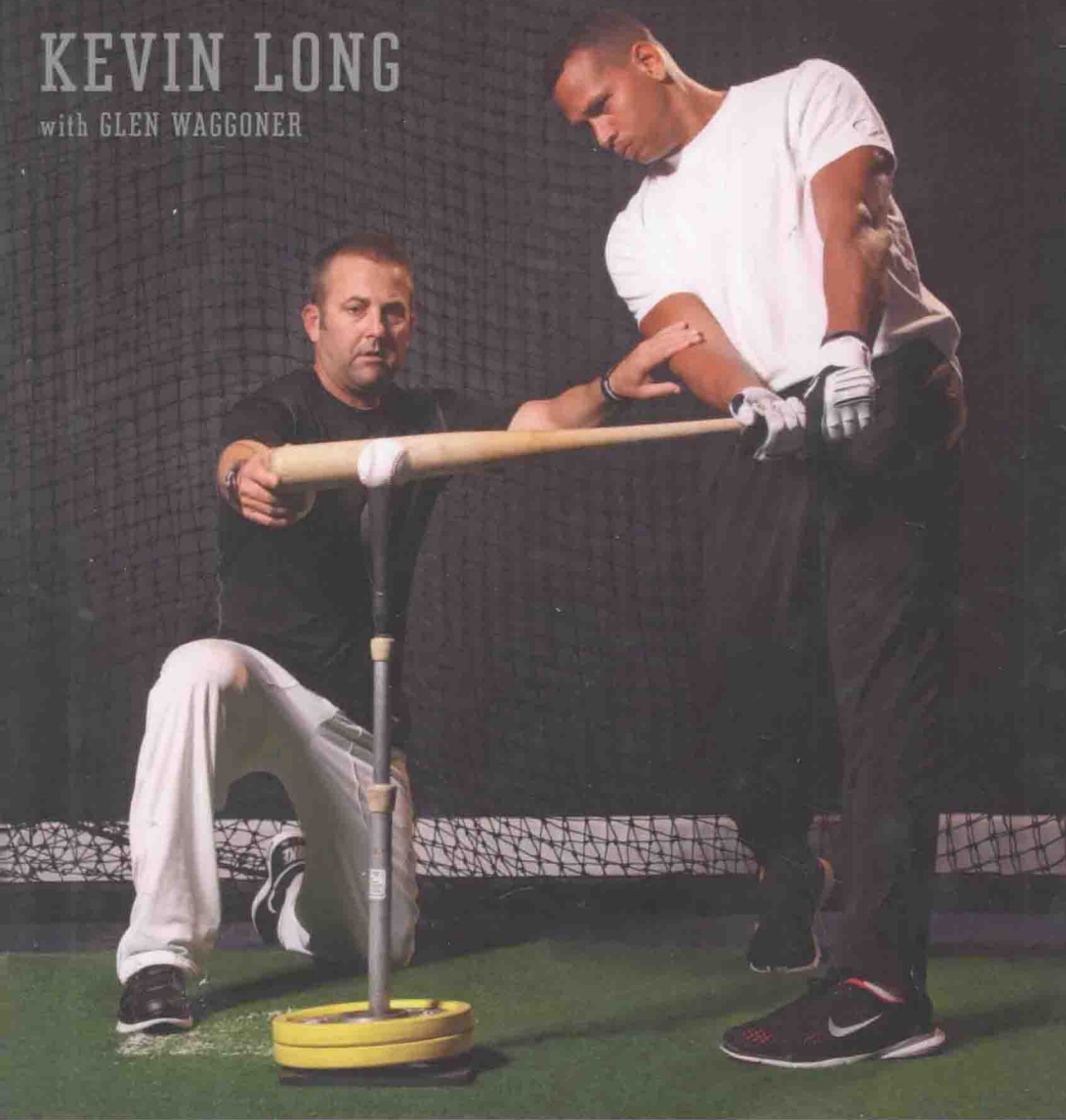


CAGE RAT

LESSONS FROM A LIFE IN BASEBALL
BY THE YANKEES HITTING COACH

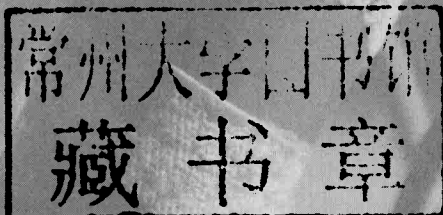
KEVIN LONG

with GLEN WAGGONER



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ecco

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To Marcey

Thanks, baby . . .

