

# Baseball's second-chance specialist

**Silver has been a savior for troubled players, including Josh Hamilton**

BY JOEL POILEY

CLEARWATER, FLA.

As Roy Silver watched the laser beam of a line drive rise from just above his head at the pitcher's mound to its landing about 500 feet away beyond the center-field wall, he had no doubt that Josh Hamilton still had the ability to play in the major leagues.

It was Hamilton's mental state Silver was concerned with. During those dark days in early 2006, when baseball had given up on the thrice-suspended former phenom, Silver reached out to Hamilton at his lowest ebb, offering him one last shot at redemption.

The amazing story of Hamilton's descent from uber-prospect into the abyss of cocaine addiction and alcohol abuse, and his subsequent revival, has become the stuff of baseball legend. Less well known is where it all began, in an empty ballpark in Clearwater.

Silver, 46, runs a baseball academy called The Winning Inning at Jack Russell Stadium, where the Phillies trained from 1955-2003. His baseball pedigree is vast, having played, managed and coached in the Cardinals organization for 14 years. He also served as a manager in the Florida State League for the Rays when they were born in 1998-99. It was there he met Hamilton, when the then-Devil Rays made him the first pick in the 1999 draft.

But 2006 was light years removed from that bright beginning, and Silver reached out to Hamilton when he seemed finally to have reached rock bottom, offering him one last shot at redemption. Hamilton arrived about two weeks later, and Silver put him up in the converted Phillies executive offices in a 10-by-12-foot room with an air mattress. The arrangement was rent-free, and Silver provided all of Hamilton's food. In return, Hamilton would have to earn his keep, doing everything from cleaning toilets to pulling weeds to dragging the infield. His reward in the afternoon was time in the batting cage.

"He wasn't allowed to leave," Silver said. "His truck was behind a locked gate at night. He lived here under our rules. He could leave any time he wanted and go back to North Carolina. But as long as he was here he did what we said."

"If he didn't get up some mornings to work, he lost privileges just like you would discipline your child. Money, his keys, everything was under our jurisdiction. And he wanted it that way."

Hamilton, who by that time had drained most of his \$3.96 million signing bonus on his addictions, said he was impressed with Silver's faith-based philosophy and motto: "Developing players from the inside out." And he felt it would be the right place to attempt his comeback in earnest.

"Roy was offering me what amounted to a stay at a ballplayer's halfway house, and right away it sounded like the perfect opportunity for me," Hamilton said in his book, "Beyond Belief, Finding the strength to come back."

Hamilton is the most high-profile case, but Silver has helped countless kids in the Tampa Bay area, including Nationals pitching prospect Tyler Clippard. Clippard drew considerable attention entering his senior year at Mitchell High in nearby Trinity, in 2003. But

a drunken-driving arrest early in the baseball season almost derailed his budding career until his father brought him to Silver.

"My world came tumbling down because baseball was my life," Clippard said. "I was like a lost puppy and Roy led me in the right direction. I got a head start on professional baseball my senior year in high school because I go to this guy who teaches me things I'm still using today as far as mechanics. And he made a bunch of calls to scouts on my behalf."

"And the most important thing, outside of the baseball knowledge that he has, is that he gets you to look beyond what's happened to you and gets you to look at the bigger picture. Him getting me to look at those things at 18 had a huge impact on me being successful after I was drafted."

Clippard was drafted in the ninth round by the Yankees and reached the big leagues in 2007. He's currently pitching in relief for the Nationals' Triple-A affiliate in Syracuse. He wasn't surprised Silver not only reached out to Hamilton, but also helped him find his way.

"Roy's a genuine individual who does things because he wants to, not because he expects anything in return," said Clippard, 24.

Randy Holland, Silver's partner in The Winning Inning, said Silver has been helping young men who need a second chance for years, often with little compensation.

"Roy's a big-hearted guy who doesn't seek the recognition," Holland said. "Roy's heart, and mine, is for these young men to grow up to be responsible people down the road—fathers, husbands, leaders in their community—and they have a great experience playing baseball. The Josh Hamiltons are few and far between. Ninety-five percent of the kids that we see here aren't going to play professional baseball, and Roy wants them to go on and do something positive with their life."

Silver said when Hamilton came to Clearwater, he obviously wasn't in playing shape, only months off his last drug binge. But the baseball skills were undeniable, even hidden beneath years of rust and neglect.

