

Valley *of the* Moon

July/August 2017

Sonoma Valley



**STANLEY
MOUSE** *and the*

SUMMER OF LOVE

SAM SEBASTIANI'S
SONOMA LEGACY

PUBLIC ART
IN SONOMA

SONDRA'S
RHÔNE ROAD



Baseball: A Day in the Life

For Stomper Joel Carranza, it's for the kids and the bigs.

Story Jonah Raskin Photos DAVID BOLLING



No two days are identical in Joel Carranza's three-months-long baseball season, but almost every day has a routine, whether he's playing at home in Sonoma or on the road in Vallejo, San Rafael or Pittsburg. Carranza's big idea—or at least one of them—is to be relaxed, especially in the batter's box when relaxing can pay off with a hit or a walk.

A righty, Carranza plays first base, bats fourth and leads the Stompers in home runs with four this season, which began in June and runs until the very last day of August. So far he's hitting .303, which is close to where he'd like to be. At 28, he's the second oldest player on the team and a legend in the

Pacific Association of Professional Baseball (PAPB). No one has hit more home runs than he has in the league.

For eight or nine months of the year Carranza lives in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, where he works as an administration assistant in an elementary school. When the baseball career is behind him, he'd like to work in education. "I just love the kids."

Three to four months he's in Sonoma at the home of Margaret and Don Hage, who are big Stompers fans and who make his stay here as comfortable as could be.

Recently, I sat down with Carranza in the bleachers at Arnold Field and talked



JOEL CARRANZA loosens up his swing in preparation for more Stompers home runs.

with him about his life on and off the diamond. Later that same day, the Stompers defeated the San Rafael Pacifics 11 to 3. It was their sixth straight win. What follows are Joel Carranza's cogent comments on the sport the Stompers have brought to Sonoma since the summer of 2014, and in the process making the town proud.

"I wake up maybe 9 a.m. or 10 a.m., depending on how late the previous game goes, which could be three-and-a-half to four hours. That comes with the territory. There's no place I'd rather be than on a baseball field.

"I don't set an alarm before I go to sleep at night. I don't want to rush. In the morning, I'll have coffee and sit outside, maybe near the swimming pool in the backyard. Sometimes I'll remember my boyhood when I played ball with my father and we had the best of times together.

"It's tough being a minor league player. We do it for the dream, not for

the money. Not everyone who deserves to make it to the majors does make it. Sometimes a player will be stuck in the minors his whole career. My goal is to reach the majors, have my name on the back of my jersey and have kids ask for my autograph. In Sonoma, the kids are the biggest reward; they carry me through the season, through wins and losses, batting and fielding.

"I like to get to the ballpark by noon. I'm the hitting coach as well as a player, so I have more responsibilities than some of the others on the team. I have a good eye for stuff and help batters with their stance and their swing.

"Most days we're back and forth from the locker room to the field where we do stretching and warm-ups. Infielders catch ground balls and throw to me at first base. In the afternoon, we might have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. It's tough eating during the day 'cause we're so busy. After the game we'll have pizza or pasta from Red Grape

or another place.

"In the locker room, before game time, we put on our uniforms and talk about which hitters on the other team are hot and what strategy we'll need to win. At 5:30 or so we go out on the field and our starting pitcher warms up.

"When it's my turn to bat I visualize what success will look like. I don't pay all that much attention to stats because that puts me into my own head too much. Still, I know I'm second on the team in runs batted in. I also just broke the league record for home runs. To hit a homer at Arnold Field, the ball has to travel a long way; in center field that's 435 feet from home.

"At bat, I look for a fastball in the strike zone. I watch the pitcher go into his windup, see where he's gonna release the ball, and if it will be a curve, a change-up or a fastball. I notice the spin on the ball, and I keep my eye on it the whole time it travels toward me.

"It's more challenging for me as a batter now than when I started. I'm known in the league and the opposing pitchers are not giving me a lot to hit. I might have to change my approach, make adjustments, move back in the box or choke up on the bat. In baseball, if you succeed as a hitter one-third of the time, you'll make it to the Hall of Fame. I'm aiming for a .333 batting average.

"At first base, holding my glove in hand, I don't want to be a deer caught in the headlights and freeze. I visualize what might happen. I've learned that from the coaches here who've taken me, and some of the other guys, under their wings.

"There's great camaraderie in the locker room and on the field. Coaches and teammates are inspiring. I read the Bible and sometimes I'll say a prayer before a game. On my arm I have a bunch of tattoos: one of St. Michael slaying a demon; another that's an angel with a cross; a third that's of Jesus; and also a verse from Philippians 4:13. I try to be a little bit better every game. There's not a day that's lost all season." ☾

Jonah Raskin grew up as a Brooklyn Dodgers fan. Now he roots for the Stompers.