

# Speaking of Damon

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BY ANTHONY McCARRON

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He seems made to stand in front of a television camera - glib, rock-star handsome with a ready smile and a helluva player, too. He is a spokesman for Puma, has talked teammates through complicated labor negotiations as the Red Sox union representative and is the darling of postgame interviews. He was creative enough to dub his old team a bunch of "idiots," a moniker that stuck all the way to a World Series crown.

But speaking didn't used to be so easy for Yankee outfielder Johnny Damon. For several years as a child, Damon stuttered so badly he was afraid to introduce himself. Sometimes, there was cruel teasing from other kids.

Damon vividly remembers going to the movies as an oversized youth and trying to pay child's prices. When clerks saw his man-sized frame - by the time he was 12, he was 6-1, 185 pounds - they thought he was kidding. When they heard him stutter as he tried to explain that he was big for his age, they thought he was lying.

"My mind was going a thousand miles an hour and my mouth would say whatever came to it," Damon recalled. "I slowed down, took my time, connected my words and got better. Now I'm talking in front of millions of people a day. At times, there's some slight hesitations and whatnot, but I feel like I've overcome it. I don't think about it too much anymore. I just roll with it and feel like I've come a long way."

"It's amazing that a guy who years ago was sometimes afraid to talk is now such a great quote," said Damon's childhood friend and former pro teammate, Brian Barber. "People who know him now don't even realize he had it."

Words "kind of lock up" when a person stutters, said Jane Fraser, the president of the Stuttering Foundation of America, a non-profit organization devoted to treating and preventing the condition. About three million Americans stutter, about 1% of the population, Fraser said, and around 5% of children stutter at some point, though most outgrow it.

There are plenty of famous people other than Damon who have battled stuttering, including sports stars such as Tiger Woods, Bill Walton and Kenyon Martin. Winston Churchill and Marilyn Monroe dealt with it, too.

"A lot of kids work their way out of stuttering by being good at sports," Fraser said. "It gives you self-confidence. And then the more you talk, the more you will get out of this problem. I think that sports analogies help kids who stutter. You've got to work on your speech. We tell kids, 'Don't think someone who can hit a baseball is an expert because they just do it five minutes a day.' That's something we like to share with teens, their eyes get all big."

Damon, 32, started taking speech therapy classes in second grade because he had trouble saying "S' or 'T' or 'D,'" he said. He could sing without stuttering - mostly hair bands such as Motley Crue, he said, laughing - and that helped build confidence. The late Robert Merrill, the baritone who sang the national anthem at Yankee Stadium, used similar technique.

"When I was able to talk a lot and express my feelings, I think that's what really helped," Damon said. "I even dealt with this in my first couple of years in the big leagues and it's something that I still have. Obviously, when I talk now, there are 'ums' and slight hesitations to help me get past it. "Sometimes I got teased and maybe people didn't understand," Damon said. "They thought I was a little slow or just couldn't really talk. Playing my sports did my talking and who's laughing now?" One offseason, when both Barber and Damon went home to Orlando after a year in the minors, "It wasn't there anymore, really," Barber said. The two were teammates briefly on the Royals in 1998 and 1999, and when Barber was called up for the first time, he lived at Damon's house in Kansas City.

"Now, you can see him thinking through the process," said Barber, who is now a scout for the Yankees. "The talking to the media itself has helped him. He knew he had to do that, he always wanted to do it and he thought it was part of his job. He's met plenty of new people and been in situations that would've bothered him and he's not bothered by it."

Now he's so smooth, interviews with him turn into magazine cover stories. Last winter, he signed a four-year, \$52 million free agent contract with the Yankees to be their leadoff hitter and center fielder. They've been delighted with his breezy, loose clubhouse manner.

He also signed a four-year deal with Puma to pitch that company's gear in television and print ads. Puma gave Damon a Ferrari F430 Spider as a gift.

"I always thought I had a stuttering problem and people would stay away, but I guess because I overcame it, I tend to draw people into me and people want to hear me speak now," Damon said. "And that's pretty amazing."

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