"His skin color was off, and he had just put his weight back on while he was living with his grandmother, but it wasn't a healthy-looking weight," Silver said. "He didn't look like an athlete."

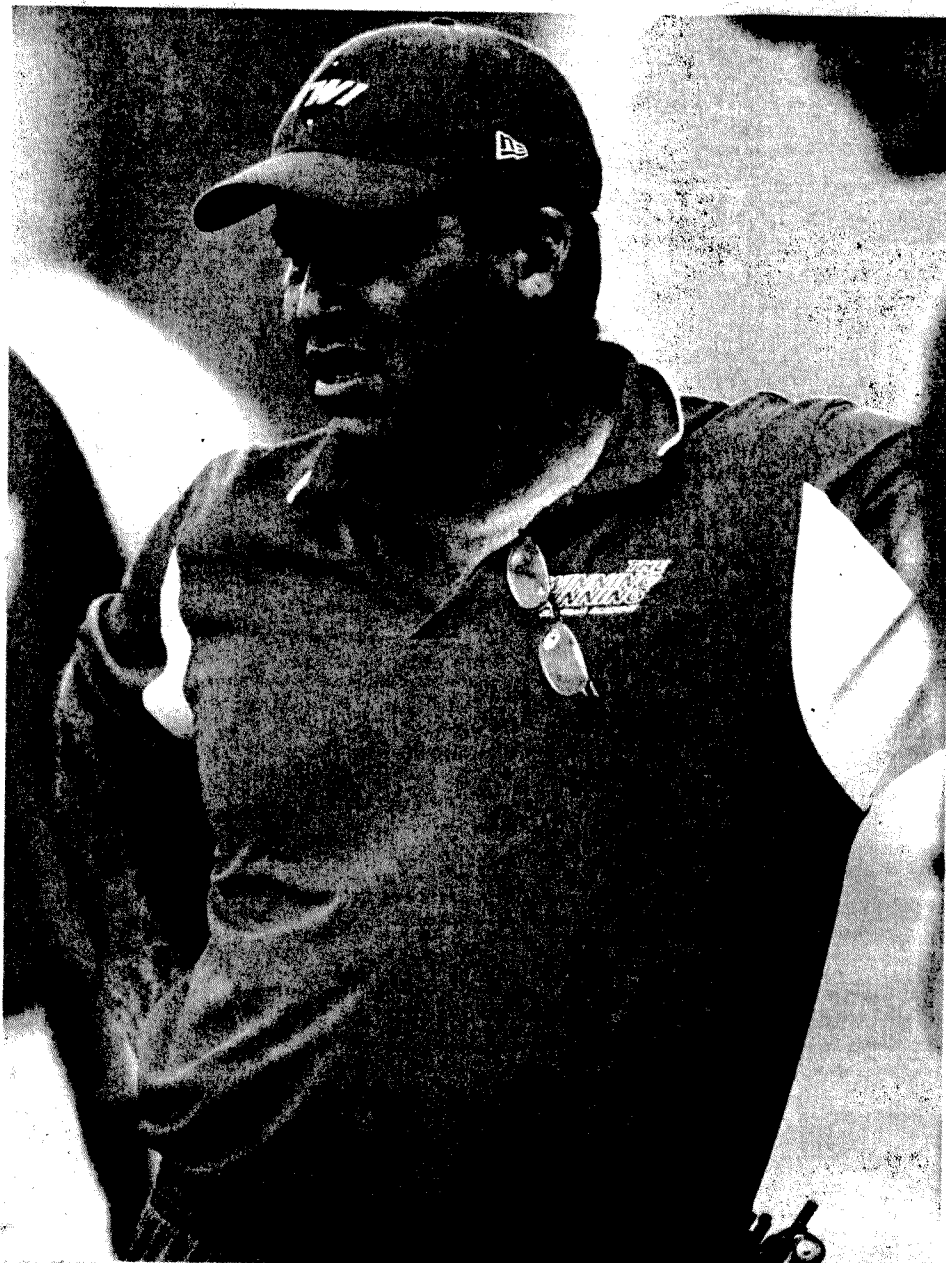
None of that mattered when Hamilton stepped into the batting cage for the first time, though.

"The first ball he hit sounded like a shotgun," Silver recalled, smiling. "Even though visually he wasn't Josh, he was still Josh. When that ball hit the back screen, he was excited. It put a lot of joy in his heart."

