

UCLA head baseball coach Gary Adams reached into his pocket for some loose change and headed for a payphone. He was out recruiting at a baseball field, but he thought he'd check in on incoming freshman Chase Utley.

Utley committed to UCLA out of Long Beach Polytechnic High School, but the Dodgers had used their second-round pick in the 1997 MLB draft on him.

"I thought I better call Chase and let him know I still want him to come to UCLA," Adams recalled thinking.

In fact, at that moment, a scout from the Dodgers was inside Utley's home, trying to convince the 18-year-old to sign a professional contact.

But Adams had to have Utley, because he saw something in the teenager that was unique.

"He wasn't afraid to get dirty," said Adams, now 76, retired and growing wine grapes in Bear Valley Springs

in Kern County. "He would go head first sometimes. Feet first other times. When he was running the bases, he was an aggressive runner and yet he didn't have tools like some players that I recruited. He wasn't blessed with a lot of speed. Not blessed with a lot of strength, as a matter of fact. He was built kind of like the Splendid Splinter (Ted Williams). But it was as much the intangibles that I liked as the physical."

Adams said he reminded him of a scrappy outfielder he coached previously — Utley's current manager, Dave Roberts.

"I thought for sure I was going to lose (Utley)," Adams said. "But by some miracle he came to UCLA, and boy, he just blossomed into a middle infielder that could hit home runs and still kept the same old characteristics of not being afraid to be dirty. ... He led the team by example by his hard work and his hustle."



CHASE HUSTLE

From teenager to 37-year-old, Chase Utley has set an example with his gritty play

BY CARY OSBORNE



Whether it's on the basepaths or out of the box, Chase Utley is aggressive. According to Fangraphs, he is one of the best baserunners of all time.

Westwood saw that for three years. Philadelphia, where Utley was a seven-time All-Star for the Phillies, saw it for 12 1/2. And with graying hair, past his 30-plus home run prime of the last decade and supposedly playing out his final days as a part-timer, Los Angeles is seeing it now.

Utley is 37-year-old kryptonite for complacency. He hustles on everything, regardless of the circumstance. He doesn't run — running doesn't always have purpose. He chases. Because every play is an opportunity.

"I've always taken pride in playing hard," Utley said. "That's something you have to do on a daily basis. It's not the easiest thing to do, especially over the course of years and years and games and games. But if you're able to have that mindset every game, you get the most out of yourself and therefore give your team the best chance to win."

A RARE RUNNER

Howie Kendrick's calf strain during Spring Training opened the door for Utley early in 2016. The 14-year veteran ended up starting 19 games at second base in April, and though the power he once possessed has diminished, his .815 OPS

in the month was fourth-best among National League second basemen. He also led NL second basemen in total defense, according to Fangraphs.

When he was on the East Coast, Utley's reputation as a hitter crossed all time zones. Utley ranked seventh all-time in home runs by a second baseman with 230 through May 5. But since his arrival with the Dodgers, the revelation has been what he does — what he still can do — with his legs.

"There aren't a whole lot of statistics other than stolen bases that can give a player value on the bases, but you can score if you run the bases correctly and hard," Utley said. "You're going to be able to squeak out a handful of extra runs per month, and over the course of the year, that can be a game-changer."

It's not as if Utley could never swipe a bag — he has nearly 150 steals in his career. But more to the point, Utley also ranks 16th all-time, according to Fangraphs, in a stat called BsR that "turns stolen bases, caught stealings, and other baserunning plays (taking extra bases, being thrown out on the bases, etc.) into runs above and below average."



After 12 1/2 strong years in Philadelphia, the Pasadena-born Utley has made an impact on the Dodgers with his attitude and performance.

Utley is at 69.6 runs above average.

“It’s un-believable,” Dodger first-base coach and baserunning coordinator George Lombard said of Utley’s hustle and baserunning. Lombard separated the word with a pause to emphasize how special Utley is.

“You get out there and you tell him information, and he processes it faster than any player I’ve ever been around,” Lombard said. “We talk about little attention to detail, things like hitting the inside part of the bag and getting your head around, and you’ll see him do it in a game. Routine flyout to the outfield, you see him hit the corner of the bag and turn his head in. Nobody does that. When you’re on base, you get your signs and check the outfield. A lot of people do it, but they don’t do it with a purpose. He’ll look at the right fielder, look at the center fielder, look at the left fielder and he processes information.”

Lombard gave an example of Utley’s smarts and hustle. On April 24, Utley was on first base with two out in the third when Corey Seager hit the ball to the gap in right-center field at Denver’s Coors Field. Lombard watched Utley sprint around the bases with intent.

As Seager was barreling into third base, Utley had crossed home plate with so much momentum that he was near the first-base dugout.

“He sprints almost into their dugout because he knows there could be a play (at third base), and if he doesn’t touch home before the tag then he’s not going to score,” Lombard said.

THE EXAMPLE

Utley became an inspirational figure for the Dodgers almost immediately after he was acquired in a trade with the Phillies on August 19 last season. And since re-signing with the Dodgers this offseason, he’s continued to be. The Pasadena native follows a line of All-Stars turned Dodger mentors.

Over the past couple of years, when a prized Dodger rookie has come up, his locker in the Dodger clubhouse has been next to a veteran star. Yasiel Puig was placed next to Adrian Gonzalez when he was called up to the big leagues. Joc Pederson was stationed alongside Carl Crawford. Seager was put next to Utley.

“I watched him when I grew up,” Seager



Utley has been a rock for fellow veterans like Scott Kazmir and a mentor to young players like Corey Seager.

said. “I had a buddy I played with forever who’s from Philadelphia and grew up a Phillies fan. ... To be able to sit beside (Utley) is still cool. I still talk about it with my friend. I walk in every day, and he’s sitting there and he’s always there before you. He’s that kind of guy.”

Seager said he’s felt comfortable going to Utley for advice. What makes that advice more powerful is how, at 37, Utley earns more and more respect every day by the way he plays everyday.

“I think (Clayton) Kershaw put it the best way, that if he has a boy he’s going to tell him to play like Chase Utley does,” Seager said. “He plays hard no matter what inning it is, what the score is. He’s going to break up double plays when he needs to. He’s going to get guys over. He just does everything right.”

“Honestly, that’s the ultimate compliment,” Utley said of Kershaw’s comment. “I have two boys now. Knowing what it’s like to be a father, you obviously want the best for your kids. For him to say that is special.”

Utley recently received another plaudit. He was the first-ever recipient of a base-running award handed out by Lombard. The award came in the form of a T-shirt.



On the front is the interlocking “LA” logo. On the back, there’s a muscle-bound guy coming in hard to a base.

The words on it read: “Dirtbag Dodgers, 2016 Team Grit.”

It shows that nothing’s changed for Utley since the days when UCLA was able to keep him from the Dodgers.

“I never had to tell him to run hard,” Adams said.

Adams offered one more story.

“He had problems with his heel one year, and he had custom-made shoes from our training department,” Adams said. “They put some special platforms in his shoes because his heel was bothering him so bad. I told him, ‘You don’t have to go 100 percent, and you don’t have to sprint back to the dugout (after an out or after an inning). You can walk back to the dugout.’ But he did it anyway. He never eased up. He played hard all the time.”