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. . .set an unbreakable record

By Kevin Kouzmanoff

When 2003 Nevada All-American Kevin Kouzmanoff stepped to the plate for his first big league at-bat, Sept. 2 in Arlington, Texas, he ended up doing something no one had ever done before or ever will surpass.

It was almost midnight, and the phone was ringing. I picked it up. It was my manager with the Triple A Buffalo Bisons, Torey Lovullo.

There were only three games left in the season, and we were back at the Crowne Plaza hotel in Rochester, N.Y., having just lost to the Red Wings 3-0 in the third game of a four-game series. I'd gotten one hit in four at-bats. I asked him what was up.

He said, "I have some good news and some bad news for you. You're not going to be in Buffalo's lineup tomorrow. You're going to be in the Indians' lineup tomorrow."

It was a dream come true to hear those words. He told me I would be flying out the next morning to Texas, where the Cleveland Indians, our parent club, were playing the Rangers. It was what I'd thought about every day of my life growing up, and now it had happened. I was in the big leagues.

Well, almost. At the airport in Dallas, my luggage didn't come out in the baggage claim. I ended up sitting there waiting forever and panicking because I was going to be late for pre-game stretching. Here I am, my first day and I'm going to show up late. But finally I got my bags and got a cab to the stadium. I went straight to the locker room, still lugging my bags.

I met a couple of the guys and found a locker with my name on it. I just stared at all the premium Dri-FIT undershirts, all the fleece, and there's my jersey, No. 11, Kouzmanoff, hanging there. My locker was right next to Travis Hafner's, the Indians' star designated



John Byrne

Kevin Kouzmanoff

hitter, and Aaron Boone, the third baseman, and I was like, "Wow, this is unbelievable." It was the first time I'd ever been in a Major League locker room, and I thought about how I'd worked hard my whole life to get here and now it was time to work even harder and take care of business.

I went to go see the manager, Eric Wedge. He shut the door and told me what my role was going to be. I

was going to be DH-ing in place of Hafner, whose hand had been injured the night before when he'd been hit by a pitch. They found out later that it was broken, and he ended up missing the rest of the season.

As I got ready for the game I was feeling a little nervous. I'd had a tough time sleeping the night before, and I couldn't eat. I was out along the leftfield line warming up when I heard, "Hey, Kev."

I looked up and saw my little brother, Ky, walking down the aisle in the stands. I hadn't seen him in a while. He told me he and a couple of buddies had driven the entire day from their school in Nebraska to see me. It was awesome to see him. I'd called my parents the night before to tell them I'd been called up, and they were flying in from our home in Evergreen, Colo., near Denver. I imagined them later on looking down at me and saying, "There he is. He's in the big leagues."

Finally the game got started and I was sitting in the dugout. I just tried to think about my first at-bat, going through my usual routine, telling myself to be patient, look for a good pitch to hit. Being the road team, we batted first, but I was hitting seventh, so I didn't expect to get up till at least the second inning.

Things didn't go as I expected.

Grady Sizemore led off with a home run, and the second guy hit a single. The next two made outs. But then Casey Blake, our right fielder, walked. Suddenly I was in the on-deck circle. Then our shortstop, Jhonny Peralta, walked. The bases were loaded, and I was going to hit.

On deck, I had been thinking, I'm the new guy, they're just going to go right after me, just see what I've got. So as I stepped to the plate I was looking first-pitch fastball. And that's what I got. It was a little up, about letter-high. It's tough to hit a pitch that's at the letters, but I was ready to go and swung.

LOOK ONLINE

Watch Kevin Kouzmanoff's record-setting home run and its aftermath from video taken by SportsTime Ohio at www.unr.edu/nevadasilverandblue.

I didn't get it solid, I didn't even get it square, not crisp on the barrel. But it went up in the air and I just said, "Go, ball, go." I didn't want to fly out with the bases loaded. I was just blowing the ball out.


It went over the center field fence.

I don't remember hearing anything. I just remember thinking, "Oh, my gosh, I just hit a grand slam in my first at-bat." As I rounded third, third-base coach Joel Skinner said, "That a boy. Congratulations." I was so excited to get to home plate to give my teammates high fives, running into the dugout.

After that my heart was just racing. I was trying to calm myself down because I was taking these short, deep breaths. Casey Blake started giving me a hard time. "You come in here and hit a home run. It's that easy, huh?"

After becoming the first player to hit a grand-slam home run on the first pitch of his major league career, Kouzmanoff hit his second home run in the fifth inning the next day to break up a perfect-game bid by Texas pitcher Kevin Millwood. He finished the season batting .214 with three home runs and 11 runs batted in in 16 games. The 25-year-old Kouzmanoff, who hit a combined .379 in the minors at Akron and Buffalo last year, was traded by the Indians Nov. 8 to the San Diego Padres. Former Nevada player Joe Inglett (1997-2000) is a strong contender to stick with the Indians after batting .284 in 64 games as a utility player last year.

The game's that easy for you?" But it was all positive, all fun.

In my next at-bat, I got up to the plate, and their catcher, Gerald Laird, congratulated me and said, "Good swing." 

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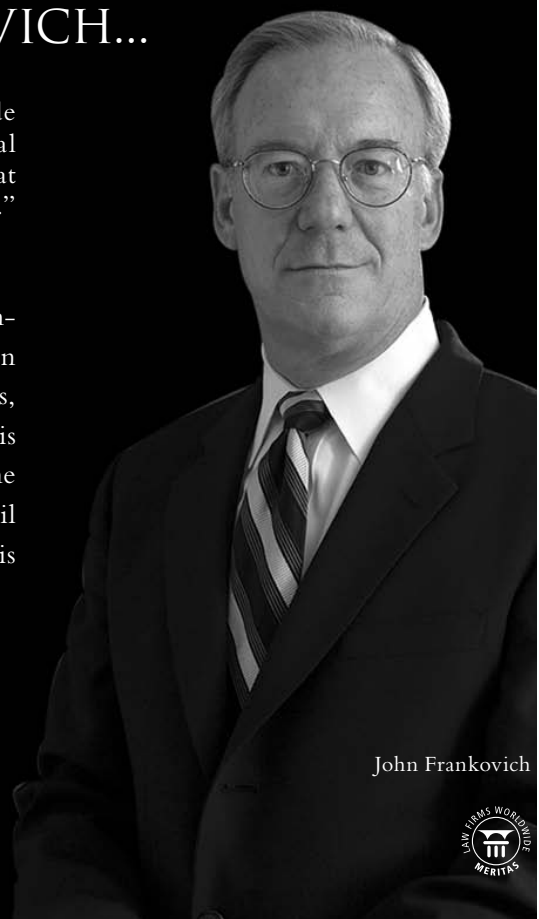
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