Hamilton was drug-tested three times a week by Major League Baseball while living with Silver, a practice that's still part of his major league routine. The main goal, Silver said, was to help Hamilton become a responsible father and reunite with his wife and daughters.

"Getting his life back together was more important, by far, than baseball," Silver said. "I've been around a lot of first-rounders, and when someone throws a lot of money at you and you're 18, it changes you—most of the time in a negative way because it's not normal and you don't always fit in socially with older teammates."

"Josh made some bad choices. He's been public about that. And he knew when he came here the scholarship was over. This was a second chance; but also a last chance. And he wanted it bad enough that he made it happen."



Roy Silver has impacted players' lives, on and off the field, at The Winning Inning academy in Florida. "Roy is a big-hearted guy who doesn't seek the recognition," Silver's partner, Derek Holland, says

Hamilton, who went through eight attempts at rehab, said Silver and Holland kept an eye on him, yet were also able to give him his space, which he appreciated.

"Roy and Randy ran after-school camps and other group activities for kids in the area. It was part of their mission, using baseball as their ministry," Hamilton said. "This became one of my favorite things about the place. Being around the little kids reignited my love for baseball and made me realize why I had to give myself another chance to get back into the game."

After several months with Silver, Hamilton attempted to hook on with an independent league team, but MLB wouldn't allow it. Upon reviewing his case, and hearing from doctors that being around baseball might speed his recovery, MLB did allow Hamilton to work out with Rays minor leaguers in June 2006. By the end of the month he was allowed to participate in minor league games and was assigned to short-season Hudson Valley.

The rest is history. At the 2006 Winter Meetings, the Cubs picked Hamilton in the major league Rule 5 draft and sold him to the Reds. After a scintillating spring training, he completed his miraculous ascent to the majors when he made the Reds' Opening Day roster a little more than a year after Silver took him in. The Reds traded him to the Rangers before

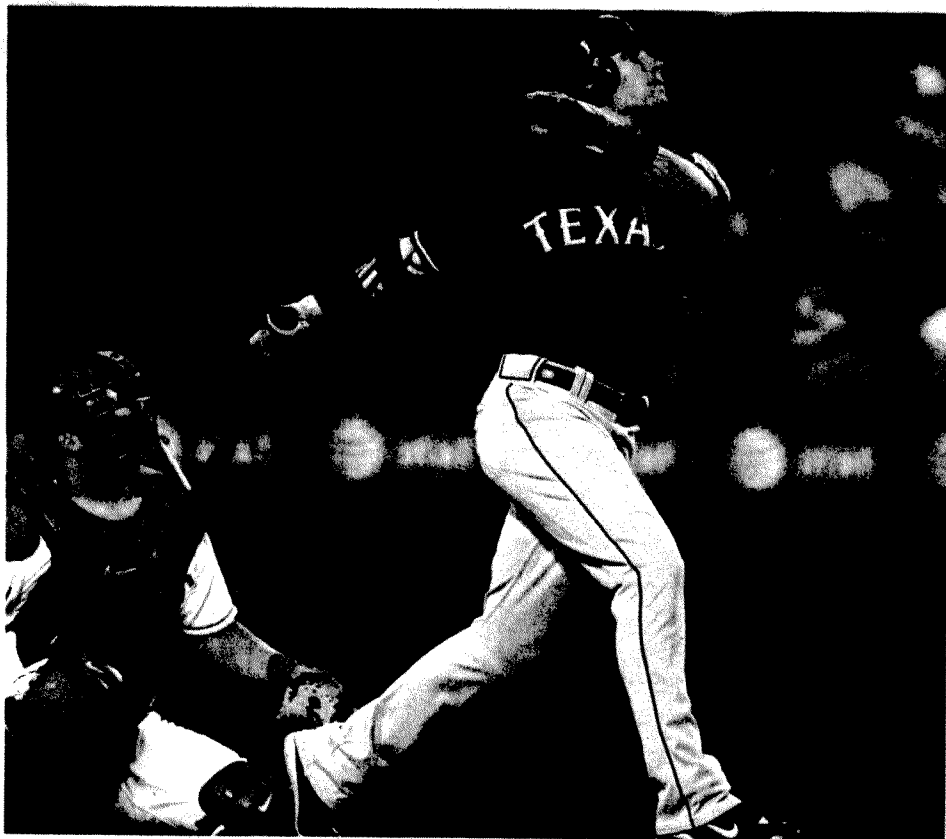
the 2008 season, when he made the American League all-star team and took the baseball world by storm in the Home Run Derby. He hit 28 home runs in the opening round, breaking Bobby Abreu's record of 24 set in 2005, though he eventually finished second in the final to Justin Morneau.