For being the most amazing wife a man could ask for . . .

For being my best friend, confidante, and lover for life . . .

For being the best mom in the world to our three kids . . .

For all your support and love, every step of our way together.

Thanks, baby!

To Britney, Tracy, and Jaron

You guys are almost as amazing as your mother.

Thanks for all your understanding and support.

We made it on nothing but love for a lot of years,
but you hung in there like champions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A lot of people, many of whom I met for the first time in the last eighteen months, deserve credit for helping make *Cage Rat* happen, but I want to start with what has always been my primary source of strength and inspiration: my family.

Thanks first to my parents, Donna and Gary, for teaching me right from wrong and for always being there for me. And then there's Tim, my kid brother. Your unconditional love is so heartfelt that it's hard to believe we actually used to fight like . . . well, like brothers just two years apart. Grandma Jane, you are a living wonder, still going at ninety-two. (Dear reader, if you've never had a Grandma Jane, then you've never had a woman who simply did it all.) Marcey and I couldn't have done without you guys.

My beautiful Marcey blessed me with a great extended family. Slim (that would be Dennis Peed, Marcey's dad), we miss you so much. Carolyn (Marcey's mom), you are a tremendous lady who continues to amaze me with your strength. Lisa, you are the loving sister I never had. Mike and David, a guy can always use an extra couple of fine brothers. Thanks for your support and jumping on the Yankees bandwagon.

Between us, Marcey and I have a big, wonderful collection of aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, grandmas and grandpas. Hey, gang, I love you all!

U of A! U of A! A big shout-out to all my teammates at the University of Arizona who taught me how to grow up and paved the road to my success—especially Lance Dickson, Scott Erickson, Chip Hale, Frank Halkovich, Trevor Hoffman, Todd Ingram, Jason Klonoski, Damon Mashore, Gar Millay, J. T. Snow, and Alan Zinter. We were led by the greatest college coaching staff ever assembled: head coach Jerry Kindall, who probably prayed more for me than for any player he ever coached; Jerry Stitt, the best hitting coach I ever had; and Jim Wing, our pitching coach, the most thoughtful man a teenager could be around.

Three coaches made their mark on me before I went off to college: Larry Waters, who made me a first-round draft pick when I was just ten years old; Owen DeJanovich, my high school coach in my first love, football; and my father, Gary Long, who was always willing to play catch and throw BP to his son, even after working ten-hour days.

A special thanks to a huge part of my family today, the New York Yankees. I consider myself blessed to be a part of the greatest organization in sports history. Learning at the feet of Joe Torre and Joe Girardi? Talk about hitting the lottery! Marcey and I have a remarkable bond with the other coaches and their wives. Thanks to our front office staff and scouting team—what a great gang!—and, of course, to the Steinbrenner family, who make it all come together.

Brian Cashman, you hired an unknown and gave him a chance to work on the biggest stage in sports. Thanks, man! I told you I wouldn't let you down.

I tip my cap to all the players I have coached along the way. Trust me, guys, nothing has made me happier over the years than to watch you make yourselves into better hitters. You make me proud.

A whole slew of people helped me get my memories and ideas down on paper. Thanks for guiding me on this journey and for catching me when I stumbled. Writer Glen Waggoner is a confessed longtime Yan-

kees hater; he likes some team called the “Glenwag Goners” in some outfit called “Rotisserie League Baseball.” Whatever, he can be my translator anytime. My publisher at Ecco, Daniel Halpern, had to put up with Glen and me, and managed to keep this project afloat. He is a Yankees fan, and a knowledgeable one at that. Thanks, Dan—I have found a friend for life. Associate editor Libby Edelson did a ton of heavy lifting behind the scenes and saved me from a lot of E-KLs. Tom Hopke, of HarperCollins, is a true baseball fanatic. (And, yes, a Yankees fanatic.)

To Alex Rodriguez and Robinson Cano, please accept my sincere gratitude for the stories you tell about me in the introduction and afterword. Thanks, guys.

I owe a special debt to Ray Négron, a true Yankee if there ever was one, who had the initial vision for this book and kept pushing me to write it. I thank you from my heart, Ray.

