

# DESTINY Redirected

After stalling out as a minor league shortstop, **Oliver Marmol** rocketed through the Cardinals' farm system as a coach and manager before landing as Mike Shildt's right-hand man this season. For the majors' youngest bench coach, the sky's the limit.

By Jenifer Langosch

At the time, Oliver Marmol didn't know the name or even recognize the face of the man standing behind the backstop at the College of Charleston's fall intrasquad game. In fact, Marmol can't recall some 13 years later whether he even noticed the scout standing there.

It wasn't unusual to have others watching him. The attention had begun a few years earlier, when he was a standout infielder drawing scouts to his Florida high school. He'd get drafted by the Pirates in the 31st round in 2004, but pass on that opportunity to develop his game at the collegiate level. And now scouts were coming to see him again as he prepared for his junior year with the Cougars.

This particular scout settled into a spot just to the left of home plate, where he'd

have the ideal angle to watch the pitcher pound righthanded hitters with inside fastballs. Marmol stepped in and was promptly struck on his left elbow.

He didn't flinch, nor did he take his base. When the next pitch nearly hit him again, the scout waited to see Marmol's reaction. There wasn't one.

"This is one tough dude," the scout said to himself. "This guy has the makeup to play the game."

From that first impression, the scout began a more thorough evaluation. His report praised Marmol's speed – a 70-75 grade on the standard 20-80 scouting scale – and noted the shortstop's solid to above-average arm.

The next summer, when the Cardinals' scouting department gathered to prepare for the 2007 draft, the scout stumped for

Marmol in the draft room. He assigned one of his three "gut-feel" stickers to the 5-foot-10, 160-pound shortstop. He made a strong enough case for Marmol's big-league potential that the Cardinals took him in the sixth round, two spots ahead of Anthony Rizzo's selection by the Red Sox.

Marmol signed quickly and reported to Batavia, N.Y., a "short-season" Class A stop on the organizational ladder. When he arrived, the scout who had watched him throughout Charleston's season introduced himself as the team's new hitting/position coach.

It was future Cardinals manager Mike Shildt.

"Poor guy," Shildt muses of the man who's now his bench coach. "He's been stuck with me ever since."



## 'I'VE NEVER MISSED HITTING .180'

Shildt was right about something in those early reports he filed: Marmol was destined to be a big leaguer. He simply took an unexpected route.

After topping out at advanced Class A as a player, Marmol made an accelerated climb through the farm system as a coach and manager. He then joined Mike Matheny's staff as a first-base coach in 2017 and, at age 32, became the youngest bench coach in the

big leagues when Shildt appointed him to be his right-hand man for the 2019 season.

"From really early in his playing days, we knew he was someone who could have a future in the game if he chose it," president of baseball operations John Mozeliak says. "We made sure we paved a path for him."

To find it, Marmol first had to navigate the weeds of a challenging minor league playing career. His speed and defensive tools were intriguing, but he never generated

Connected since 2006, when Shildt (left) scouted Marmol and stumped for his selection in the '07 amateur draft, the two now work in tandem as manager and bench coach in the big leagues.

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much production with his bat. He later joked to general manager Michael Girsch that he did only two things well as a college hitter: lean into pitches to get hit and yank balls down the line to take advantage of a short left-field porch at College of Charleston's ballpark.

Girsch served as coordinator of amateur scouting when Marmol was drafted and oversaw an analytics team that was as high on the shortstop as Shildt was on draft day. He reminds Marmol, half-joking: "Why didn't you tell us that before we drafted you?"

Already relegated to a part-time role as he started his third season at high-A Palm Beach, Marmol was pulled into the

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– John Mozeliak

manager's office in July 2010 and notified of his release. He had batted only .203 and slugged .282 over four seasons.

The news hardly surprised Marmol, who admits he already had begun to form his post-playing plans. He had started to envision the possibilities earlier that spring, when Cardinals manager Tony La Russa visited minor league camp.

"I'm sitting there listening to him speak to the players, and even though I was a player, the whole time he's talking I'm listening to him as, 'That's what I want to do or say when I coach,'" Marmol says. "That's when I knew."

Which is why he planted an important seed before he left Palm Beach manager Luis Aguayo's office for the last time: "I'd like to put it in your ear that I'd like to coach," he told Aguayo.

