

# Coaching the Biggest of the Big: An Interview with Kevin Long by Dan Piro

*New York Yankees hitting Coach Kevin Long is carving his initials into pinstripe lore, but he's also a favorite at John Rubinow's Pro Ball Baseball Clinic, a spring training-like camp for adult amateur players held in Peoria, Arizona each January (see ad, page 9).*

*Whether dealing with superstars or amateurs, Long can diagnose swing inefficiencies and prescribe drills to get players back on track. He's a swing doctor who can heal a sick batter, keep well a good one, and improve the statistical health of others.*

*Long knows how to hit. He was a second-team All-American and first-team PAC-10 in 1989 at the University of Arizona and still holds the school's record for most extra base hits in a game (5). He was a 31st round pick of the Kansas City Royals in 1989. He led Class-A Eugene in 1989 in almost all offensive categories, and he ranked eighth among all Northwest League hitters with a .312 batting average in his rookie season.*

*More importantly, he knows how to teach. The big question is this: how does a guy who never made it big in the bigs get the respect of the biggest of the big?*

*HardBall publisher Dan Piro explored that question and more when he interviewed Long at the Pro Ball Baseball Camp in January. This was Dan Piro's final interview. He succumbed to pancreatic cancer just weeks later.) —Jeff McGaw, Editor/HardBall*

**HardBall:** *You've got a whole bunch of guys who make a thousand times what anybody here makes. And you've got to sell them on your ideas. So tell me how you go about doing this.*

**KL:** There's always three things that I think are going to put you above anybody else (as a coach). First of all, work ethic. No one is going to outwork me. No one is going to put in more time. That's number one because the players see that.

Number two is knowledge. I've got to be very knowledgeable about what I do. Drill work, what adjustments I make with these guys... I have to know what makes good hitters good. I've done my homework. I've studied. I've taken Barry Bonds' swing and broken it

down into the finest details. And that's how I started with my philosophy.

The third part—and if you don't have this, you might as well pack it in as a hitting coach—is you'd better be personable. You'd better have people skills.

Do I like every guy I've ever worked with? No, not really. Do they know that? No. They'll never know that because in order to make my unit the best offensive unit out there, I've got to make every guy feel important. So I've got to build relationships with them.

**HardBall:** *How do you accomplish that?*

**KL:** I went to the Dominican Republic (to work with Robinson Cano). Did the Yankees



Dan Piro interviewing Yankee hitting coach Kevin Long in January.

pay for that? Did Robinson Cano pay for that? You know who paid for that? Kevin Long paid for that...It wasn't the Yankees saying go.

(I went) in order for me to be a good instructor. You know what Robinson Cano thinks of me? He thinks I'm the greatest guy in the world...And as I do that, and as we go through a season where there's struggles and this and that, he now feels he can lean on me, and we can lean on each other and that part can get you over the hump.

**HardBall:** *Talk about your experience last year with Nick Swisher. (Swisher was slumping horribly with a .114 average in the post-season through World Series game two. The long term plan was to work with Swisher in the off-season to make some batting adjustments. However, opportunity knocked early, according to Long.)*

**KL:** We had a break in between game one and two (of the World Series), then we had game two, then we had another off day. So we had three days before his next start. So I said, "Let's go into the off-season program. Let's start it today. (Long explains how he tweaked Swisher's stance by spreading the feet, moving the hands closer to the hitting position, and getting up on the front toe a little, to name a few of the adjustments. The goal was to see the ball better and react better to the off-speed pitches.)

We did it for the first day. Second day, I called him in the morning and told him he wasn't going to be starting against Pedro Martinez, that we were going to start Jerry Hairston. I said, "I'm not worried about it, I just want to come off the throttle a little bit. I want you to do what we did yesterday. I loved the work that we did yesterday."

So right now I'm selling him a little bit on "it's okay not to play this game, I think eventually it's going to help us because you're going to start game three."

So we do that for three straight days, and then we go into game three. He says, "I like what we've been doing. I'm going to try that."

**HardBall:** *So the coaching rubber hits the road at that point, right?*

**KL:** At that point you just say, "Please, if there's a Lord above, please take care of me today!" Because we just made some major changes and we need to see if this stuff works. (It apparently worked. Swisher was 2-for-4 with a double and a homer in game three of the 2009 World Series.)

**HardBall:** *So overall it's a good approach for you?*

**KL:** I think if you go to those three things, you're going to find out what puts me—I'm not saying I'm the best hitting coach; I would never say that—but it certainly puts me up at the upper echelon because I can relate to these players at a high level. No matter what kind of money they have, no matter what they make, I don't put any one of them above anyone else. It's one through thirteen, thirteen through one.