Finally, my starting lineup: Marcey, Britney, Tracy, and Jaron. And our amazing son-in-law, Mark, and our grandson, Jackson. We made it, guys!

INTRODUCTION

THANKS, COACH

BY ALEX RODRIGUEZ

Kevin Long and I first met in Tampa in 2004 during spring training, but we didn't really start getting to know each other until that September. That's when major-league rosters expand from twenty-five to forty, and also when a few coaches move from the minors to the big club—Kevin came up from Columbus. We hit it off right out of the box, and we talked some about hitting, sure, but we didn't really work together. Don Mattingly was the Yankees' hitting coach, so even though Kevin and I wore the same uniform, our relationship at first was personal rather than professional. The next year, same deal—we talked some during spring training '05, and then that September he came up during roster expansion, plus we continued to talk during spring training in 2006. During those brief encounters, our relationship picked up a little momentum on its way to becoming a great friendship.

That early friendship turned out to be really important to me after the 2006 season, when I asked him for a huge favor.

I felt like I'd struggled during the 2006 season, and the day that Detroit knocked us out in the AL Division Series, I knew what I needed to do about it. I promised myself, Donnie, manager Joe Torre, and general manager Brian Cashman that I was going to go home to Florida and get

into a really intense workout regimen for the winter, and get my game back to where I thought it should be. That is, I would spend the off-season trying to figure out what was broken and fix it.

Turned out that Kevin would play a big part in that. Early that fall, the Yankees promoted Donnie to bench coach and named Kevin hitting coach, so when he called up just to say hello, like he did with all the other guys, I jumped at the opportunity and asked him if he could possibly come see me in Florida so we could work on some things.

That was asking a lot. Kevin lives in Arizona, so it wasn't like I was offering him a vacation from the winter cold or anything. Plus he has a family that he adores. But he said "Yes, sure" in a New York minute. He came over to my home in Coral Gables, Florida, in early December, and we went right to work in my batting cage. (By the way, the title of this book? An absolutely *perfect* description of my good friend, Mr. Kevin Long.) We spent four days together that first trip, and he came back in mid-January for a quick visit to see how I was doing with the things we'd talked about and worked on. Since then, a winter workout together has become part of our off-season routine, no matter what kind of season I'm coming off of.

One big thing about Kevin—make that one *huge* thing—is that within five minutes after meeting him, I knew that this was the kind of guy I could trust. I sensed immediately—it came through loud and clear—that this guy wasn't going to bullshit me about anything. That's why Kevin and I were good from day one.

At first, though, I didn't know exactly what to expect. He was a really nice guy and all, but we'd never worked together on my swing. Once we started talking about our philosophies a little bit, I discovered Kevin reminded me of Rudy Jaramillo, whom I worked with when I was with the Rangers, and who I think is one of the greatest hitting coaches out there. Kevin was saying a lot of the same things that Rudy said to me, and it made me feel very comfortable right away.

When a guy is as knowledgeable about the game as Kevin is, when he has as much passion for it as Kevin has, when he has a work ethic

that I think may be even greater than my own—well, we found our common ground.

“Kevin, you have a blank canvas. I’m not happy with where my game is. I’m all ears. I’m just gonna listen to you, because I really want to get my game back to where I think it should be. You tell me what to do, and I’ll bust my butt trying to do it.”

Those are pretty near my exact words to Kevin when we got together that first time. It helped, I think—at least in my mind—that we had a blank canvas to work on. I’ve always believed that it’s much easier to go from bad to great than from good to great. Maybe that’s crazy, but I wanted to start from scratch. And I think that Kevin liked the fact that he was able to come in and speak his mind with no hesitation. Hitting 101, that’s what it was.

Beginning in our first season together, 2007, when I had the best year of my baseball career (at least so far!), we set a pattern of talking every day before, during, and often after a game. Some days a little, some days a lot. But we talked: there was never a shortage of communication between us. We’ve become so good at our back-and-forth that sometimes all it takes is just a look, a phrase, or a word for Kevin to get his message across. For instance, if I take a bad swing and I glance over at Kevin standing at the edge of the dugout, he might just mouth the word *foot*. I can’t hear one word, but I can see it, and I know what he’s saying: “Alex! Remember, when you pick your front foot up, put it down in the same place as you swing. Don’t stride forward!”

