Asperger's doesn’t define Rivier baseball’s Da Silva

By TOM KING
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The video and audio doesn't lie. The proof of just how important and appreciated Mauro Da Silva is to Rivier University's baseball team was caught on camera 10 days ago during a non-conference blowout loss to Plymouth State.

The footage - now on the school's athletics website - shows Da Silva pouncing on a fastball and lining it into the right-center-field gap right up to the fence. He rounded first base, thinking about heading to second for a double, but held up. Seconds later, he was removed for a pinch runner, then mobbed by his Raiders teammates.

Why? It was the first hit of the senior's collegiate career.

"If you saw the score, we were down by 18 runs," Raiders senior Nick Pica said. "It's all his hard work wrapped up in one moment. The kid knew what was going on. He faced a good pitcher, and he hit it to the fence."

It could be the signature moment of Rivier's season, but certainly of Da Silva's life. Although high functioning, he suffers from Asperger's syndrome, a form of autism. That hasn't stopped him from defying the odds. Not only will he conclude his a four-year baseball career this week, but he will then walk across the stage to receive a degree in biology with a minor in chemistry.

Amazing? Da Silva admits that he thinks it is.

"I feel it's been a tremendous accomplishment," he said. "Especially not being able to focus 100 percent of the time. (The syndrome) hurts my focus; it sometimes make you act in a highly upbeat way, like when children sometimes act silly. That's exactly what it does."

But he understands the odds he's overcome, because it was once thought he wouldn't have anything close to this chance.

"When I was born, according to my doctor, to my disability, I wasn't supposed to be able to walk, talk, go to school anytime, let alone go to college," Da Silva said. "I never thought to graduate college. ..."

"This semester is the most relaxed semester I've had because I only have four classes."

It's all a product of the environment, according to Raiders coach Anthony Perry, who four years ago was first introduced on campus to Da Silva.
"It takes multiple factors to make that happen," Perry said. "One, you have to be in the right place. One thing I preach to my guys is that family atmosphere, that you embrace each other and carry each other through. And I make sure they don't treat him special; they treat him like he's part of the team. And that helps in his development.

"It's a tremendous accomplishment for both him and his family to see him walk across the stage that (graduation) weekend."

Da Silva was a high school senior at North Middlesex Regional in Townsend, Mass., four years ago, as he and his parents were searching for a school. Driving by Rivier one day, his father planted the seed that it might be a good choice.

The more the two investigated it, the more they decided their instincts were right. Or at least Da Silva's father did, trying to convince him.

"I didn't believe him most of the time," Da Silva said with a chuckle. "But I noticed that with small schools and large schools, when going to open houses, small schools were more humble and closer together with the students and the teachers. Bigger schools were more focused on the typical routine of teach, money, schedules."

And it had baseball. Da Silva played at North Middlesex, and got his first high school hit his junior year.

"It would have been a double if I kept running," he said. "It was also the first hit I've ever scored on. The pitcher balked twice, the last time with me at third."

During Perry's first year of recruiting, he got a call from the admissions office letting him know there was a student recruit interested in baseball. Upon meeting Da Silva, he told him if he wanted to come out for the team, fine.

"I didn't think anything of it," Perry said. "Then all of a sudden he's there in my orientation group."

Perry told Da Silva if he showed up, worked hard and acted responsibly, he wouldn't cut him.

"And that's what he's done for four years," Perry said.

"At the beginning, as the guys were starting to know him, there was, I wouldn't say troublesome, but a learning period," Perry said. "But once everyone figured out what was going on, they completely embraced him as one of our steady brothers in our baseball family."

Perry gets Da Silva at-bats when he can, especially in non-conference games.

His freshman year, Da Silva got just five at-bats, and fanned five times. In his exit interview, Perry asked him how he felt the season went.

"I've got to do better hitting," was Da Silva's response, according to Perry. "He never mentioned anything about getting only five at-bats."

Perry says he has to make some adjustments in coaching Da Silva, but otherwise, it's business as usual.

Da Silva is grateful for the opportunity Perry has given him and the program, saying that coach and teammates make it fun.

"It's been building up for four years, since I've been here from the start," Da Silva said.
Meanwhile, Pica took Da Silva under his wing.

"Coming in freshman year, he had problems throwing the ball," Pica said, "so we worked through his bad mechanics, just playing catch, helped him out, gave him some pointers, let him work on it the next few years.

"If you saw when he walked in Day One, and look now, his progress is unreal."

Da Silva's success has put a smile on Athletic Director Joanne Merrill's face, as well as others in Riv's athletic community.

"I give Coach Perry and our players a ton of credit," Merrill said. "One of the best things, Anthony treated him like one of the players - no special treatment, one of the players they could razz and tease like the others. Mauro felt like part of the group.

"But I give him from the beginning an extreme amount of credit for just the growth that we've seen, in physical ability and everything else. I just think he's an exceptional young man to live the life that he has. It's been a win-win both ways. The best thing, the only thing, he's just part of the team. Like everybody else's quirks, differences, that's what it's been."

Certainly there was an adjustment period, as teammates had to get used to Da Silva, understand his limitations, but also offer overwhelming acceptance.

"Initially, you didn't know what to expect; you didn't know the severity of it," Pica said. "But today? He's just a normal teammate. It's like nothing's wrong. He's a great guy."

"I didn't have any problem with it," Riv senior Mike Janerico said. "He's awesome. He's awesome for the team. He wants to see everybody do well; he looks forward to coming to the park every day. It's a joy to have him around.

"At first it was a little difficult getting him to open up to everybody. But he came around. He's a little shy, but once he started talking and got involved with everybody on the team, it was great."

Da Silva said the whole process of being part of the team "is really fun. We have some moments, but it's really temporary."

His favorite moments were the base hit, but also seeing the Red Sox play a spring training game during the team's season-opening Florida trip. He got to see JetBlue Park's "Mini Monster" and his favorite player, David Ortiz, in action.

But back to that hit.

"I was ecstatic," he said. "It's like carrying the world's most heaviest bat for 12 miles, and you think you're not going to be able to do it for the first 2 miles. ... You keep going, not trying to think about it. Then all of a sudden, it doesn't feel heavy anymore. You say, 'OK this is something typical I'm doing.'

"So you keep going and going and going, and once you reach your destination, it's the best thing in the world."

"It was unbelievable," Janerico said. "Everybody was so excited for him. All of his hard work wrapped into one moment. All the countless number of swings he's taken, all the practices he's been to, all wrapped up in that one hit. We were so excited for him."

Janerico says playing with Da Silva has put a special signature on his own college career.

"To see him succeed, it's humbling," he said. "It's almost like a reality check for you. You do
the same thing with him every day, but you don't know the uphill battle he came in with. He
has so much motivation and drive. It really inspires everyone else here to be a better player."

Pica agrees.

"His dedication is unreal," Pica said. "He's at every game, cheering everyone on. He's done
great in the classroom. He's an inspiration to this team. He's one of the hearts and souls of
this team."

Has Da Silva stopped to smell the roses? There's no doubt, even when there are days that he
personally feels stuck in neutral.

"Sometimes it feels like I've made no progress," he said, "but other times I stop and see all
that I've done, how I got here to begin with, how I've overcome my disability, making sure
I've proven people wrong."

All the proof he needs is in that video.

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