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## The Slump and the Streak

No sport is more prone to slumps than baseball. Is it simply a matter of probability? Or is it all in the head?

By Ian A. Stewart

There was nothing out of the ordinary about the way Anthony Young, the New York Mets' 26-year-old starting pitcher, walked to the mound to begin the bottom of the sixth inning on May 6, 1992. There was nothing telling about the way he loosened up, pumping fastballs into his catcher's mitt. Even after Bip Roberts, the Cincinnati Reds' young second baseman, dug into the batter's box and after the umpire gave Young the nod to begin play, there were no clues, at least to the naked eye, to suggest Anthony Young's career was about to take a dramatic turn for the worse.

Young, a lean, long-armed pitcher, came into the day with a record of two wins and no losses, including a complete-game, one-run gem in his first start of the season—a good sign for the Mets, who were expected to compete for the pennant.

But suddenly, something went haywire. Young couldn't know it yet—the scope of what was about to happen wouldn't become clear for weeks—but he was about to etch his name into the game's history books.

A three-run homer cost Young the Reds game. San Diego roughed him up next. Then the Dodgers got him. Three losses later, after a spectacular nine-run, first-inning collapse in Chicago, Young was moved to the bullpen.

Young pitched in 43 more games that season, sometimes as a starter and often in relief, but over the next two years he never won another ballgame—giving him

the dubious distinction of owning Major League Baseball's longest-ever losing streak. Young had, undoubtedly, fallen prey to the Slump – one of baseball's great mysteries.

"I really don't know how it started," Young said the first time we spoke. "There were nights I felt like my teammates had even more weight on them than me. They'd try so hard to do well for me. That was the part that was the hardest – it was putting even more pressure on my teammates."

Statistically, a slump is just a run of failures that outlasts the usual ups and downs of pure chance. Ian Ayers, an economist at Yale, in 2009 wrote an article for the *New York Times* in which he laid out a simple algorithm to quantify a baseball slump. For a player with the league-median batting average, according to Ayers' formula, a nine-and-a-half at-bat hitless stretch qualifies as a slump. (This more or less lines up with what most players and fans would guesstimate.)

Among athletes, however, the slump can't merely be quantified. It is terrifying: a shadowy specter always lurking, one at-bat away. In fact, many players won't even talk about a slump, for fear that acknowledging the symptoms might somehow confirm the disease's presence.

Todd "Trick" Steverson, now a minor-league hitting instructor with the Sacramento Rivercats, says he can still remember the slump's icy clutch.

"In your mind, you just don't know anymore," Steverson said. "It gets so deep sometimes you start to doubt yourself. You doubt your approach, the thing you've been working on this whole time. You get your pitch and you just can't hit it. It's like, 'How can I clean my swing up? How can I clean my mind up?'"

Initially, a slump can seem like nothing more than a run of bad luck. It's not at all

uncommon for players to encounter and dismiss an 0-for-10 now and then. Players call it a funk. But the slump—the career-threatening slump—is an entirely different brand of failure. It generates its own momentum, building into a relentless drought that afflicts both great players and merely good ones without favor. Mickey Mantle once went 20 straight at-bats without a hit, and Willie Mays was 0-for-24 during his MVP season in 1965. Derek Jeter once went 0-for-32.

Either way, from a player's perspective, it's excruciating. In a *Baseball Digest* story about his 1992 season-long slump, Seattle Mariners catcher Dave Valle described the embarrassment of getting booed by the home fans.

"I've lived through hell," Valle said. "I've walked through it every day. There were days I was driving across I-90 [to the ballpark] saying, 'I don't want to go.' ... You just get to the point you say, 'I don't need this. This is crazy.'"

Anthony Young, like everyone who's fallen into a funk before him, was at a loss to explain his slump.

"My streak could have stopped at two, or eight," Young said. "It wasn't like I was thinking, 'Damn, I gave up too many runs, I deserve to lose that game.' All I could do was throw my ass off, and just wait for the ball the next time."

If players seem at a loss for answers to the slump, fans appear even more poorly positioned to offer critique, although it's never stopped them from trying. Last August, the San Francisco Giants' best starting pitcher, Tim Lincecum, two-time winner of the National League Cy Young award, fell into the first real slump of his career, losing five straight games and looking nothing like the dynamic young arm that had made him the team's most popular player.

