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Almonte happier as high school mound star

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By Blane Bachelor, Special for USA TODAY

BRONX, N.Y. — The early afternoon rain has nearly cut short yet another media interview, this one from a local television station, for James Monroe Campus school pitcher Danny Almonte. The reporter and cameraman barely wrap up before heavy drops begin to fall on Steve Ray Stadium, sending everyone inside the school.



It's a long way from his Little League World Series flap: Danny Almonte is now a freshman at James Monroe High School in New York City, where he has won seven of eight decisions.

By Robert Deutsch, USA TODAY

Almonte, gazing out the window, seems far more concerned with the sheeting rain than missed sound bites. "I won't play today," he says in Spanish, resting his head in his hands.

An hour later, the rain has stopped, the sun begins to shine, the Public Schools Athletic League (PSAL) game in the Bronx against Alfred E. Smith is on and Almonte is again smiling.

These days, the highly publicized left-hander from the Dominican Republic has much to smile about. In his first year of high school, Almonte is playing for one of the top-ranked teams in New York under Mike Turo, one of the city's more respected and successful coaches. Monroe's storied baseball history includes such alumni as Hall of Famer Hank Greenberg, a star for the Detroit Tigers in the 1930s and '40s.

Almonte, 16, has played in some capacity in every game for the postseason-bound Eagles, posting a 7-1 record on the mound, including a near-perfect game and a three-hitter.

It's a far different scenario than two years ago when national controversy swirled around Almonte. An investigation found Almonte was two years older than Little League's age limit of 12. His team, the Bronx-based Rolando Paulino All-Stars, was stripped of its third-place finish in the World Series and all its records, including a no-hitter by Almonte, whose talent was overshadowed by the incident.

But like the weather this day in the Bronx, the clouds seem to have lifted of late for Almonte. The outlook appears much brighter because of what has always been the focus for him: Baseball.

"People are finally looking at what he's doing in high school," says Jorge Ocasio, a former Monroe player. "People are watching to see how he does against 14-, 15-, 16-year-olds and older kids, not 12-year-olds. And he's really holding his own."

Of course, reminders of the past sometimes turn up.

For one, Almonte's date of birth listed on Monroe's roster: April 7, 1987. It's a date that still suggests some confusion after his parents insisted it to be two years later during the Little League incident.

Then there's the media, a constant fixture in Almonte's life, always seeming to sneak in a reference to what happened in 2001.

That's not to mention the initial treatment from some classmates in Almonte's first few weeks at Monroe.

"When he first arrived, some people were saying that he was a cheater about his age," senior center fielder Victor Liriano says. "But people make mistakes, and he's not the one to blame. He just wanted to play baseball. He loves baseball. It's his life."

It shows. Milling around Turo's office and the locker room before games, Almonte swings an imaginary bat. On the field during warm-ups, he tosses pop flies to himself in between drills with teammates. Off the field, one of his favorite pastimes is playing the PlayStation video game: Baseball, of course.

"I started playing baseball officially when I was 7, but I when I was very little I used to just go in the streets with a stick and bat things," says Almonte, whose father, Felipe de Jesus, taught him how to pitch.

Part of two countries

Almonte doesn't speak much about his parents beyond that he misses them and speaks to each twice a week. They are separated but still live in the small Dominican Republic town of Moca.

He'd like for them to come to the United States to live, but he hasn't been back to the Dominican Republic since his arrival here in 2001.

In his home country, the controversy of the past still creates a stir: Almonte didn't participate in a February trip there for a baseball tournament because of the local press and its obsession with the Little League incident.

Turo went with his son, who participated in the tournament, and was mobbed as soon as he stepped off the plane in Santiago by reporters hungry for information about Almonte. While in the Dominican Republic, Turo also met Almonte's parents.

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"His mom is very, very sweet," Turo says. "She was very happy to meet me. She had tears in her eyes. I felt like she was very proud of her son and happy that he was in good hands."

In New York, Paulino, founder of the Rolando Paulino All-Stars, serves as Almonte's family. Almonte has been living with Paulino and his wife in their Bronx home since Almonte's arrival in America.

"He's my second father," Almonte says of Paulino, who was banned for life from Little League but remains active in the local baseball community. "When I need something, I just ask him, and he helps me. If I want to buy myself sneakers, he buys them for me. We get along well."

Part of a team

Almonte's relationship with his teammates appears equally solid. With his cap askew to the right, its brim stiff and straight, he blends right in with the Eagles and their urban style.

In New York, one of the nation's baseball hotbeds at the high school level, the Eagles play in the competitive PSAL and won city championships in 1993, 2000 and '02. Last season their 38-4 record set a school mark for total victories.

Almonte's lanky, 145-pound, 5-10 frame, once measured against other Little Leaguers, is smaller in comparison to many other players at the varsity level. His maturity, however, has apparently made a big impression on those around Almonte.

"As I see him, I just feel like he's one of the seniors," Liriano says. "He has a lot of experience. He's still young and he still has time to develop, but I already see him as a senior. And he's just going to keep developing every year."

Even as a freshman, Almonte has established himself among the elite of New York's baseball community. His fastballs, last clocked at 84 mph, and his natural, fluid pitching motion have piqued interest from Major League Baseball scouts.

"He has amazing control," says Walter Mazza, of the Bronx Umpires Alliance. "In my 33 years as an umpire, I've never seen a kid that age hit the target like he does on nearly every pitch."

Although Almonte might be tempted to overuse that kind of talent, Turo has kept close watch on the pitching. As he does for all of his pitchers, he monitors pitch counts during every game and is strict about maintaining at least four days' rest between outings.

Turo also takes into account Almonte's participation with Paulino's baseball league in the Bronx. Almonte plays in the Class A division, against 16-, 17-, 18- and 19-year-olds on the weekends during high school season, and more often during the offseason.

Also a position player

When he's not on the mound for Monroe, a team bound for the playoffs next week, Almonte has contributed to the Eagles' 33-5-1 record with notable play at first base and in the outfield.

At the plate, he started off the first half of the season batting around .500, although he recently has struggled some, Turo says.

Almonte's solid all-around game came as a pleasant surprise to everyone but his opponents.

"A left-handed pitcher is great, but he's so much more than a left-handed pitcher," says John Adams coach Glenn Beyer, whose team was the first Almonte pitched against, in a fall scrimmage.

"He has excellent understanding and poise as far as the game goes. Plus, he's very skilled as a first baseman, which in my mind is one

of the most underrated positions in baseball, especially at the high school level. Balls are flying at him from all over the place, and he makes everyone look good.

"Now, all the teams around here are saying, 'We wish we had Almonte.' "

As he has since the beginning, Almonte seems removed from the buzz around him. Removed from the cameras and reporters. From the crowds, sometimes up to several hundred people, that turn up to watch him. And from the comments referring to the Little League incident, although those are increasingly being replaced by compliments on his standout talent.

Perhaps his indifference stems from the language barrier, although Almonte — an English as a Second Language student at Monroe — has improved his comprehension immensely since he first enrolled, Turo says.

Or perhaps it's simpler — just a passion for the game that brought Almonte from his home country to the USA, through an agonizing ordeal, and finally back to just playing.

"I've already forgotten about the past," Almonte says. "When (reporters) ask the questions, I answer them. But I'm thinking about the future."

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