

# A-Rod's sloppy defense hurting Yankees, frustrating fans

By Mike Fitzpatrick

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Alex Rodriguez's throws are wild and swings are late. And now the New York Yankees star is back in Texas, where he can always count on a cold reception.

He must be getting used to those.

Playing in the Big Apple with a record \$252 million contract, Rodriguez is constantly under the microscope. Every failure is magnified, fodder for the back pages of the city tabloids or talk radio.

A-Rod has been booed at Yankee Stadium nearly all season for failing to come through at the plate. Now, it's his shoddy defense that's frustrating fans and more importantly — hurting his team.

"I'm working through it,"

Rodriguez said recently. "It's not easy that's for sure."

It's almost strange to hear him say something like that. So many things appear to come so easily to A-Rod on a baseball field.

But lately, he can't even make a routine throw to first base. Or second. Or home plate.

The two-time MVP committed five errors in a five-game span last week and led the American League with 18 going into Monday. Not exactly what you'd expect from the most talented all-around player in Major League Baseball.

In fact, it got so bad that manager Joe Torre made Rodriguez the designated hitter on Saturday in Toronto — even with New York trying to snap a three-game losing skid.

It didn't help his offense any. Rodriguez went 0-for-4 with four strikeouts, including one with the bases loaded, during New York's 5-4 victory.

He finished 0-for-4 again on Sunday in a 13-5 loss and was on a 4-for-27 slide going into Monday's series opener against the Texas Rangers, his former team.

What's wrong with A-Rod? One major flaw is his footwork at third base. But the biggest obstacle is probably in his head.

Rodriguez made a pretty smooth transition from shortstop to third base when he joined the Yankees in 2004. He worked hard that spring to get comfortable and made only 13 errors all season — plus some dazzling plays.

He committed 12 errors last year, and his strong defense was a big reason he beat out

Boston designated hitter David Ortiz for AL MVP.

But right now, there's a kink in Rodriguez's footwork.

He drops down, submarine-style, to make his throws across the diamond — something many major league infielders do. It's not how Little League coaches teach you to do it but it's a style that plenty of big league players have perfected, including Rodriguez.

The problem now is that, without proper footwork, his throws are often tailing high and to the right. Like a slice off a right-handed golf swing.

"He hasn't had that feel," Torre said.

Watch closely and you can see it. A-Rod is opening up his front shoulder too far and planting his left foot wide of the target, instead of directly toward the target.

Overcompensate, and he hooks his throw too far to the left.

"It's definitely mechanics," said Rodriguez, a Gold Glove shortstop in Texas. "It really becomes staying on top of the baseball. Pitchers, catchers, everybody does it at some point. You've just got to get your target, get your footwork and stay on top of the baseball."

That's the easy part, though. The hard part for Rodriguez is not letting all the miscues affect him mentally.

It seems they already have. You can almost see him trying to aim his throws from third. He doesn't look natural. And once an infielder begins thinking, "I can't throw this ball away, that's exactly what he'll often do."

With his recent struggles,

some have even suggested A-Rod will want out of New York soon.

"That couldn't be further from the truth. That's a ridiculous thought," he said.

But the Yankees, who trail first-place Boston in the AL East division, have a more pressing concern. Missing three injured All-Stars, they need Rodriguez to rediscover his form — quickly — so they can stay close in a tight pennant race.

"I don't know what's going on," pitcher Mike Mussina said. "I know he's disappointed in the way he's playing. It's just not him right now. We need him back the way he's supposed to be."

Associated Press Writer Rob Gillies in Toronto contributed to this report.

## Soriano wants to play in Washington

By Howard Fendrich

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Alfonso Soriano says he wants to stay with the Washington Nationals, but he doubts he'll reach an agreement on a new contract before the July 31 trade deadline.

"I don't think so. I think that my agent and the club, they have to talk a lot," Soriano said after homering in Washington's 7-1 victory over the Chicago Cubs on Sunday. "If we have something working, we need a little bit more time."

The five-time All-Star said he spoke with incoming team president Stan Kasten on Thursday, but they didn't discuss contract details. Soriano added that he doesn't think his agent, Diego Bentz, has discussed numbers with the Nationals, either.

Reached by telephone, Bentz wouldn't say whether contract proposals have been extended by him or the club.

"That doesn't really mean anything. The bigger question is: Does he like it there or not? Does he feel comfortable there?" Obviously, you can tell by the way he's playing," Bentz said.

Soriano joined Washington last offseason in a trade from Texas, and the Nationals shifted him from second base to left field. He's batting .288 with 31 homers, 62 RBIs and 25 steals.

Soriano is slated to become a free agent at season's end; the Nationals figure to be able to get top prospects in return if they deal him.

During Sunday's game, Kasten said he's had "numerous conversations" with Soriano and his agent.

"I have been told unequivocally, from both of them, they would like to remain here. No doubt about that," Kasten said.

"We love Alfonso, we love what he does — lots of people do. Let's face it. He's a potential MVP candidate. It goes without saying that he's a superior player," Kasten added. "But, you know, our No. 1 mission is getting to be the best team we can as soon as possible."

One potential stumbling block if the sides try to agree on a new contract, Soriano said he wants a no-trade clause, something Kasten pointed out Sunday he refused to include in contracts he negotiated in recent years while an executive with the Atlanta Braves, the NBA's Hawks and the NHL's Thrashers.

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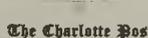
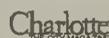
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