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Sam Fuld's Value to the Rays Goes Beyond Numbers

By TYLER KEPNER

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — Samuel Babson Fuld was 10 pounds at birth, so chunky that the nurse in the delivery room told his parents, Ken Fuld and Amanda Merrill, that their son would grow up to be a football player. They called him Sumo Sam.

He never grew into the body of a hulking lineman or a mammoth wrestler. Sumo Sam adored baseball as a child in New Hampshire, not only playing it but studying the meaning within its numbers. By age 5, he carried around *The Complete Handbook of Baseball*, a pocket-sized paperback with the statistics of every player in the majors. On long car rides, he would call out totals for hits and at-bats and quiz his parents on the corresponding batting average.

"It was probably a pretty odd hobby for a little kid," Fuld said. "But it was something that always interested me."

Fuld was speaking in the [Tampa Bay Rays](#) dugout at Tropicana Field before Monday's game, when he went 4 for 4 against the [Chicago White Sox](#) to raise his average to .396, the best in the American League. He made another diving catch that night, skidding on the artificial turf in center field.

The [Rays](#) won the game, and Fuld finished it with dirt across his uniform and scrapes along his arms. Fuld, who went 0 for 4 Tuesday to drop to .368, has batted leadoff for every Rays victory this season, seizing an opening created by the departure of [Manny Ramirez](#), who retired rather than face a 100-game suspension for failing a steroids test.

Ramirez left on April 8 without a goodbye, ending a storied career in disgrace. A superior defender, Fuld allows Johnny Damon, when healthy, to be the designated hitter. He cannot replace Ramirez's power, but his exuberance and effort have endeared him to teammates.

"Right now, I feel like he's the most exciting player in baseball, with the plays that he's making, the at-bats that he's having, with the presence he has out there on the field," said David Price, the Rays' ace left-hander. "A lot of guys in baseball probably didn't even know his name. He is absolutely making a name for himself right now, and it's a thrill to watch."

Fuld, 29, came to the Rays in January in the eight-player deal that sent starter Matt Garza to the

Cubs. He played 98 games over three seasons with Chicago, batting .252 with a .368 on-base percentage. Fuld was out of minor league options, and the Cubs' general manager, Jim Hendry, told Fuld that the Rays had wanted him for a long time.

Andrew Friedman, the Rays' general manager, said Fuld was a gifted defensive player who ran the bases well, made contact and works good counts. And though it was incidental to the reasons for acquiring him, Fuld is also the kind of player Friedman wanted to be as an outfielder at Tulane, with similar sensibilities.

Friedman worked on Wall Street before joining the Rays, whose front office is renowned for its appreciation of statistics. In Fuld, Friedman said, "We joke that we could use him as our advance-scouting intern."

Fuld has the background and the aptitude. Drafted in the 10th round out of Stanford in 2004, he applied for an internship at Stats LLC, outside Chicago, following his professional debut at Class A Peoria in 2005. Joe Stillwell, a supervisor in data collection, sent Fuld a tape to analyze, asking him to track the type of pitch, the velocity and the location.

The internship would last only a month or two, so Stillwell needed a person who would not require much training. He picked a challenging pitcher for Fuld to analyze: [Cory Lidle](#), who threw four different pitches at similar speeds, including a splitter and a changeup, which are often difficult to distinguish. Fuld logged in remotely, entered his findings, and easily passed the test.

"Seeing what he could decipher watching a game, he was almost too good to be true," Stillwell said. "We needed to figure out a way to get him in here."

Fuld, who has also pursued a master's degree in statistics from Stanford, said he always wanted to keep his options open for after his baseball career. His parents offer powerful role models: his father is the dean of the College of Liberal Arts at the [University of New Hampshire](#), and his mother is a New Hampshire state senator.

But baseball has directed Fuld's path. He made the varsity as an eighth grader, and hit so well that he transferred to Exeter Academy for the athletics. He dominated there, too — usually hitting above .500, all while managing Type 1 diabetes — but a major league career seemed far-fetched.

"From when he was young, he had such a good mind for math and statistics that he's always had a sense of how hard it is to make the major leagues," Merrill said. "But at the same time, he stuck with his dream."

Fuld had had a taste of the majors as a child, spending a day as a bat boy at Fenway Park when the U.N.H. team played [Boston University](#). At the 1999 All-Star Game in Boston, Fuld and his friends sneaked into a party for autographs.

“We’re literally rolling under this tent, popping up, and I remember to this day, Jeff Bagwell and his family sitting at this table, just laughing at me,” Fuld said. “I’m some harmless 17-year-old. But we got in there and met all the All-Stars.”

Now Fuld is playing like one, though the true test will come when the league adjusts to him. His defense should stay consistent; Manager Joe Maddon compared him to the former Ray Carl Crawford and the perennial Gold Glove winner Jim Edmonds. Contending for a batting title will be a much bigger challenge.

For marketing purposes, the Rays hope Fuld’s success continues at least through May 29. The original giveaway for that night was a Manny Ramirez bobblehead doll. Now, the first 10,000 children will receive a “Super Sam” cape, picturing Fuld in midflight, diving for a catch.

From bench hopeful to superhero in a few frenzied weeks? Fuld, of all people, appreciates the odds against it. He knows that slumps will happen, and that he probably cannot sustain his hot start. But he will let others do the analysis.

“I hate combining those two worlds,” Fuld said. “To me, I don’t feel comfortable looking at my own numbers. I know what kind of player I am.”