

Wladimir Balentien blasts felt in Twins' bullpen

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CHICAGO, Sep 17, 2013 (Menafn - Pioneer Press - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX) --Former big-league outfielder Wladimir Balentien, Japan's new single-season home run king with 57 blasts (and counting), has a couple of friends in the Twins' bullpen.

One of them is right-hander Shairon Martis, who comes from the same hometown (Willemstad) on the tiny island of Curacao. Martis was doing a group chat online with Balentien a few weeks ago when he predicted his countryman would break Sadaharu Oh's 49-year-old record of 55 homers.

Previous challengers such as Karl "Tuffy" Rhodes and Alex Cabrera were pitched around once they got within range of the great Oh. In Balentien's case, there was so much time left in the Yakult Swallows' season (18 games remain), Martis figures opponents had no option but to challenge his friend.

"I don't know how that happened," Martis said. "He has to be proud of that. It's amazing."

Not even the revelation by league officials in June that the baseballs had been altered this season could take away from Balentien's accomplishment.

"I told him to keep hitting them so he can hold the record for even longer," Martis said. "Everybody is talking about him right now (on Curacao). This is big. Coming from a small island like us -- only 150,000 people -- everybody is going to Google us to see where Curacao is."

A parade has been planned for Nov. 17 in Curacao, Martis said. He plans to be home for the celebration, which is so anticipated even former big-leaguer Andruw Jones is expected to return.

"Andrew lives in Atlanta now," Martis said of the five-time all-star and 10-time Gold Glove winner. "He hasn't been home for like six years, but he's going to come back for that."

Twins right-hander Jared Burton played with Balentien, 29, in Cincinnati (2009) and at Triple-A Louisville the following season.

"He always had raw pop and a great arm," Burton said of the right-handed hitter. "I guess that opportunity came about over in Japan (in 2011) . Sometimes you put people in the right situation and they just flourish. It sounds like he's ruling the roost."

At Louisville three years ago, Burton even played a role in helping Balentien escape something like an 0-for-30 slump.

"He was frustrated, even though he was having a pretty good year," Burton said. "I went to Wal- mart before I

went to the field -- didn't tell anybody -- and I bought a pair of purple lace panties and hung them in his locker. He gets there and says, 'Who put these in my locker?' "

That's when Burton stepped in.

"I went over and said, 'Wear 'em under your uniform. They're going to get you out of your slump,' " Burton recalled. "He got a couple hits that night."

Maybe Burton will get invited to the big parade this November as well.

Follow Mike Berardino at twitter.com/MikeBerardino.

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