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CULTURE SPORTS

KEVIN PILLAR TALKS BASEBALL AT MACCABI FUNDRAISER

By **Shlomo Kapustin** - June 24, 2016 > 5080 > 0

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Toronto-born broadcaster Dan Shulman, left, interviews Kevin Pillar, right

TORONTO – On June 21, Kevin Pillar added to his oeuvre with a catch highlighted by a head-first leap into the Rogers Centre wall. The night before, he opened a window on the fearlessness that has become his calling card.

“I have had to prove myself ever since I was a little kid,” said the Blue Jays centrefielder. “My parents always told me to work hard.”

Pillar, who is Jewish, anchored an all-star lineup at Maccabi Canada’s *Sports Unplugged – Talkin’ Baseball*. The event drew about 500 people to the University of Toronto’s Goldring Centre for High Performance Sport. Toronto-born broadcaster Dan Shulman, a Maccabi alum, interviewed Pillar and helped secure the other media figures interviewed: Mike Wilner, Shi Davidi, Tim Micallef and Sid Seixeiro.

With the event, Maccabi raised funds to subsidize athletes’ attendance at Maccabiah games, which are held every four years in Israel, and increased the organization’s profile.

“Maccabi has definitely increased its community involvement,” said event co-chair Mike Bacher, “and that is a pillar of our current set of priorities now and for the future.”

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Pillar’s winding road to major-league success is not unique in baseball. That honour probably goes to Hall of Fame catcher Mike Piazza, who was famously picked in the 62nd round of baseball’s 1988 entry draft as a favour to his father. But it remains unusual.

As a child in California, “baseball wasn’t necessarily number one” among the multiple sports he played. Eventually, he judged it the most suitable for his 6-foot, 205-pound frame. But it had seduced him earlier with its sweet smell of sweat.

“For some reason, I was attracted to the failure of it,” he told Shulman. “That one at-bat that I didn’t get a hit I wanted to figure out.”

Pillar wasn’t drafted out of high school, and he played college ball at California State, Dominguez Hills, an NCAA Division II short on major league talent. In his junior year, he set a Division II record with a 54-game hitting streak.

Baseball’s scouting fraternity remained unimpressed. In the 2011 draft after his senior year, the Blue Jays drafted him in the 32nd round, with the 979th overall pick. His knowledge of Toronto? “Nothing. I knew it was in Canada, on the East Coast, somewhere in the New York region.”

Pillar thought there was a chance he could make the big leagues, but he knew little about the congested development, or “farm,” system he would need to ace.

“I had no friends or family who went through this,” he said. “I thought I would go to A ball [a team’s lowest level], then Double-A, then Triple-A. I had no idea how many players they draft or how many levels. There are always people trying to take your job.”

Pillar’s climb of the organization’s depth chart was faster than many first-round picks. While his fielding now garners the most acclaim, he says he was known for his prowess at the plate. In 2014, his final year in the minor leagues, he had a .323 batting average for the Buffalo Bisons, the Blue Jays Triple-A affiliate.

First promoted to the majors in 2013, Pillar finally stuck with the team last year.

“Once you get there,” he said, “your mindset is always figuring out how to say there, how to be successful. Now it’s all about winning.”

The turning point came last April 15, against division-rival Tampa Bay, when he scaled the left-field wall and reached over to rob Tim Beckham of a home run.

“It was a life-changing moment,” he said. “Not only my teammates, not only my organization, but major league baseball understood that I was serious, that I could play this game.”

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Pillar’s reputation grew as the team reached the playoffs for the first time since 1993. He has established himself as the team’s everyday centre fielder.

Earlier this year, when Texas Rangers reliever Matt Bush plunked Jose Bautista in retaliation for last year’s post-homer “bat flip,” Pillar was one of the first to step in to support him.

“To me it was no different from being a soldier. If one of our guys was getting attacked I had to go out there and get mine.”

With the Blue Jays pursuing another postseason berth, Pillar still thinks about last year’s elimination in the American League Championship Series.

“It still hurts ... For a lot of us it was the first time playing in the postseason. We learned a lot about ourselves, and when get there this year I think it’s going to pay off.”

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