

# Mounds Of Gratitude

The No. 1 pick from the 2013 MLB Draft, **MARK APPEL** battled through injuries and struggles — and even left the game for nearly four years — before finally reaching the majors in 2022. Whatever happens in his career from here is just more favor from God.

BY SARAH RODRIGUEZ



Photo courtesy of Mark Appel

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Mark Appel

As Philadelphia Phillies right-hander Mark Appel rubbed the ball in between his hands, standing at the back of the mound before the top of the ninth inning, a slight grin crept onto his face as he gazed up at the Citizens Bank Park crowd in Philadelphia the night of June 29, 2022.

"Ten seconds, five seconds, whatever it is, just spin around, take in the environment," a friend had told him. "You're never gonna get that moment again."

At 30 years and 349 days old, the day Mark had dreamed of since a child had finally arrived. He was making his Major League Baseball debut.

"I was just able to kind of breathe a little bit and be like, 'God, I literally never thought this day would come, for a while, for years,'" Mark said.

Drafted with the very first pick in the 2013 MLB Draft by his hometown Houston Astros, Mark's journey to the big leagues was filled with highs and lows, injuries and surgeries,

and countless minor league appearances. But it was just part of the path to those few minutes on the mound on June 29. With that appearance, he became the oldest No. 1 overall pick to make his MLB debut.

"It was just a really overwhelming, emotional night," he said.

Though the pressure from critics to live up to expectations had grown over the years, it wasn't relief Mark felt after finally making it. It was joy — knowing that through his faith in Jesus Christ, his sure foundation, Mark didn't need to make a MLB appearance to be content.

"I was at this point in the season where I was like, 'I don't need my debut for me to feel joy; I get to play baseball,'" he told Sports Spectrum this offseason. "I haven't felt like that in a long time because I've had all these injuries and dealt with some of the pressures of life and pressures of performance. ... I think it was God's kindness to me. It was His favor. He's like, 'I know you don't need this, but I'm giving it to you anyway.'"



When the 2022 season began its long grind, Mark was pitching for the Phillies' Triple-A team, the Lehigh Valley (Penn.) IronPigs, and just joyful to be playing in his second season after being out of the game for nearly four years. He had begun implementing a few tweaks to his pitching technique after talking with developmental coaches, and had begun to see his hard work paying off. Now a full-time relief pitcher after coming into pro ball as a starter, Mark began stringing together successful outings. By the end of June, he had put up a 5-0 record and 1.61 ERA out of the bullpen, to go along with five saves.

"Before you know it, you're like, 'Wait a minute, from January of 2022 until June of 2022, things are like vastly different. I feel like there might be an opportunity to play in the big leagues,'" Mark said.

The statistical outcome of 2022 didn't matter to him. Mark was focused on his definition of success: "If you can have fun and be with your teammates and try to love the people that you're around, and try to make an impact while you're there, then it's still going to be a successful year."

"I just never thought that it would be successful on the field in the same way that it felt like it was successful off the field," Mark said.



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The Appels (L-R): Mark's brother John, sister-in-law Shelley, Mark, dad Patrick, mom Sandra.

After a tough loss on June 24, Mark and the IronPigs gathered in the clubhouse for a debrief with manager Anthony Contreras.

"And he looks at me, and I had chills," Mark said. "He's like, 'Mark, you're going to the big leagues.' And I'm like, 'Wait, so you're saying after the highest expectations in 2013 when I got drafted, basically to being out of baseball in 2017, and then coming back' — and then all of that culminated to that moment. I was overwhelmed, like almost immediately started crying."

Mark was called up to a 37-34 Phillies squad that was in the midst of a four-game series in San Diego. He joined his new teammates at Petco Park, but didn't make it into any of the games against the Padres before the Phillies headed back home to host Atlanta.

He also stayed in the bullpen June 28, and for eight more innings the next night. But as the Phillies trailed 4-1 heading into the ninth, Mark got the call. He took in the moment, then went to work. Four batters, 10 pitches, three outs and one strikeout later, No. 22 had just completed his major-league debut, pitching a scoreless inning — a lifetime in the making. And there in the stands in Philadelphia on June 29 was his older brother, John, and John's wife, Shelley, so eager to see No. 22 make it into the game.

