

Legend of Sam Fuld catches on with Tampa Bay Rays

By Daniel Brown
dbrown@mercurynews.com

Posted: 07/24/2011 10:00:12 PM PDT
Updated: 07/25/2011 07:20:02 AM PDT

There's a quip about how Sam Fuld caught a cold

but set it free. And another about how Sam Fuld can slam a revolving door. And another about how the Red Sox check under their bed at night for Sam Fuld.

The best line?

"I like: 'The highest possible Scrabble score is for

Sam Fuld,' " Sam Fuld said.

Fuld -- the man, the myth, the outfielder -- is back

in the Bay Area on Monday when the Tampa Bay Rays open a four-game series against the A's.

The former Stanford star returns as an unlikely folk hero, a previously forgettable outfielder whose defense and early season hitting binge transformed him into a sensation at age 29. Those one-liners above are from the #LegendofSamFuld, a Twitter hash tag dedicated to baseball's most beloved .244 hitter.

He has also inspired Super Sam Fuld Superhero Cape Day at the ballpark, a Sam Fuld look-a-like contest at a Florida bar (won by an 8-year-old girl) and a lengthy profile in New Yorker magazine.

It's a shocking story, except to those who have seen it before.

"He was the same way at Stanford," Cardinal coach Mark Marquess said. "Those catches you see him make now? That's Sam. He was one of the best center fielders we've ever had."

Fuld played for the Cardinal from 2001-04. He remains the school's all-time leader in at-bats and runs.

Fuld also ranks among the Cardinal's all-time leaders in grass-stained uniforms and slammed-into walls. In pursuit of a flyball, then as now, Fuld is a crash-test dummy in cleats.

"I pretty much go brain-dead," said the man with the Stanford degree in economics. "If I did ever think about it, I might see the risk. But I'm pretty narrow-minded: There's the ball, go get it."

Fuld's glove helped launch his legend in April, when he made the most of an unexpected chance. Manny Ramirez retired rather than accept a 100-game suspension for a second violation of Major League Baseball's drug policy, so the Rays shifted Johnny Damon to designated hitter and gave Fuld a shot in the outfield.

Fuld immediately began popping up on the highlight shows, most memorably after an April 9 doozy in Chicago, when he snagged Juan Pierre's sinking line drive to right field with two out and the bases loaded. The New Yorker later described the play this way: "Fuld sailed two or three body lengths before making a backhanded catch, while airborne, that is surely the equal of any athletic feat in recent memory."

Two days later, the New Hampshire native made his Fenway Park debut by smacking four hits -- a homer, a triple and two doubles -- in a game televised by ESPN.

Soon, the #LegendofSamFuld was all a-Twitter.

The 5-foot-10, 180-pounder hung with the big boys for most of April, ranking among the league's batting leaders. But Fuld hit only .157 with a .176 on-base percentage in May.

He has pulled himself out of the free fall, hitting 288 (23 for 80) since the start of June, and is tied

for 12th in the American League with 18 stolen bases.

And Fuld's glove never slumped. His place in Tampa lore is secure.

Take the time Rays utility man Ben Zobrist hit two

homers and drove in 10 runs over the course of a doubleheader.

"This must be what it's like to feel like Sam Fuld," Zobrist told reporters.

Or the time a Rays game was washed out by rain.

"This is me washing my planet," Fuld explained.

Or the Manny Ramirez Bobblehead Day that was

reborn as Fuld Superhero Cape Day. (Damon wore one as he shagged balls during warm-ups.)

Fuld's unusual back story helps fuel the legend. His father, Kenneth, is dean of the University of New Hampshire's College of Liberal Arts. His mother, Amanda Merrill, is a New Hampshire state senator.

Sam was a Little Leaguer when he was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes, which requires constant regulation. (He checks his blood sugar between innings.) These days, Fuld makes time to talk to kids about juggling baseball and diabetes -- because that's what former major league pitcher Bill Gullickson did for him when Sam was a tyke.

"It was maybe a five-minute conversation, but it did mean a lot to me," Fuld said of talking to Gullickson. "It was seeing with my own eyes a guy who could make it."

The Chicago Cubs drafted Fuld in the 10th round in 2004, but his big-league career sputtered from the start in 2007. It took him 102 at-bats to collect his first RBI. Last January, Chicago traded him to the Rays as part of a deal for pitcher Matt Garza.

With Tampa Bay, Fuld found a home -- and the ideal manager in Joe Maddon. "This team puts a lot of emphasis on defense, and that's one of my strong suits," Fuld said. "And Maddon is a joy to play for. He's easy. He wants you to enjoy yourself, as long as you play hard. He understands physical mistakes. He gets how hard baseball is. He's just a really relatable guy."

Maddon, like the rest of the Rays, gets a kick out of Fuld's unexpected fame. But he said fans love Fuld not because he's Superman -- but because he plays like Clark Kent.

"There are a lot of average Americans who can identify with this fellow," Maddon told USA Today.

"He's hard not to like. He's Everyman."

Contact Daniel Brown at dbrown@mercurynews.com.

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™