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Dynamic Duo

Jeff Kent and Jose Vizcaino are Hits With More Than Their Bats

Remembering the 1962 World Series

Darryl Hamilton Takes On the Role of the Giants' Leading Man



Double Trouble

Jeff Kent and Jose Vizcaino team up (again), making sure the Giants' defense doesn't miss a beat.

BY LINDA GEBROE

Perhaps Jeff Kent and Jose Vizcaino wouldn't appreciate being compared to Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. But if they thought about it a while, they might start to see some similarities between themselves and the celebrated dance duo of the 1930s. Astaire and Rogers flowed, and they made their artistry look effortless. Their seamless performance was the result of years of practicing and working together. They functioned as a unit. Each knew where the other was at all times when they danced. Astaire and Rogers knew how to anticipate each other's movements and they knew how to react to them. They had incredible footwork. They made a living doing what other people did for fun, and audiences loved watching them.

What made Astaire and Rogers outstanding is what makes Jeff Kent and Jose Vizcaino successful, too. In their fourth year of playing baseball together, the new Giants have become the classic and compleat double play combination. Kent, the second baseman, and Vizcaino, the shortstop, have practically developed radar about each other. In the few seconds it takes to turn a double play, they don't have time to think and, fortunately, they don't have to. Each knows where the other is, who will field the ball, who will cover the bag, how the throw will be made, how it will be received, how to avoid the runner barreling down the base path and how to still get a good throw off to first base. Their performance netted the "dynamic duo" of Kent and Vizcaino the second-highest ranking among all 1995 National League double play combos by Elias Sports Bureau.

Manager Dusty Baker attributes their success to the chemistry that has evolved between the two.

The greatest thing they have going for them is

that they're familiar with each other," he says. "They've played together on two teams (the New York Mets and Cleveland Indians) before they came here. I'm not sure there's been a double play combination that has played for three teams together before.

"The kind of chemistry Kent and Vizcaino have takes months or even years to develop," he adds.

Both halves of the double play combo agree.

"Coming here with Jose makes the adjustment to a new team a lot easier," explains Kent. "The apprehension that we might have had about playing together isn't there because we've done it already and we've done it for years. Playing the infield, you need to have chemistry, even with your catcher and centerfielder. With Jose, I already have a jump start on that."

"We don't have to work at knowing who's doing what when," adds Vizcaino. "I already know where Jeff wants me to throw the ball. We also

know who's covering the bag. I decide and I give him the sign."

Still, it must be hard to come to a team like the Giants, which has been known for years as a great fielding team, especially in the double play department. Kent and Vizcaino are impressed and they respect the quality infielders the Giants have had. But they're not intimidated.

"Being the new double play combination is not a hard role for us to step into. We're different players than those other guys were. We've got our own style and it works. We just play the game the way Jeff Kent and Jose Vizcaino play the game," says Vizcaino. "If you try to imitate other players, you're doing too much, anyway."

"When we were with the Mets, we were right up there," chimes in Kent. "The number of double plays we turned, the amount of chances we had, and the ability we bring to the field not only defensively, but offensively all stack up."

Indeed. Kent is a lifetime .274 hitter with power. Twice in his five-year career, he's enjoyed 20-home run seasons. Vizcaino brings switch-hitting abilities and a .283 average over his last four seasons – this in addition to leading all National League shortstops with a .984 fielding percentage in 1995.

Having the chemistry and the ability in place already is a great head start. But there must be something more that contributes to the success of this double play combination.

"There is," answers Kent. "It's the work ethic. There's a reason Jose is so steady. He doesn't get his cage rattled too often. That's because he dedicates himself to being the best. I think the Giants fans are going to appreciate Jose. He makes every routine play, he's a clutch player and a timely hitter."

Kent developed his strong work ethic from his father, a police officer, who instilled in him a sense of pride in an honest day's work. Consequently, the baseball players Kent followed were not the marquee names as much as the "Steady Eddie" kind of guys.

"Growing up in Southern California, I watched guys like Bobby Grich and Dick Schofield of the Angels. I also liked the way Steve Garvey and Bill Russell played for the Dodgers," he says. "What made

them stand out for me was their attitude and personality in relation to their work ethic. They didn't have a flashy style, and they were dedicated to the game. Those were the guys my dad taught me to watch. He taught me to appreciate their hustle."