"I remember thinking, 'Whatever happens is how it was supposed to happen,'" John said, "and we sat there and watched Mark become a big-leaguer officially."

Just two and a half years apart, Mark and John were typical brothers growing up, playing sports together and roughhousing. But family always came before sports. As the years have passed, their relationship has continued to grow, making John's presence in Philadelphia on that historic day even more special.

"We've also been there through the thick and the thin for each other, through the highs and lows in each others' lives," Mark said. "And the fact that he was there, honestly, was maybe one of my favorite things about the entire experience."

Mark was inserted into the next night's game as well, followed by two more appearances before being sent back to

Lehigh Valley. He was called back up in late July for a couple more appearances, and ended the season with 10.1 MLB innings pitched. Elbow inflammation unfortunately ended his season early, and he watched from afar as the Phillies made an improbable run as a wild-card team to the World Series, where they fell in six games to ... the Astros.

Mark's major-league debut was all the more remarkable considering he was injured most of the 2017 season, and in February 2018 he officially walked away from baseball, unsure if he would ever get the chance to throw a pitch at the highest level.

At the time, Mark told MLB.com, "I know that I need to take some time to just reevaluate some things and get healthy physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually — just all around want to have good practices in my life. I think there are times where playing baseball when you're hurt, when you're on the [disabled list], even when you're playing and you're in the minors and you're there for a while, it can feel pretty isolating. You're away from all the people that you love the most, and I think I just realized I wasn't excited about going back to play."

Mark had spent three years with the Astros organization before a December 2015 trade sent him to the Phillies farm system, where he jumped on and off the DL for two years before needing to reevaluate.

"It was just exhausting, so I knew I needed a break, and I'm really glad that I made that decision," Mark told Sports Spectrum late in 2021. "But you know, probably 10 months after that decision, in October of 2018, I decided to have surgery on my shoulder, and from that point, I said I want to play again. I want to have another opportunity to go out and perform and to do it with good health."

Following rehab in 2019, Mark prepared for a return in the 2020 season, but the COVID-19 pandemic canceled the minor league season. So his return came in 2021, as he made 23 appearances for the Phillies' Double- and Triple-A affiliates. But his stats looked similar to the numbers from before he walked away.



"I had a blast that I was back playing baseball," Mark said. "I was in the clubhouse, I was traveling, I was doing all the little things that you take for granted. The thing was I just didn't play well. ... I had fun. I was healthy, so I accomplished my goals, but I wasn't playing well."

He thus wrestled with the decision to continue playing in 2022. Ultimately, he decided he wanted to give it at least one more year of being healthy.

"I think once I made that decision, I was like, 'All right, this is gonna be my last year playing. So let's try to make it fun and have a good time and work hard and see what can happen,'" he said.

He headed into 2022's spring training still unsure if it would be the season he finally broke into the majors. A timely conversation with John around that time helped him stay focused on one day at a time. The brothers discussed how God in the Old Testament provided manna from Heaven for the Israelites wandering in the desert. However, the people were instructed to only gather enough food for a single day, or double their portion if the Sabbath was the following day.

"God could have provided bread that lasted 40 years and given them a massive storehouse and been like, 'Here you go, you're good for the next 40 years. You won't have to worry,'" Mark said. "But that's not how God works. He wants us to trust Him every day. He wants us to basically empty the tank every day and then trust that He will [provide] when we rise tomorrow in a way that only He can do. He's gonna give us the strength to be able to get through that day, and then do it again the next day and the next day and next day."



**M**ark grew up in a Christian home, knowing Jesus and having a relationship with Him since he was young. Yet it was during middle school, high school and into college at Stanford when he started making his faith

his own. During these pivotal years, God began to reveal to Mark the depth of the Gospel and His love for humanity.

