

# HILL COUNTRY NEWS

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## **Never say die: After more than 16 seasons, 17 teams and two countries, Brandon Mann makes major league debut**

Brandon Mann literally couldn't believe what he'd just been told.

After more than 16 professional seasons and 17 teams in two countries in both affiliated and independent baseball, the late-round draft pick that at one point quit the sport altogether to work at a grocery store was about to make his MLB debut at age 33.

"The ultimate goal was to make it to the major leagues," Mann said. "Not just to make it, but to have an impact. I've made it and I still want to make that impact. It's all just part of the journey and everything I did has led me to where I am."

He allowed one hit over 1.2 innings in his debut with the Rangers on May 13 against the Astros. Overall, he gave up one run and four hits across six innings in four games with the big league club, which included a game at Safeco Field against his hometown Seattle Mariners.

After the initial shock of being called up wore off, he called his wife and got her and his sister on the first flight from their home in the Pacific Northwest to Houston.

"I don't think he necessarily believed me at the time," Express manager Jason Wood said. "He's persevered through ups and downs in his career. He got a taste of that and I don't think he wants to quit. He's going to continue to grow even with the age that he's at. He's going to pitch in the big leagues again."

He's been one of the most consistent pitchers out of the bullpen in Round Rock this season, boasting a perfect 3-0 record and 2.31 ERA with 33 strikeouts and 35 innings pitched in 26 appearances, the third-most on the team.

Originally a 27th round draft pick of the Tampa Bay Rays, Mann toiled in the lower levels of the minor leagues for five seasons and finished the 2006 season with the Class A-Advanced Visalia Rawhide, finishing 4-9 with a 5.64 ERA.

He sat out all of 2007, returning to his native Washington and work at Whole Foods.

"I kind of hit a wall," Mann said. "I struggled in 2006 and I was still young and I questioned if I wanted to play. I missed it the entire time I was out. I was with Tampa Bay at the time and they told me I'd have a spot in spring training the following year, so I showed up."

Mann spent three seasons in Japan from 2011-2013. His first start in Japan was in Tokyo Dome in front of 40,000 fans, and he threw six shutout innings.

His first two seasons were spent with Yokohama Bay Stars in the Japan Central League, one of the top leagues in the country. He then pitched for the Shinano Grandserows in the Baseball Challenge League, an independent minor league.

He loved every minute of it, even if his Japanese was never as polished as he would've liked.

"I acclimated myself to the culture and the game over there and it just became normal pretty quickly," Mann said. "They work really hard. They put a lot of emphasis on having fun and playing hard. We do things differently over here and some guys can't adjust."

Now 34 years old, the lefty is one of the oldest players on the Round Rock roster, but he doesn't always feel like an elder statesman.

Mann spends his summers at Driveline Baseball, a data-driven player development program. He and former Cy Young Award winner Tim Lincecum — who spent a month in Round Rock earlier this season — both train and were scouted by Texas at the Seattle-based facility.

He credits their weighted ball program with his jump in velocity beginning in 2016. His average fastball averaged 86-89 mph before, while his average now is 92.4 mph and he's thrown as hard as 96 mph.

"In the sense where baseball is now, I don't feel older," he said. "I work with all the spin rates and (data) and try to use all of that to my advantage. That's where baseball has gone. I just wish I did this when I was 25 not 34."

Up until this season, Mann was really just wanting a chance in Triple-A, having advanced to the top minor league level for a short time last season. He got that with the Rangers and Express and it's paid off for everyone.

The biggest thing that keeps him going is the belief that he has the ability to help a major league club.

At least for a small moment, he proved that to be true.

"It's definitely been my favorite year playing baseball," Mann said. "Texas took a flier on an older guy. They invited me to Spring Training and let me try to prove myself. I don't know if they had plans for me the way they've turned out, but I appreciate the opportunity."