Growing up in the Dominican Republic, Vizcaino had the benefit of watching players like Tony Fernandez and Alfredo Griffin. The Cincinnati Reds' Jose Rijo and Los Angeles Dodgers' Raul Mondesi as well as former Giants shortstop Jose Uribe also come from Vizcaino's home town of San Cristobal.

"There's a reason a lot of great shortstops come from the Dominican Republic," Vizcaino explains. "It's where almost every kid there likes to play. It's the most difficult position, because it takes so many skills to play it.

"You get more involved in the game on the infield," he continues. "You've got to pay attention, to be ready all the time. When a guy's on base, you need to be watching to see if he's going to steal. You want to be ready to pick him off."

Of course, double plays are rarely made alone. Vizcaino appreciates having a steady player like Kent to work with.

"I wouldn't change anything about him. And if I did, I'd be giving up something else," says the shortstop. "Let's just keep it the way it is."

Because they're so good at it, Kent and Vizcaino usually make the double play look easy. It's anything but. In fact, it takes about six small plays to complete a double play. It begins with communication, the players agreeing on who will cover second base for the play. It also requires players to be in the proper position – double play depth, which is shallow on the infield and close to the base. When the ball is hit, the infielder needs to field the ball cleanly and know where the man covering the bag is. He then needs to throw the ball letter high, not to where his teammate is, but to where he's going to be. (This takes a unique blend of practice and faith.) The other infielder has to get to the bag before the throw does, receive the ball, touch the base, get out of the way of the runner, pivot and throw the ball hard enough to first to get that runner out as well. This is what Kent and Vizcaino do on a daily basis, and have done successfully for years together.

“What goes into making a great double play – and why these guys are so good at it – is consistency,” explains Duane Kuiper, Giants broadcaster and former infielder for the Giants and Indians. “I never like to use the word ‘routine.’ There’s no such thing in baseball and there’s certainly no routine double play. But from what I’ve seen, Kent and Vizcaino turn every double play that needs to be turned.

“The best word for these two is ‘solid.’ Showy players can be more fun to watch at times, but they may not make the play. Flash is fun to watch. Solid wins games.”

Kuiper suggests that fans who want to check out a double play combination begin by watching the feet.

“The whole process of fielding a ground ball and throwing it starts with the feet,” he says. “It used to take Brooks Robinson (the Baltimore Orioles’ Hall of Fame third baseman) a month to run from home to first, but he had the quickest feet. By that I mean he had the ability to take the first step to the left or the right or to come in. Robinson would be fast at first and then slow down. Usually it’s the other way around.”

Kent sees rhythm as an integral part of good footwork, too.

“Just like in dancing, you need rhythm to turn the double play. That starts with the feet,” he explains. “You need good footwork in order to orient your body, from getting to the bag to relocating your momentum and making the pivot that sets up your throw to first.”

“Footwork?” muses Vizcaino. “That’s what you use to get out of the way of the guy who’s coming right at you.”

Then, too, there are the much-talked-about “soft hands” of the great infielders. Often, that quality is compared to catching a baseball as if it were an egg. Jeff Kent has a slightly different spin on it.

“Soft hands would be like a pair of shocks on a Cadillac. You need a pair of good shocks on a Cadillac if you want to get that soft, smooth consistent ride,” he says. “It’s the same thing in baseball. You need a pair of soft hands on an infielder

so you get a nice, clean consistent transition from catching the ball to throwing the runner out.”

Of course, nothing is easy about the double play. But there is one aspect of it that stands out as most difficult.

“The hardest thing about the double play is completing the double play,” says Vizcaino, quite seriously. “Getting the throw off to first base is difficult. You’ve got a guy coming right at you trying to break up the double play. He’s aiming for you, trying to take you out. You’ve got to make the throw as quick as you can, make it accurate and get out of the way.”

“It’s a little easier if the guy coming at you is Freddie Patek (5’5”, 148 pounds). But more often than not, it’s Dave Parker (6’5”, 230 pounds),” says Kuiper, recalling some of his own hard luck at second base.

However the double play combination works – and “solid” seems to be the operative word here – it is a major factor in a team’s defensive ability and, ultimately, in the team’s ability to win games. “They don’t call the double play ‘the pitcher’s best friend’ for nothing,” says Vizcaino. “When you make the double play, you get out of the inning. You need to make it all the time.”

Kind of like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers without a ball. They may not be as glamorous, but Jeff Kent and Jose Vizcaino are smooth, they’re steady and they turn two almost every time. For Giants fans, they’re a classic in the making.