

The Fall Guy

In what has become an annual event in Philadelphia, slugger Ryan Howard again stepped up his game for the stretch run. **By Jonathan Lesser**

THE PREDICTIONS RACKET may be a good time, but there's really no longer any point in guessing the National League MVP until all the games have been played. Not because you need to see who clinches playoff spots — that never stopped fans from such discussions — but because one man saves his best work for last. The Phillies' Ryan Howard has rendered an age-old practice futile.

Since he broke into the league four years ago, Howard, more than any player in recent history, has elevated his game so much in the season's final month that he is hardly recognizable at the plate (statistics-wise that is; it's hard to mistake the 6-foot-4, 250-pound lefty). His strikeouts go down, his batting average goes up — way up — and his already league-leading power numbers grow exponentially. October may belong to Reggie, and November may belong to Derek, but Ryan has dibs on September.

Consider his career totals: Howard, a lifetime .269 hitter April–August, balloons to a .317 hitter thereafter. In every meaningful offensive category, from walks (12 per month from April to August, versus 17 in September) to slugging percentage (.552 versus .716), the numbers go up similarly. And consider the September awards: 2005 NL Rookie of the Month, 2006 NL Player of the Month *and* 2008 NL Player of the Month. In the last two early autumns, Howard has helped carry the Phillies to come-from-behind NL East championships. This year he did it by hitting .352 with 11 home runs, 32 RBI and 26 runs scored in September. And, perhaps more remarkably, he eliminated his biggest weakness: The man who struck out an average of 36 times per month this season going into September whiffed just 21 times down the stretch.

"He's making more contact because he's seeing the ball better," Phillies hitting coach Milt Thompson told *The Philadelphia Inquirer* at the end of September. Yet neither Thompson nor Howard himself can explain *how* the 28-year-old slugger's vision suddenly improves every fall.

"I don't know what it is," Howard said. "I just try to finish strong. I haven't thought about it. I'm just going out there and playing."

September is obviously the most pressure-filled month for a team that's battling for a playoff spot, and Phillies Manager Charlie Manuel has tagged Howard as one of the few players who focuses better the tighter the situation. He's the baseball equivalent of Michael Jordan or Tiger Woods. "He's our carrier," Manuel told the press on Sept. 29. "He's the guy who's big in the moment. He bears down. He wants to be up there. He strives to drive runs in."

For Howard's teammates, September has become a joyride. "He's been unbelievable," Phillies pitcher Joe Blanton said after the regular season. "He gets big hits with runners on, and timely home runs at the end of the game or to get us a lead early. He's always coming up when we need him, and constantly getting big hits. He's fun to watch."

This year the joyride ended in a world championship. Once Howard got locked in at the plate — he homered in Game 3 of the Fall Classic and twice more in Game 4, both Philadelphia victories — the Phillies took control of the Series. "To be able to have two home runs in the World Series," he said after Game 4, "that's the kind of stuff you dream of when you're a teenager. Obviously you want to win, but being able to do something like that ... it's a great feeling." ♦

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