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve started a game with a lousy at bat, a really bad one, and Kevin will say just one little thing to me back in the dugout, and I end up with 2-for-4, a couple of homers, and 5 RBIs, and we win the game. One *little* thing is often all it takes, because a baseball swing is composed of a lot of little things, and if one of those is off, all you can do is go back and take a seat and hope the next guy gets a hit.

A hitting coach has to have great eyes: he must be able to recognize immediately what a guy is doing wrong at the plate. Once he’s spotted

something wrong—and usually he’s the only guy in the ballpark who has—your hitting coach has to be able to convey it clearly, concisely, and constructively. The last bit is super important: he can’t say, “Alex, you really sucked on that last swing.” He has to say something positive like, “Alex, get your hands up just a tad next time. You’re going to nail this guy.” That way, I take a positive image of what I need to do right the next time I go to the plate, not a negative image of what I did wrong the previous at bat.

That’s one area where I think Kevin and I are really tight. He has the eyes and understanding to spot a tiny flaw and communicate that finding constructively, and I have the ears and understanding to grasp what he’s saying and the talent to put his advice to work. We make a good combo because we trust each other 100 percent.

“Different strokes for different folks.” You’ve heard that a million times, so let me explain one of Kevin’s special talents another way. If Kevin Long worked on cars rather than batting swings for a living, he’d be an equally great technician with three types of cars: Hondas, Mercedes-Benzes, and Ferraris. Not every teacher—and that’s what a hitting coach is, a teacher—can do that. Too many, in fact, teach the same way across the board: “Different folks, *just one* stroke.”

Kevin has thirteen *swings* to know inside out, but he’s also got thirteen different *personalities* to know inside out. That’s because so much of hitting is psychological that he has to be a therapist as well as a technician.

Understand, too, that it’s a year-round deal for Kevin. For him, the season doesn’t end with the last out in one year and begin with the first day of spring training in the next. I sometimes think he doesn’t know the meaning of *off-season*. I know he’s been available for me and my teammates even though the calendar says November, December, or January.

Remember, the man is a cage rat.

Mastering the baseball swing is the hardest thing to do in all of sports. That’s why nobody has ever done it. Mastered it, that is. Not

Babe Ruth, Ted Williams, Willie Mays, George Brett, or Hank Aaron, not any other superstar you can name.

Master the baseball swing? Can't be done. If you have the talent, the right coaching, a strong work ethic, and a whole lot of luck, you can get better. But as Kevin will be the first to remind you, a guy who hits .400 is *still* failing to do his job 60 percent of the time. So if you want to get better, if you want to go from good to great, you can't let yourself get down if you go 0-for-4, or even 0-for-16. That's the really hard part of this game, accepting how hard it is to take a piece of wood about a yard long and make a decision in a fraction of a second whether to swing at a ball that's coming at you at, like, ninety-plus miles an hour—and then, if you do swing, hit it solid.

One of Kevin's greatest strengths, in my estimation, is that he's able to take a thing that's super complicated, the sports equivalent of advanced calculus, and simplify it into a very easy $2 + 2 = 4$. That's a gift. Not everybody has that gift.

For sure not everybody has Kevin's work ethic. *Hard work!* Kevin will tell you that's the key to getting better, no matter what you're trying to do. And I think that message comes through loud and clear in this book.

My road to the big leagues was so much easier than Kevin's. I mean, I basically went from my senior prom to the majors. Kevin's journey was a little different: he went from the prom to eighteen years in the minor leagues and only then as a coach into the big leagues. I have a tremendous appreciation for what he's done. If you're a high school ballplayer and want to improve your hitting, this book is a must-read. Ditto if you're a longtime baseball fan who wants to get more inside the game. And if you're looking for a role model . . .

Kevin Long's life story is more than just a story about baseball. *Cage Rat* is a story about living the American dream. No, he didn't make the majors as a player; his first dream didn't come through. But he didn't let that crush him like it might have, considering how much of his heart and soul he'd put into the game since he was just a kid. He worked and

worked and worked some more and made it to the majors as a teacher, and I believe he's the best in the business, a Hall of Famer at what he does. Beyond that, K-Long has a great, great family, and he loves, truly loves, what he does for a living.

If that's not living the American dream, I don't know what is.

CAGE RAT

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