Sports-talk radio shows devoted countless hours to the subject of Lincecum's sudden and dramatic decline. Some callers conjectured that he was playing injured. Or they thought his conditioning had slipped. Others argued he was relying too heavily on his fastball, neglecting his other pitches. The theories went on and on: Perhaps Lincecum was smoking too much pot (he'd been busted before the season began with a gram of marijuana in his car); he wasn't smoking enough pot; his hair was too long; he wasn't talking with his father enough; he was talking with his father too much. Before a consensus could emerge, though, Lincecum was back to form, pitching the Giants to their first World Series title in over 50 years. Problem solved. But still not understood.

For players stuck in a slump, desperation can breed weirdness. Babe Ruth is said to have eaten scallions to end a slump. Wade Boggs preferred chicken. Mark Grace, the longtime Cubs first baseman, once admitted that the best "slump buster" was a night out with the heaviest girl he could find. Bobby Bonilla said he slept with Charlie Lau's instructional hitting book, "The Art of Hitting" under his pillow at night, hoping he'd absorb its teachings through osmosis.

Baseball has always been considered a slump-prone game. With such a long season, and such long games, the self-reflexive mind has ample time to wander. The games in which activity comes as part of a natural flow – like football or ice hockey – tend to have fewer "head cases." But in baseball (and in golf, too), superstition is practically ubiquitous.

In the hours before a June 17 game against the New York Yankees last year, Philadelphia's star second baseman, Chase Utley, mired in a month-long slump in which he'd lost 50 points off his batting average, was seen by reporters building a voodoo shrine in front of his locker: six baseball bats, an apple, an orange and a banana, a can of Red Bull and a pair of batting gloves. That night, Utley went 0-for-3. (The next two games, though, Utley got hot: 5-for-10, with

seven runs batted in).

“It’s almost like we’re stuck in the 1800s,” said Jamie Cevallos, a private hitting coach in Northern California. “Somebody gets in a slump, and they start doing all this superstitious stuff. That’s a sign that we’re not figuring this out. It’s a sign that we’re behind.”

Experts in the game also seem powerless to fix a slump – and often can’t even agree on where to begin. Some regard the slump as a physical problem – a technical breakdown, to be cured through careful and tireless retraining. Steverson acknowledged that the first thing he looks for in a slumping player is a physical cue that something’s gone wrong. Is he dropping his shoulder? Is he taking his eye off the ball? Is he chasing the same curveball low and away?

Tinkering with one’s swing or throwing motion is generally reserved for the off-season or spring training, but some players have no choice but to reconstruct their technique during this season. “Sometimes it’s just necessary for some guys or they’ll just continue that spiral,” Steverson said. “It’s a matter of always fine-tuning and getting it to be consistent.”

Cevallos, whose claim to fame is having helped Tampa Bay Rays outfielder Ben Zobrist transform himself from a middling talent into an All Star in just one year, says there’s only one way to cure a slump: get back to the basics. Deconstruct the swing, optimize the bat’s path through the strike zone, and practice it until it becomes habit. When the swing breaks down, rebuild it. Cal Ripken Jr., who collected over 3,000 hits in his Hall of Fame career, was known to hit hundreds of balls off a batting tee every day hours before the game just to regain the feeling and work the kinks out of a fritzzy swing.

Alternatively, the sports psychologists – and increasingly the baseball

establishment – see the slump more as a mental flameout. Today, nearly every Major League team employs a full-time team psychologist, ready to talk or visualize a slump right out of a hitter’s head. And then there are the statisticians, who argue that the slump is simply a long-odds run of bad luck, like flipping a coin and getting tails 30 times in a row.

The fact that the slump has been so poorly understood is particularly perplexing, since the slump is a game-changer. With literally millions of dollars on the line in every at-bat, and in a sport that’s obsessively scrutinized and optimized by trainers and staff on the ready for every contingency, the slump remains impenetrable.

Recently, though, a third camp has developed. Scientists are now taking their stabs at solving the slump. A study conducted by the Mayo Clinic in Arizona last year suggested that golfers dealing with the “yips” – golf’s word for the sudden inability to make ordinarily routine shots – might suffer from a neurological movement disorder called a dystonia – a brief, involuntary flexing in the wrist (not unlike a writer’s cramp). So far, the tests have been too small to reach conclusive results.