"Instead of it still kind of being about me, it starts to just really be only about God and His glory, and I think those are the times where my faith really started to grow," Mark said.

He recounted a sanctifying moment in his life when he was pitching for the High-A Lancaster JetHawks in 2014. Struggling, with his ERA skyrocketing, he was taken out of a game in the second inning. He headed straight to the locker room, needing to release tension that had been building up for months. He then picked up a baseball off the ground and threw it at a wood panel between two lockers. It felt good. So he grabbed a box full of dozens of baseballs, and for 15 minutes chucked them through the wall.

"When it's all said and done, there are no more baseballs to throw," Mark recalled. "I have tears running down my face. It's just a mess, but I sit down and I just sense this calmness, this peace both in the room and in my heart, and I'm reminded of Paul's words in Philippians 4."

He thought of Philippians 4:12, where Paul says, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."

Recalling that moment, Mark said, "I'm in a circumstance that I don't necessarily want to be in, struggling in High-A, less than a year after I'm the first overall pick. But there is contentment to be had in Christ, and Christ is the One who will give me the strength to be content in the circumstance."

He realized he was so focused on getting to the next level that he was missing what God had for him in his current season.

"It was just a humble reminder [that] Christ is enough. Christ is all we need. Christ is sufficient for whatever circumstance you find yourself in, whether you are winning a World Series or you're in Lancaster throwing baseballs through



AP Photos/Matt Slocum, Sports Spectrum Photo/Leah Montgomery

a wall because your ERA is over 10," he said.

Finding contentment in Christ has filled Mark with gratitude — for baseball-related things, sure, but more so for the people God has placed in his life. So this winter — prior to re-signing with the Phillies on a minor-league contract, and subsequently being assigned to Triple-A but getting invited to spring training with the big-league club — he took off on a solo tour of the U.S. in a renovated van. He'd dreamt and prepped for months, longing to take time to see the beauty of God's creation out West and be intentional with the relationships in his life.

"Literally any region of the country, it's like I've met someone that God has intentionally placed in my life at that time to encourage me or to support me or to pray for me or whatever it is," Mark said. "And I just feel so thankful. Being able to just go and visit these people, and just let them know, 'Hey, God used you in my life in a really cool way.' I think that would be so much fun to be able to do."

From Moab, Utah, to Denver, Colorado, to Yosemite National Park in California, God continued to teach Mark a theme that has reoccurred many times in his life: God is in control.

"He is totally in control. You experience that when you're sitting under this canvas of stars in the middle of Arches National Park (in Utah) and you look up," Mark said. "... How great, awe-inspiring God is, and then humbling because we know from Scripture, and in the life of Jesus, He wants to have a relationship with us. And somehow as minuscule as we feel when we look at the sky, He also gives us an incredible amount of self-worth."

As Mark traveled, he continued to work out, stay in shape and keep pitching in preparation for the 2023 season. And as the days until Opening Day dwindled, no one knew what lay ahead for Mark. Will he have a chance to build upon his 1.74 ERA in the majors? Or were those 10.1 innings over six MLB appearances the peak of his baseball career?

Whatever the outcome this season, he has surrendered it to God.

"I hope that when Mark pitches, he feels God's pleasure, that he knows whatever the outcome of the pitch is, he's doing one of the things that God put him on earth to do," John said.

Their father, Patrick, echoed this hope for Mark's upcoming season and all God has in store for him.

"My desire for him is that he would continue to focus on relationships and others and just simply the joy of being on the baseball field," Patrick said. "And you know, if baseball, just playing the game is enough, then I will be happiest for Mark."

So Mark prepares to step on the mound again for what could be a full season at the big-league level, or perhaps his final season of pro ball. Either way, he remains focused on his solid foundation.

"God is so good and He's writing way better stories than we could write for ourselves," Mark said. "He's just really faithful. I think it's easy to say that when you get to experience a high, but I see God's faithfulness through a lot of the lows too." *S*

To listen to the entire interview with Mark Appel, visit [SportsSpectrum.com](https://SportsSpectrum.com)