Less than a week later, the Cardinals



As a player, Marmol had speed and defensive smarts that were intriguing, but his bat couldn't keep pace (.203 over four seasons), prompting an early transition to the coaching ranks.

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made Marmol an offer. He accepted it, and finished the season as a 24-year-old "fourth coach" for Batavia. A year later, he moved up to batting coach for the Rookie-level Gulf Coast League Cardinals.

"It was a very smooth transition," Marmol says. "I have never missed playing, probably because I hit .180 my whole career. No one misses hitting .180."

## LEARNING THE ROPES ...

The Cardinals tracked Marmol's development as a coach much like the blueprint they use to identify a standout prospect. They invested in him, and aggressively moved him through the system.

Marmol's first managerial opportunity came in 2012 with short-season Johnson City (Tenn.), when he led the Cardinals to a 39-28 record and postseason berth. He spent the next two years managing in State College, which produced consecutive championship appearances and a league title in 2014.

By 2015, Marmol was back in Palm Beach, this time as manager.

**"He gets things done, and they get done right. He's very forward thinking and has a nice blend of old-school fundamentals with modern aspects of the game. He's got little to no fear."**

– Mike Shildt

"He's always been one of those types of individuals who was inquisitive, asked questions and always wanted to learn," Mozeliak says. "When you have that type of personality, and you're embracing new ideas and innovation, you're going to move quickly in our organization."

The people Marmol gravitated to were crucial to his climb. In fairness, *they* gravitated toward him, none more so than Shildt and minor league field coordinator Mark DeJohn. Both recognized potential in Marmol as soon as they saw him play.

"He was always an intelligent player, a smart guy," recalls DeJohn, his first manager back at Batavia. "Even when he didn't get to play much, he never

complained. He never said a bad word about anybody. He just came to the park and prepared and was ready. You notice that and know it'd be a shame if we didn't try to keep this guy."

Their willingness to help was matched by Marmol's eagerness to listen. In 2011, he was assigned to assist Shildt as an instructor in extended spring training. Day after day, the two sat next to each other,



Marmol took charge of an opportunity to manage by reaching the playoffs in four consecutive seasons, highlighted by a league championship at State College (above) in 2014.

## Rommies with a (similar) view

They're teacher and pupil now, but a decade ago Oliver Marmol and Matt Carpenter were teammates – and roommates – pursuing the same major league dream.

They met in 2009 at Palm Beach, where Marmol was playing in his second season for the Cardinals' high-A affiliate when Carpenter arrived that August.

They immediately struck up a friendship. Both 23, the two infielders were a year older, on average, than most players in the Florida State League. Carpenter, however, was making up for lost time – the fifth-year senior out of TCU was already on his second promotion after being drafted that June in the 13th round, with stops at short-season Batavia and low-A Quad Cities behind him.

Marmol, meanwhile, already sensed his own climb had stalled. A sixth-round pick in 2007, he would start just 61 games in '09 and own a cumulative batting average of exactly .200 through three seasons.

Despite the pair's divergent trajectories, there were several similarities.

"We connected so easily," Carpenter recalls. "We hit it off from a baseball standpoint. We were on the same wavelength. One thing I noticed in him right away was his knowledge of the game and how much he cared about it. And really just the maturity level he had."

Marmol remembers they shared the same dedication and demeanor.

"He was more of a quiet, stay-in and hang-out type of guy," Marmol says. "We fit in that way."

It made perfect sense that when the team took its first road trip with both players on the roster, they asked to be paired as roommates.

From faith to future plans, they spent many evenings in hotel rooms discussing details of their lives. Both expressed curiosity about moving on to coaching whenever their playing

days ended. It seemed a natural path for Carpenter, the son of a high school baseball coach. For Marmol, each day he was stuck on the bench nudged him closer to his Plan B.

"You meet certain people who have certain character traits and are just special," Carpenter says. "And he's got something about him that makes him special."

"He had the major league mentality. Unfortunately for him, his ability didn't match it. But you could tell right away he was going to be a great coach one day."