A different study on archers who suffered from what their sport refers to as “target panic” also pointed to the possibility that some cases of the yips could be physiological – the result of worn-out brain pathways that get frayed by repetitive use, causing certain muscles to spaz out. Slightly adjusting the grip on a bow, or a golf club, or perhaps even a bat, requires the brain to send signals to the muscles through alternate neural pathways, and may represent a potential cure for the yips. Therefore, it makes sense, whether or not it’s intentional, for a ballplayer to tinker with his batting stance.

Charles Adler, who led the Mayo study, said he was approached by Arizona

Diamondbacks general manager Joe Garagiola Jr., who wanted to know how the early-stage research might relate to baseball players.

“I told him I thought it [dystonia] existed in baseball, but I didn’t know how many players might have it,” Adler said. “One of the problems, to be honest, is that people don’t understand normal movement completely, let alone what might be abnormal.”

So if the answer cannot yet be found through neurology how do we solve the slump? It seems the best place to start may be where most players do: in the mind.

## II

It’s Chris Carter’s turn to take batting practice, and the 6-foot-5, 230-pound outfielder ambles in from left field. Behind home plate, the groundskeeper decides to take a break from his pregame work, and leans up against his rake to take in the view. Three players from the minor-league Las Vegas ’51s, tonight’s opponent, poke their heads up from the visitors’ dugout. Everybody wants to see Carter hit.

Carter, just 24, is one of the Oakland A’s top prospects. He was named the team’s Minor League player of the year in 2009 after hitting .329 for the club’s top affiliate in Sacramento. But when he was called up to the majors toward the end of the 2010 season, Carter got off to something of an uninspired start. In his first game, against the Seattle Mariners, Carter went 0-for-3, striking out twice. The next night, he again went 0-for-3, with two more strikeouts. The team sent him back down to Sacramento, hoping to right the ship, but recalled him less than a month later. Nothing had changed. By late August, Carter had started his big-league career 0-for-33 – the worst debut to a career in 38 years.



Carter starts his batting practice with a couple of bunts. Steverson, the Rivercats' hitting coach, tells Carter to hit the next pitch to right field. On cue, he laces it down the line. "Now center," Steverson says. Carter's line drive nearly takes the pitcher's head off. "Now swing away."

It's easy to see why Oakland fans are high on Carter, who will likely be recalled back to the Major League team sometime this summer. He barely flicks his wrists at the first one, and it one-hops the fence in center field. The next one is crushed, sailing well over the left field wall and onto the roof of a building behind the bleachers. "I've been here since '03," the groundskeeper says. "And he's the only guy I've seen who can do that."

A few pitches later, the show's over, and everyone goes back to work. For Carter that means more practice hitting off a batting tee. That Carter is, once again, in the clutches of a prolonged slump is nearly incomprehensible. In batting practice, everything he hits is loud. Every swing he takes produces what would be at least a double in a real game. And yet, heading into tonight's game, Carter is riding an 0-for-12, and hitting just .160 for the season.

"I don't know, I'm swinging at everything," Carter says. "I'm chasing. It's frustrating when you're not getting hits." Carter finishes the night 0-for-3, his hitless streak now at 15.

Harvey Dorfman made a career out of trying to save players like Carter. Dorfman, who died shortly before publication of this article, was widely considered baseball's pre-eminent psychologist, and he may have been its first. His book, "The Mental Game of Baseball," remains one of the seminal works in the field.

At its simplest, Dorfman's formula was to instruct his players to visualize their successes and let go of their failures. By the time they stepped into the batter's box, Dorfman wanted his players' minds in an almost Zen-like calm, where the stresses of even a prolonged slump might melt into oblivion. Players call it entering "the zone," where the actions of an at-bat take on a sort of mindlessness, and the habits formed over a lifetime of practice trump the anxiety and pressure of the moment.

Robert Weinberg, a sports psychologist and professor at Miami University in Ohio, described "the zone" as a state in which the mind can't get in the way of a player's natural and honed instincts.

"What you're trying to do is quiet the mind," Weinberg said. "Hitting a ball requires mostly reactions – autopilot kinds of things. See ball, hit ball. It's not Phi Beta Kappa stuff."

Weinberg described a former Major League Baseball player he consulted several years ago. The player, Weinberg said, couldn't let go of a bad game. "He'd beat himself up too much. If he took an offer (as in 0-for-4), he wouldn't go to sleep that night. He'd get too anxious and work himself up so much that that one offer would lead right into another."

