

**NEW REIGN**

Since his call-up in May, Soto has become an integral part of the Nationals' lineup, getting on base more than 40% of the time.

Photograph by  
G Fiume/  
Getty Images

# Juan SOTO

**TEAM**

Washington Nationals

**POSITION**

Leftfielder

**SPOTLIGHT**

This rookie from the Dominican Republic has played beyond his years and emerged as one of the brightest young stars in baseball.

**BY MATT WEYRICH**

**A**t 19 years old, most major league prospects are either working their way through the minors or showcasing their skills on the college stage in hopes of being drafted. They'll find their names on prospect rankings or draft boards, but that's about it, as far as national attention goes.

When the 2018 season began, Juan Soto was one of those promising young players. The 19-year-old was highly regarded within the Washington Nationals' farm system but had never played above Class A and was still most likely a few years away from the majors.

Yet only 45 days after stepping into the batter's box at a minor league ballpark in Rome, Georgia—a town with a population of 36,407—for his first at bat of the season, Soto made his MLB debut at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles in front of 40,201 fans.

The Nationals called up the lefthanded slugger after a rash of injuries hit their outfield. Soto struck out as a pinch hitter in

his debut, but he made an immediate impression the next day against the Padres by sending the first pitch of his first start into the leftfield seats for a three-run home run. Manager Dave Martinez has been penciling Soto's name into the lineup ever since.

"I like his approach a lot," Martinez says. "He's done great, and he makes adjustments every day. I watch him. He's a student of the game, he pays attention, he knows what pitchers are trying to do to him, and he makes adjustments."

## (QUICKLY) RISING STAR

Born in the Dominican Republic, Soto signed with the Nationals in 2015, at age 16, for \$1.5 million—at the time, the most money Washington had ever given to a teenage Latin American prospect. That year, he attended the Nationals' prospect academy in the D.R., becoming familiar with the organization and brushing up on his English.

Once he arrived in the States in 2016, Soto began to soar through the Nationals' minor league ranks. Although hand and ankle injuries limited him to 32 games in '17, he bounced back this season to earn three separate promotions. He never spent more than 17 days at a single level this year before making it to the majors.

And Soto has accomplished quite a bit since that day at Dodger Stadium in May. He had the highest on-base percentage by a teenager at the



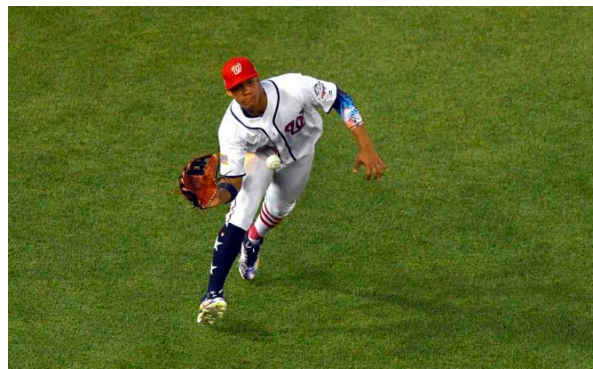
## TEEN TALENT

Soto has fit in on the field and with his teammates, who have been impressed with the 19-year-old's maturity.

All-Star break (.411) in MLB history. He's the fourth teenager to have a multihomer game at Yankee Stadium (and the first since Atlanta's Andruw Jones did it at the old ballpark in the 1996 World Series). Soto even found a way to time travel, hitting a home run in a game that originally began before his MLB debut but was suspended due to weather.

Fans dubbed Soto the Childish Bambino thanks to his heroics against the Yankees. Despite being the youngest player in the majors, Soto has found a way to stay relaxed and just enjoy the game he's been playing since he was four years old.

"I have fun," Soto says. "I like to



have fun on every play, because you miss a lot. If you think a lot and miss it, you're gonna be worse. So if I miss, I don't care. I just have fun. I just laugh because [pitchers are] lucky when I miss it."

Pitchers have tried to make adjustments against Soto, but with little success. His teammates attribute that to Soto's knowledge of the strike zone and marvel at his ability to lay off close pitches and shorten up his swing with two strikes. At the All-Star break, he was averaging a walk every six plate appearances, second on the Nationals

behind All-Star slugger Bryce Harper.

"I think what he's been able to do is find time at the plate," Washington second baseman Daniel Murphy says. "He makes really good decisions. When you make really good decisions, you swing at good pitches. When you swing at them, you usually hit them hard. And when you don't get good pitches to hit, you take them and you end up walking."

Despite playing in an era in which players study launch angles in an effort to hit more homers, Soto believes making consistent contact produces better results than trying to hit the ball out of the park every at bat.

"When you have contact, you never know, the ball can [go] over [the fence], a double, hit, whatever," Soto says. "The most important part [is] the contact. . . . Try to put the ball in play. You never know what is gonna happen with the ball in play."

Maintaining this approach is tough for any major leaguer, never mind a teenager. Murphy believes it speaks volumes to Soto's maturity—a quality in the young outfielder that extends well beyond the confines of a baseball field.

"On the bus, with the team, in the hotel, he's been awesome," Murphy says. "It's impressive for a 19-year-old. I was a sophomore in college [at that age], and I didn't talk like that."

The earliest Soto can hit free agency is after the 2024 season, when he's the ripe old age of 26. He's following in the footsteps of Harper, who also broke into the majors at 19 and quickly established himself as a key cog in the Nationals' lineup.

It's probably going to take a few years before Soto faces a pitcher who's younger than he is—and that doesn't faze him in the slightest.

As Soto puts it, "This is just baseball. The baseballs don't have age."

# TEENAGERS RAGIN' IN THE MAJORS

Youngsters don't always live up to the hype once they reach then big leagues, but these four not only handled the pressure as rookies, they also set the tone for their careers.



## BRYCE HARPER NATIONALS, 2012

Called up at the end of April to provide the Nats' offense with a spark, Harper took the league by storm. He set the NL record for most homers in a season by a teenager (22) en route to winning Rookie of the Year honors.



## FÉLIX HERNÁNDEZ MARINERS, 2005

Although he made only 12 starts in his age-19 season, Hernández dazzled on the mound for lowly Seattle. He faced 112 consecutive batters without allowing an extra-base hit to start his career and finished the season with a 2.67 ERA.



## DWIGHT GOODEN METS, 1984

From the moment he first took the mound, Gooden was a star. Under the bright lights of New York, Dr. K set the modern rookie record for strikeouts in a season (276) and received all but one first-place vote for Rookie of the Year.



## MEL OTT NEW YORK GIANTS, 1926-28

Ott actually played three seasons as a teenager, first breaking into the big leagues at 17. He hit .318 in his teens with 19 home runs and more walks (66) than strikeouts (54). It was the start of what would be a Hall of Fame career.