Marmol hung on with Palm Beach until the following summer, when the team granted him his unconditional release. By then, Carpenter had been promoted to Double-A. The next year, he made his big-league debut, while Marmol steered his course to coaching in the Cardinals system.

The two remained in touch and crossed

paths in spring training, where Marmol worked with minor leaguers and Carpenter turned himself into an All-Star infielder. Marmol's appointment to St. Louis as first-base coach in 2017 brought them together again.

The dynamic is different, especially since Marmol's coaching duties include infield instruction. In many ways, though, their decade-long friendship has allowed for even more open and honest conversation.

"There's a comfort level with being able to be honest with one another," Marmol says. "With him still playing, I am able to challenge him with things I see. Whether it's a tough conversation or encouragement, I think he's well aware that it's coming from a good place. He knows I'm always going to be honest with him, whether he's looking for it or not."

– Jenifer Langosch



A friendship that got off to a fast start as teammates in high-A has allowed for honest conversation as player and coach in St. Louis.



Marmol's baseball aptitude allows him to stand comfortably alongside royalty like Yadier Molina, Ozzie Smith and Jose Oquendo.

watched the game and talked through it. Shildt pointed out process and strategy, all while instilling organizational core values in his newest pupil.

When it was time for Marmol to move into his coaching role with the Gulf Coast League team, the two continued their conversations via text messaging.

"It was real clear, real fast that he had a great feel for the game," Shildt says. "He took to it like a duck to water."

DeJohn's impression was much the same, though his delivery harder-edged. He never sugarcoated criticism of Marmol as he learned the ropes, mostly because he believed that "Ollie was going to be better than I ever was."

Tact isn't in DeJohn's lexicon. "There were times I had to throw my ego out the window and just listen," Marmol says. "You just sit there, and you wear it. Is it what you want to hear? No. Is that what's going to get you better? One hundred percent."

Asked for an example, both men identified Marmol's first day as manager in Johnson City. DeJohn had traveled in to

observe and found himself doing a double take when he walked into the dugout to find only "half a lineup card" hanging on the wall – Johnson City's lineup, but not the opponent's. He kept his mouth shut – temporarily.

Hours later, as Marmol headed to the clubhouse on the high of his first victory, DeJohn stormed in. The mood quickly shifted.

"What the hell?" DeJohn exclaimed. "Ollie, where was the other half of the lineup card?"

Marmol reminded him that in extended spring training, coaches saved paper by using only half a lineup card. With the rules of those games so fluid, it's not necessary to keep track of the other team's activity.

DeJohn reacted with a not-so-subtle reminder about how these games actually count.

"What if your pitcher wants to come over to see who he's going to face?" DeJohn continued. "And how do you know what changes they're making?"

To which Marmol replied: "I don't even

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– Matt Carpenter

know what's happening on my team."

The two laughed. But the lesson was learned. Or, as Marmol acknowledges today, "I now know you need two sides of the lineup card to be a competent manager."

### ... AND CLIMBING THE LADDER

The education process has never stopped for Marmol. He used his minor league experiences to shape his leadership style and coaching philosophies. He learned from director of player development Gary LaRocque to see the "bigger picture" of the farm system. He took advantage of time spent around Mozeliak to ask questions about front-office decision-making.

Shildt continued to check in with texts, and DeJohn made occasional visits and frequent early-morning phone calls to dissect moves from the night before.

Each day offered a new test.

"You can tell when people are really pouring into you because they want to see you do well," Marmol says. "I came to work, one, extremely excited, but, two, knowing that I better be on point. You're not getting away with anything. You can't just wing it. You had to have a reason for everything you did. And it's provided me a ton of structure

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Marmol's penchant for analytics makes him valuable, while his age (33) makes him relatable since he still sees the game through young eyes.

as far as how I do what I do now.”

What most impressed those who were observing was Marmol's ability to quickly learn from mistakes.

DeJohn recalled sitting in the stands the first year Marmol led State College to the New York-Penn League championship series and watching him make an ill-advised pitching change in the winner-take-all game. It backfired, and after the loss DeJohn explained why.

A year later, Marmol had the Spikes back in the championship series. Speaking with DeJohn on the eve of the final game, Marmol expressed frustration with the effort level of two key hitters. Marmol asked DeJohn if he should bench them.