Weinberg focuses on two areas when dealing with struggling players, he says. The first is developing "coping imagery." Most players, he said, have trouble forgetting about their last at-bat or their last game. They replay their failures in their minds until the stress snowballs into a crippling inability to focus on the task at hand. So players' natural dispositions matter: Often the best in the game are the players that have a natural ability to forget.

But for the rest, visualization is a way, Weinberg said, to interrupt that

downward spiral and regain some degree of confidence at the plate. When Weinberg began working with this player, he asked him to imagine himself swinging at a pitch and missing – recall exactly the pull of the bat’s weight, the *swoosh* of the pitch flying by, the snap of the catcher’s mitt. Then he asked him to stop and do it again, but this time, to imagine stroking a clean hit into center field: The crack of the bat, the tiny little endorphin rush jogging up the first-base line. Replace the negative mental tape with a positive one.

“You see yourself getting a base hit, and you try to remember that feeling and keep your confidence up,” Weinberg said. “And also, you get the feeling of that [correct] movement, that neuromuscular involvement, so that even though you’re not physically practicing, your body thinks you’re practicing.”

Next, the two developed a specific routine the player would repeat before every pitch of an at-bat, both to calm him down and to de-clutter his mind. Step away from the plate with the left foot, line up the lettering on the bat at 12 o’clock, take a deep breath. Focus. Breathe. React.

Watch almost any pro baseball game and you see players putting these sorts of techniques in motion. Some seem neurotic – think Nomar Garciaparra re-strapping his batting gloves between each pitch, or Johnny Gomes yanking at the brim of his helmet exactly three times before every pitch – but they all serve the same purpose.

Further, Weinberg helped his client develop what he called a “thought-stopping technique.” If the player felt his focus slipping – his mind starting to wander – he’d immediately picture a giant stop sign and focus his mind on the word “ball.”

For some, what sport psychologists have in recent years figured out and put into

practice, is really just baseball folk wisdom. Yogi Berra, the Yankees' famous catcher and accidental philosopher, once famously declared that, "A full mind equals an empty bat."

Baseball has always been full of counter-intuitive messages like that: think less, focus more. Try hard, don't press. Play loose, always hustle. Further, the game presents its players with a unique dilemma: Players are forced to embrace a kind of unnatural, irrational level of trust in themselves and their abilities that makes taking the long view – *it's natural to sometimes fail* – nearly impossible.

Just a few weeks before his death, Dorfman described the level of perfectionism it takes just to reach the major leagues, and the irony that it's often that very unwillingness to accept occasional failures that serves to paralyze a slumping player. In baseball, only the strong of mind survive.

"You have to understand, there is no perfection," Dorfman said. "You aspire to it, but it's an unattainable goal, and you've got to recognize that. You aspire to a goal; you don't reach it."

Of course, hearing this message and implementing it are two different things. Dorfman's client list included some of the most successful players in the game, including Alex Rodriguez and Greg Maddux, players who have sworn up and down by his methods. But it also included Rick Ankiel, the famous St. Louis Cardinals pitcher who suddenly and inexplicably lost his ability to throw the ball over the plate and is remembered as one of the game's great flameouts.

"I can't ensure success," Weinberg said. "For it to work, you have to buy in; you have to have the feeling it's going to help you. And you have to practice it, just like hitting a curveball, so it becomes automatic. Because the moment you most need these things, these tools, that's usually when you forget them."

### III

Perversely, given all the effort invested in cracking a slump, there are those who argue that it's not always the player's fault. Luck, after all, surely plays some role in the outcome of things. But how much? After all, professional athletes are supposed to transcend mere luck – at least to some degree. They are supposed to be good enough to overcome the inevitable bad spell.

That's why, of baseball's most hallowed records, Joe DiMaggio's 56-game hitting streak of 1941 is so admired. DiMaggio transcended ups and downs. There was no evening out of the odds. As Stephen Jay Gould described it for the *New York Times*:

"... a streak must be absolutely exceptionless; you are not allowed a single day of subpar play, or even bad luck. ... Thus Joe DiMaggio's fifty-six-game hitting streak is both the greatest factual achievement in the history of baseball and a principal icon of American mythology."

Ed Purcell, the late statistician and Nobel laureate at Harvard University, wrote in his famous study on streakiness in 1985 that DiMaggio's hitting streak was the only streak – in the *history* of baseball – that fell outside the statistical range of probability. (Pete Rose, author of the No. 2 hitting streak, was 12 games short of Joltin' Joe). Fans agree it is baseball's only unbreakable record.