"I thought it was a little soon, honestly," Silver said of Hamilton's return to the pro game. "But that special natural ability was always there, he just had to tap into it. He's in a class by himself. The only other guy scouts will put in that class is A-Rod. Older scouts will compare him to Mantle. No one else is close."

"Josh is the type of athlete that could've played wideout or tight end in football, point guard in basketball; he threw 97 mph lefthanded off the mound. Hands, feet, coordination; he had it all."

Just as important, Silver found Hamilton a willing student and good listener as he worked on his mental recovery.

"We just had to iron out a couple minor mechanical things he might've picked up in high school, but he's very easy to coach," Silver said. "We were maybe a month or so into it and I said, 'I feel like I've run out of things to say.' And he said, 'I want you to keep talking to me about baseball, the Bible; I want to get back into God's word.'"



Josh Hamilton's rise from addict to slugging superstar began with a stay at Roy Silver's academy

**S**ilver doesn't push his faith on people, but religion has been a big part of his life since his minor league days. He runs Baseball Chapel services for the Blue

Jays and Phillies on Sundays during spring training, then performs the same service for their Florida State League clubs during the regular season.

He was glad to reach out to Hamilton. "He's a good kid, easy to like," Silver said. "The original bond was baseball, but I had gone down a similar road as Josh at one point in my life and he could see a model that was living a productive life."

"It's a privilege to play in the major leagues, and it was important for Josh to realize that and be accountable for his actions. As long as Josh stays connected to God he's going to be fine."

Holland, a certified athletic trainer who worked 18 seasons in the Blue Jays organization, said Silver has a unique ability to connect with kids and get them to confront their problems.

"There's nobody better in baseball in the mental part of the game than Roy Silver," Holland said. "He can pull out things from kids, either in a group or one on one, about baseball, life, whatever it is to get them to focus on being a better person and player."

Silver's baseball mentor and close friend was George Kissell, the longtime Cardinals coach, manager, scout and field instructor who died last year at age 88. Signed by Branch Rickey in 1940, Kissell was employed by the Cardinals until his death, the longest affiliation with one club in baseball.

Silver got to know Kissell during his tenure with the Cardinals, was with Kissell when he died, and presided at his memorial at Al Lang Stadium in St. Petersburg.

"He was my baseball father," Silver said. "He took time for all the little guys. He hung with the big guys, but he was more comfortable being around the little guys."

"I learned balance from George. Earl Weaver

and Sparky Anderson both wanted him on their staffs. But he was loyal to the Cardinals and his family, that's why he remained in Florida all those years. He's a big reason I started The Winning Inning, because it was a way to stay close to my family but still be involved in baseball."

Silver has also lived a rich life in the game, even though he's unknown to many in the sport.

A recent highlight for Silver was throwing batting practice for Team USA as they prepped in Clearwater this spring for the World Baseball Classic. He also served as a bullpen catcher during the team's training and said it was educational.

"From a scouting standpoint it kept my eye sharp as to what major league pitches do—the slider, the breaking ball, the fastball—and the mental approach those guys took," said Silver, who also helps coordinate Yankees fantasy camps. "And I got to watch the hitters during BP and how they approach certain situations."

Silver and Hamilton remain close, communicating by phone and e-mail and seeing each other when the Rangers play in Tampa. Silver does not want credit for Hamilton's recovery; he's just glad to have helped him and many other youngsters like him get back on their feet.

"It's a neat story and I was happy to be a part of it, but it was just the right time, part of God's plan," Silver said. "Had he come here a year or two earlier it would've been a different story because he hadn't hit rock bottom yet."

Joel Poiley is a freelance writer based in Tampa.

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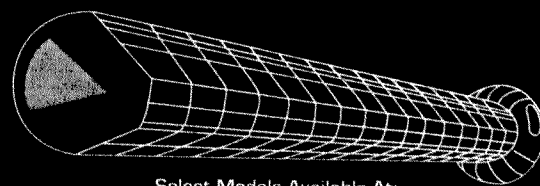
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