**HardBall:** *What kind of work do you do with Alex Rodriguez?*

**KL:** Well, in 2007 I was named the hitting coach for the New York Yankees. And I'd been with the Yankees the prior years, 2004 through 2006 as their triple-A hitting coach.

So I got to know Alex, and he was probably a big part of why I became the hitting coach. And also Don Mattingly wanted to go to bench next to Joe Torre so he could learn someday to be a manager. So it was a good fit for me to be the hitting coach at that point.

We came up with a game plan with his swing. He said, "Are there ways for me to get better?"

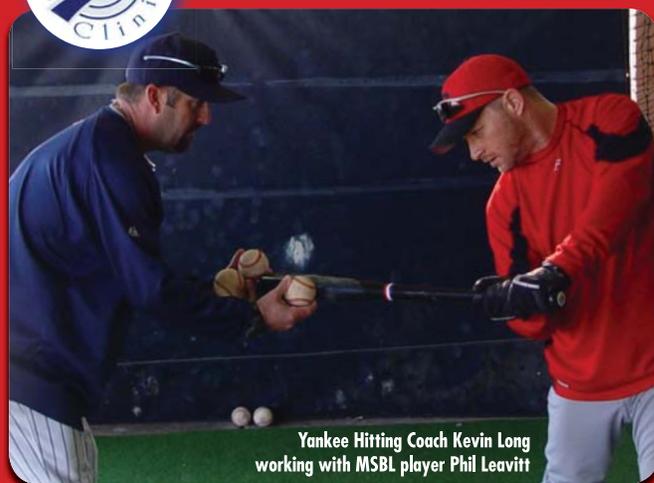
I said, "Well, you won the MVP in 2003, you won the MVP in 2005, which makes you the best player in the league...But I think pitching is getting better and I think it's getting to a point where we need to get rid of some of your leg kick height, and some of your movement forward and some of your drift. And I think if we do that, you might turn what is a really good and great hitter to maybe an even better hitter."

**HardBall:** *How did you execute the plan?*

**KL:** We addressed that in the off season. I went to his house in Miami in November, I went in December, and I went in January. And we worked on his swing. And as the 2007 season approached, April came along, and it was the best April and the best start I've ever seen in my life. I think he had 14 home runs in April. I mean he went crazy. It's the best year



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he's ever had. I don't know how many home runs he had. The RBI's were out the window, everything was great.

So there are things you can do with guys, even the best players, even an MVP.

Most of these baseball players, you've got to understand, are very intelligent. They're not stupid if they're in the big leagues.

**HardBall:** Tell me about the 0-2 home run A-Rod hit off of Brian Fuentes in the 11th inning of game two of the ALCS.

**KL:** It's just part of our philosophy with Alex: to hit fastballs and stay on fastballs. I want Alex to hit on a fastball. Fuentes made a bad pitch, 0-2, but Alex beat on the fastball and not maybe thinking about his curveball or his change-up, he was able to hit it.

I always tell Alex: you can do damage, regardless if you have one strike, two strikes, no strikes, we still want to get off our A swing. It was just a guy ready to hit, and ready to hit a fastball instead of choking up or maybe thinking about putting the ball in play; he was thinking about taking his A swing and getting a good pitch to hit, and he did.

**HardBall:** Talk about all the work you've done with Cano.

**KL:** I've had Cano for a lot of years. I've known him now for seven or eight years, and it's just year in and year out, trying to help him get better and more consistent with his swing. He's a different-type hitter than a lot of the guys I have, because part of what makes Cano good is he's got a slight drift to his swing. There's a big difference between a slight drift and when he really jumps out to his front side, so we always have to monitor and control that. But Cano's coming, he's doing a good job.

**HardBall:** Do you see him hitting more home runs?

**KL:** I say he's going to be a 30-home-run guy, and he's closing in on it. He's getting there. He hit 25 last year. Being a little more consistent with that drift, not jumping out to his front side as much, controlling his stride. If we can get it to six to eight-inch range instead of getting out there to the 12-inch range, we've got a chance.

**HardBall:** Is he aware of that?

**KL:** Oh yeah, my guys know exactly where I'm coming from. I don't leave anything back. What's in my heart, whatever I'm thinking that day, they usually know about it.