What continues to make DiMaggio's hitting streak so impressive, 70 years later, is the baffling level of consistency required to keep it going. It is the exact opposite of the slump, the other side of the same coin. In statistical terms, the streak flew in the face of something called the "independence assumption," an

important rule of hot-hand statistics, as the mathematical field is colloquially known.

If you flip a coin, over time, you assume you'll eventually get equal numbers of heads and tails. The same theory holds with dice, or roulette. The probability of landing heads, or rolling a six, stays the same even if you've tossed five straight tails. Each coin flip, or role of the dice, is independent of the one before it. That's why if you toss a coin five times, you may get four heads and one tail. It's only over a long-enough trial that the average emerges.

Sports, though, aren't supposed to follow the independence assumption. Hitting a 90 mile-per-hour pitch isn't as simple as calling "tails." The talents of the hitter, and the pitcher he's facing – and perhaps the other eight players in the field, as well – all have a say in the outcome of an at-bat. Plus there's the players' agency. An aggressive batter may swing at pitches that a player with a greater command of the strike zone would avoid. Those factors all go into determining the outcome of each of the 500-plus at-bats a player records every season.

Mike Benjamin, who played 12 Major League seasons mostly as a backup infielder for the Pittsburgh Pirates, holds a somewhat bizarre record of his own. Despite pedestrian statistics (he hit a measly .229 over his career) Benjamin set a Major League record in 1995 by recording 14 hits over a three-game span – the hottest three-game stretch in history.

"It hasn't sunk in," Benjamin said after his 14th hit. "I didn't expect it. I'm not gonna pinch myself for another three months." Fittingly, the record 14th hit came off Anthony Young.

Benjamin's record is an anomaly, but it underscores an important assumption many players and fans make about success and failure – namely, that getting a

hit isn't like flipping a coin. In baseball, just like one hitless game can beget another, one success (or one failure) can snowball into another. Players get hot. DiMaggio – and Benjamin too – got historically hot. Other players go cold. We see it with our own eyes.

Or at least we think we do. Alan Reifman, a statistician at Northwestern University who keeps a “Hot Hand” sports blog where he posts links online to all sorts of notable sports streaks, says they're an illusion.

“A baseball player sometimes says the ball looks like a grapefruit – that they're ‘in the zone,’” Reifman said. Mostly, fans buy into it. Reifman doesn't. He used an example of a 50 percent basketball shooter who has made three straight shots. Most people assume the next shot – the fourth – has a greater chance to go in than out. The shooter's on a hot streak, after all. Not so.

“It's just not the case,” Reifman said. “Sports performance actually tends to follow the independence assumption.”

Such were the findings of Stanford mathematician Amos Tversky's 1985 study on streakiness in basketball. The “hot hand” that fans and players all swear they see nightly, he said, is just the randomized result of judging a fairly small sample size. People, he said, have a tendency – a need, really – to superimpose patterns on randomized results. It's how we make order out of chaos.

Jim Albert, a professor at Ball State University, conducted a study in 2005 to determine whether or not there really were patterns to baseball players' streaks. Albert analyzed every full-time player's statistics from the 2005 season to determine whether certain players regularly had longer runs of hits or outs than the league average – whether some players really are streaky.

A few players did appear to have longer runs of hits or outs than average, but not many. For the most part, players didn't do better in the at-bat following a hit than you'd regularly expect, and they didn't do much worse after producing an out than they would after a successful at-bat. Each at-bat, it seems, existed in a vacuum, independent of the results leading up to it.

The players Albert found to be a little streakier than the average were by no means the best, or worst, in the league. All-Stars like Ichiro Suzuki and Jorge Posada were among the least consistent players in the league. Eric Byrnes, a journeyman outfielder who played for Oakland, Colorado, Baltimore, Arizona and Seattle over a 10-year career, was the fourth-most streaky player in baseball in 2005.

"I had a lot of upside, a lot of potential," Byrnes said recently during his talk-radio show. "But I had a downside, too. And that's why I'm on the radio now."

If streakiness – the hot spells and the slumps alike – are really just the random results of probability and chance, it stands to reason that they are entirely inevitable. All a player can do is hang on and hope to ride the streak out.