“Me? I probably wouldn't do it,” DeJohn replied.

Marmol did anyway, and the two replacement players he inserted helped lift the Spikes to the league title.

“When I saw that, I knew he was on his way,” DeJohn says. “I was so impressed this kid had enough guts early in his career to do something he thought was right and not

worry about it being one game to win or go home.

“What I didn't expect,” DeJohn adds, “was for him to get to the big leagues as soon as he did.”

That call came two years later from Mozeliak, who interrupted Marmol and his wife Amber's vacation in the Dominican Republic with an invitation to join the major league coaching staff as first-base coach. Not everyone in the organization felt Marmol was ready, but he dispelled those concerns with his preparation and attention to detail. He filled the gap as an infield instructor during Jose Oquendo's absence, and he brought knowledge of advanced metrics into the clubhouse.

As bench coach this season, his responsibilities have only expanded.

It was Marmol's job to organize and run spring training this year. As part of his bench coach duties, he's a liaison between Shildt and the rest of the coaching staff. He disseminates information, requests video, builds scouting reports and helps with on-field instruction. Once the game starts, he

offers input for Shildt's in-game decisions.

Consider him part air traffic controller, part chief of staff.

“He gets things done, and they get done right,” Shildt says. “He's very forward thinking and has a nice blend of old-school fundamentals with modern aspects of the game. He knows the game. He's got little to no fear. This is a guy who will trust his gut and communicate what he thinks.”

All-Star shortstop Paul DeJong points to Marmol's added responsibilities as a bench coach with helping him become a better baserunner.

“He'll go out there during BP and take reads with me (leading off) second base, and it's like a little competition to see who can get the best breaks,” says DeJong, who had a career-high six stolen bases before the All-Star break. “He watches video on guys and comes up with ways that we can take advantage of the other team.”

Another asset: he's relatable. Marmol's age (he turned 33 this July), as well as his fluency in Spanish, allows him to communicate and connect within a diverse clubhouse.

“If you were building the perfect manager or bench coach, he checks a lot

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– Mike Shildt

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of the boxes,” says Matt Carpenter, whose relationship with Marmol dates to when they were road roommates in Class A a decade ago. “He's bilingual. He played in this organization. He's managed at the minor league level. He can relate to the younger generation well because he is a part of it. He's smart. He understands the analytical side of the game but also has a

feel for (the game itself).

“It's a unique skill set. And it doesn't surprise me he is where he is.”

Which leads to another question: Where might Marmol be going next?

It's the one query he doesn't have an answer for.

“The next step from a bench coach would obviously be to manage,” he says. “But then

what? I don't want to ever limit myself to one goal.”

Ask others, and they'll tell you Marmol's climb is far from complete. The paths of opportunity will continue, they say. The only unknown is which turn Marmol will choose to take.

“I don't think there is any question that Ollie could manage in the big leagues if he wanted,” Shildt says. “He could be a general manager. He could be a farm director. His skill set travels from the front office to the field to running a minor league department. There's very little limitation for what Ollie could possibly do in this game.”

Trust the word of someone who's always seen Marmol's potential. After all, Shildt's first impression of Marmol 13 years prior ultimately proved true: a guy the club couldn't afford to let get away.

*Jenifer Langosch covered the Cardinals for eight seasons and is now a senior content manager for MLB.com.*

## Card'em

### THE 10 YOUNGEST MAJOR LEAGUE COACHES IN 2019

COACH	TEAM	POSITION	OPENING DAY AGE	BIRTHDATE
Cristian Perez	Reds	Asst. Bullpen	23	7-24-95
Troy Snitker	Astros	Batting	30	12-5-88
Pedro Guerrero	Phillies	Asst. Batting	30	12-3-88
Tomas Francisco	Rays	Catching	30	4-4-88
Caleb Cotham	Reds	Asst. Pitching	31	11-6-87
Robert Van Scoyoc	Dodgers	Batting	32	11-16-86
Oliver Marmol	Cardinals	Bench	32	7-2-86
Jeremy Hefner	Twins	Asst. Pitching	33	3-11-86
Donnie Ecker	Reds	Asst. Batting	33	3-9-86
Eric Duncan	Marlins	Asst. Batting	34	12-7-84