**HardBall:** What do you do with a guy like Brett Gardner?

**KL:** Gardner's a guy who everybody told me was going to be a .230 hitter in the big leagues. He wasn't going to be able to hit. Well, Gardner hit .270 last year. He's done a great job. He might get a chance to play even more.

We went to the "Albert Pujols" with him—the no-stride—and to hear somebody say that a guy would never hit above .230 and to have him hit .270, gives me deep, deep satisfaction. So, I love it when people say "Brett Gardner can't hit," because I beg to differ. The stats are

there now.

**HardBall:** Do you think he's got more upside?

**KL:** If he hits .275 to .300, there's going to be a lot of happy Yankee fans...

**HardBall:** What do you need to do to get his on-base percentage up?

**KL:** He's got to be more aggressive. Most guys you would say they would have to work deeper in the count. Brett Gardner swings at one percent of pitches out of the zone. He takes too many good pitches.

So we've got to scare the pitcher out of the zone.

In the big leagues, you can't go up there and get a walk. You have to attack the strike zone so that a pitcher, instead of saying "I'm going to go for the outer third," he says, "I'm going to put the ball right on the corner."

Like with A-Rod—they (pitchers) don't think "outer third," they think "corner." We need to get some of that fear.

I don't think Gardner will ever have that fear factor, but we've got to get to the point where they can't just throw a fastball right down the middle of the plate and he takes it.

**HardBall:** What goes on with Jeter?

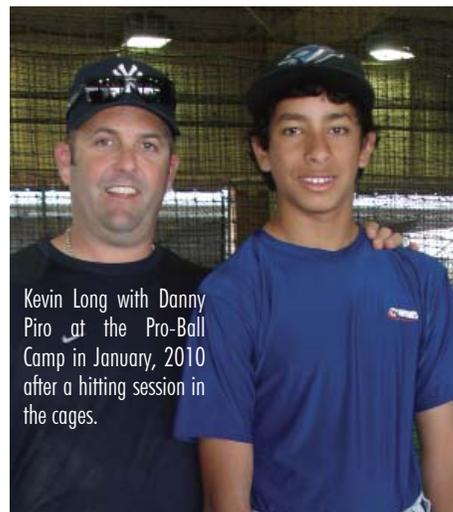
**KL:** He's got about the most slump-proof swing you could have. He lets the ball travel and stays inside the ball better than anybody that's ever played the game. His mind and how he thinks about things is as positive and as confident as any individual. If he takes a bad swing, or pops a ball up, obviously he's a little disturbed about it, but he also knows his next at-bat, that had nothing to do with it. So that goes a long way.

**HardBall:** He never lets a bad at-bat bother him.

**KL:** No. He's a very confident individual. And he's the same guy every day. When he comes to the cages he comes to work. You know what you're getting. Some guys I can't say that about. Derek Jeter, whether he's 0-for-10 or 10-for-10, you're never going to tell the difference.

**HardBall:** What's the deal going forward with Posada?

**KL:** Well, Posada's coming towards the end of his career. He's had a great career. He'll probably go down as one of the greatest



Kevin Long with Danny Piro at the Pro-Ball Camp in January, 2010 after a hitting session in the cages.

catchers in Yankee history and maybe in the game. He's going to get a chance to be maybe in the Hall of Fame, or at least be considered a Hall of Fame player. My job is to see if I can keep him as consistent as he is now.

**HardBall:** I want to ask you about your two young bench players, Francisco Cervelli and Ramiro Pena.

**KL:** This is another one that makes me feel good. Francisco Cervelli hit .190 in double-A and came up to the New York Yankees. They said, "He's not going to help you any offensively, none, okay?"

I said, "Okay, we'll see."

Francisco Cervelli hit .297 and helped us. He did well. And Ramiro Pena, a .245 lifetime hitter in the minor leagues, ended up hitting .280, .290 for us...did a great job. Both kids, they did it one year. Doesn't mean they're over the hump at all, but we gained on them.

You know, a lot of times in the big leagues, they get there and the coaches stop teaching or just allow kids to kind of go.

My job is, if I see something, if I don't think they're going to compete at the major league level even before they have an at-bat, I'm going to try to ease my way in there and try to get them to what I would call a better foundation and a better swing that I think is conducive to success at the major league level.

**HardBall:** You're fairly confident Cervelli can back up Posada?

**KL:** I'm 100 percent confident that Cervelli can do that, yes. Not fairly. I think he can do it. We'll see. ■



Mike Butcher, pitching coach of the Anaheim Angels, addresses campers at the 2010 Pro-Ball Baseball Clinic in Peoria, Arizona in January.