It's an unpalatable notion, though. The whole idea of the big leagues is that the players are talented enough to transcend mere chance. From Little League, players are told that with enough skill, dedication and focus, they can shape their own fates. The best players in the world – the ones that command \$250 million contracts – are supposed to be somehow bigger than the slump. Baseball's mythology holds that a batter truly believes, before every single at-bat, that he's good enough to win the battle. If he's not, are we all just rooting for heads versus tails?

Resistance to that notion – that players are ultimately little more than pawns on



the board of chance – may explain why so many players and teams go to such great lengths to disrupt a slump. It's why Ozzie Smith dribbled eye drops on his bat (to help it see the ball better). It's why Aubrey Huff wore the same red thong to the ballpark every day during the Giants' championship run, and it's why Dodgers owner Frank McCourt paid a 71-year-old Russian mystical "healer" more than \$100,000 to will the team good vibes during the 2008 pennant drive.

### **coda**

In his beautifully crafted ode to DiMaggio, Stephen Jay Gould sums up the dilemma of playing the sort of game where getting one hit in three tries counts as a great success. "The gambler must eventually go bust," Gould writes. "His aim can only be to stick around as long as possible, to have some fun while he's at it, and, if he happens to be a moral agent as well, to worry about staying the course with honor."

Sometimes, staying the course is all it takes.

On Sept. 20, 2010, Chris Carter finally recorded his first Major League hit, a clean single to left field. He was replaced with a pinch runner, and as he walked back to the home dugout, he flashed – for perhaps the first time in two months – a giant smile, and traded high-fives with every player on the team. The next day, he had two more hits. "Most slumps end in a heated flurry," Steverson, the hitting coach, said. "You finally get that hit, and you get all the razzing from your teammates – all the 'attaboy,' 'attababe' stuff. And then it's like, 'Man, the world's OK again.'"

The following day, Carter hit his first big-league home run. Over the final two weeks of the season, Carter collected 13 more hits, ending the year on a hot spell

in which he hit .342. "That was the monkey off my back right there," Carter said. "A big relief. After that, I was just able to relax and start having some solid at-bats."

But the slump – the insidious slump – is never entirely defeated. As soon as Carter had seemingly won a spot on the A's 2011 roster, he slumped his way through spring training and began the next season in Sacramento, back at square one. Such are the vicissitudes of the game.

Dave Henderson, a notoriously streaky hitter who won a World Series title with Oakland in 1989, used to say that for every hit he lost to a diving catch, or a bad call or a bad bounce, there'd surely be some cheap hit in his near future, waiting to be claimed. Belief in the zero-sum equation of fate and luck wasn't optional. It was mandatory. How else could a player keep the faith through the grind of a 162-game season?

No, such is the cosmic fairness – indeed the rightness – of baseball.

On July 28, 1993, Anthony Young entered the top of the ninth inning with the score tied, Mets 4, Marlins 4. His losing streak had been going for over 14 months. He gave up a single to Benito Santiago to lead off the inning. Then a throwing error by the Mets' catcher put two on, and then a botched fielder's choice loaded the bases with nobody out. Chuck Carr, Florida's rookie centerfielder, laid a drag-bunt perfectly between the first and second basemen, and the Marlins took the lead 5-4, with Young on the hook for his 28th straight loss.

The notes section of that night's box score indicate that the game was played with a six mile-per-hour wind blowing from right to left, no precipitation, and a muggy 82 degrees at first pitch. Curiously, the scorekeeper that night did not

make reference to the cycle of the moon, or the position of the stars, or whether somewhere among the expanse of grass a clover had sprouted a fourth leaf.

The Mets came to bat in the bottom of the ninth and mounted a rally. Joe McNight led off with a single and was sacrificed to second on Dave Gallagher's bunt attempt. Ryan Thompson blooped a ball just over the first baseman's head, scoring McNight to tie the game at five-all. Joe Orsulak flied out, leaving the winning run on base with two down for Eddie Murray.

"I still remember that like it was yesterday," Young said. Murray ripped a double just fair down the right-field line, and Thompson raced home for the winning run, making Young the official winning pitcher of record, and ending baseball's longest slump.

"All I said was, 'Thank God it's over,'" Young said. "But, really, I feel like it made me stronger. I don't know if anybody could go through what I went through and keep their head up. But I did.

"It just happened to happen to me," Young said simply. "It was just destiny, I guess."