

Eleven years ago, Salvador Perez hit a line drive off Aroldis Chapman's face. It sparked a lifelong bond



By Ken Rosenthal
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More than 11 years later, the memory remains unsettling.

The Cactus League game between the Kansas City Royals and Cincinnati Reds carried virtually no meaning. But anyone who saw the line drive off Salvador Perez's bat strike Aroldis Chapman above the left eye will never forget the terrifying sight.

"March 20, 2014. Sixth inning, bases loaded. It was a 2-1 count, I believe," Reds assistant athletic trainer Tomas Vera said, rattling off the details as if they occurred yesterday.

"I felt so guilty," said Brayan Peña, Chapman's catcher that night. "So guilty, you can't even imagine."

Chapman, then 26, already was a two-time All-Star reliever. He wanted to throw a slider to Perez, an All-Star catcher nearing his 24th birthday. Peña called for a fastball. Chapman shook him off. Peña called for a fastball again. Chapman threw it 99 mph. And then . . .

"I witnessed something so shocking that I cannot even [watch the videos](#) anymore," said Peña, who is now a minor-league catching coordinator with the Detroit Tigers.

Vera rushed to the mound to attend to Chapman, working with the Royals' trainers to activate an emergency action plan. Chapman was taken off the field on a stretcher and transported to a nearby emergency room in Surprise, Ariz. The managers and umpires decided to cancel the rest of the game.

Ramón Hernández, a former Reds catcher who was in spring training with the Royals, drove Perez, a fellow Venezuelan, to the hospital. A group of Reds players also went to visit Chapman. So did a number of Cubans from other teams in Arizona who wanted to see their fellow countryman. Chapman's father, Juan Alberto Chapman Bennett, also was present.

"When I saw Chappy in the room," Perez said, "I started crying."

Chapman also shed tears when Peña, a fellow Cuban, put his hand on his shoulder and spoke to him in Spanish, [checking to see if the pitcher was alert](#). Perez apologized to Chapman, explaining that he never intended to hit the ball at him. But he recalled Chapman reassuring him, saying, "everything is going to be fine."

At that moment, however, Chapman's prognosis was far from clear. Vera said the facility in Surprise was "not prepared for that kind of trauma." The team physicians, the Royals' Vincent Key and Reds' Timothy Kremchek, oversaw Chapman's transfer to Banner Good Samaritan Medical Center in Phoenix. The next day, the pitcher underwent a 2 1/2-hour procedure in which a titanium plate was [inserted in the bone above his left eyebrow](#).

Chapman, who also suffered a mild concussion, recalls being in the hospital three days, and Perez visiting him each day. They knew of each other previously, but mostly as opponents.

"After that moment, we became closer," Chapman said through his interpreter with the Boston Red Sox, Carlos Villoria-Benítez. "He basically became family."

After the New York Yankees eliminated the Royals in last year's Division Series, Perez spent two additional days in Kansas City, then flew with his family to his offseason home in Miami.

On his first day back, a Sunday, his phone rang.

"Where you at?" Chapman asked.

"Chappy, what do you mean?" Perez replied. "I just finished playing 48 hours ago. I want to relax a little."

Chapman was having none of it.

"No, no, no," he said, according to Perez. "You got 30 minutes? Come to my house. Let's start working now."

Chapman and Perez live close to each other in Miami. They use the same strength and conditioning coach, Nestor Moreno. And Chapman sensed, correctly, that Perez was preparing to go on vacation. Start working out right away, he told Perez, and it won't be as difficult to resume once you return.

Chapman frowned on the idea of Perez even taking time off.

"You'll have enough time to go on vacation when you retire," he told Perez.

Chapman is an eight-time All-Star, but his career has not been without its low moments. Off the field, he was suspended 30 games for his role in an [alleged domestic violence incident in 2016](#). On the field, while with the New York Yankees, he allowed home runs by Houston's Jose Altuve and Tampa Bay's Mike Brosseau to decide postseason series – the latter after Chapman threw a 100-mph fastball at Brosseau's head only weeks before.

Now, at 37, Chapman is enjoying perhaps his finest season. He has not allowed a hit to the last 46 batters he has faced. He is averaging 98.9 mph with his fastball, putting him in the top 2 percent of the league. In 54 innings, his ERA is 1.00. His opponent's batting average is .115. He made his eighth All-Star team in July, and earlier this week the Red Sox rewarded him with a one-year, \$13.3 million extension.

"The way he prepares himself, people don't see it," Perez said. "In the offseason, I have the opportunity to see it every day."

Perez said he first learned the importance of a strong work ethic from former Royals teammate Alex Gordon, who would walk out of the weight room sweating in spring training just when Perez was walking in, trying to be the first to the complex.

Chapman became an even more enduring example, inspiring Perez, a nine-time All-Star, to become one of the most durable catchers of his era. Since 2023, only Seattle's Cal Raleigh has played more games than Perez at catcher. And Perez, who at 35 is 6 1/2 years older than Raleigh, is only four games behind.

"I learned from Chapman," Perez said. "When you're 24-25 and you start working really hard, it's not to get ready for that day. It's so you can be available at this age, 35-36-37."

"When I got to the big leagues at 21-22, I could warm up in 10 seconds. I could put on my gear and go catch. But I learned from Chappy that everything starts in the offseason. How much work do you put in? How much do you sacrifice yourself? What kind of player do you want to be?"

Chapman has answered those questions in resounding fashion. In 16 seasons, he has made only three trips to the injured list for arm trouble. None was terribly long. The last was in 2021, for left elbow inflammation.

His three other IL stints since getting hit by Perez's line drive were all for leg issues. Chapman even made a quick recovery from his facial surgery in late March 2014, rejoining the Reds on May 10, then pitching well enough over the next two months to make the All-Star team.

"I always tell (Perez), if we want to stay in this business and remain there for many years, we have to work hard," Chapman said. "Maybe when we were 25 we'd do things to a lesser extent because we had youth and we had talent. But once you get to a certain age, you have to work twice as hard."

Perez took those words to heart, while absorbing Gordon's early lessons, too. The San Diego Padres' Ryan O'Hearn, a member of the Royals from 2018 to '22, recalls trying to be the first to arrive for spring training workouts, just as Perez did in his early years with the team. O'Hearn couldn't do it. Perez and a younger catcher he was mentoring, Freddy Fermin, already would be in the building.

Royals manager Matt Quatraro chuckled at the pronouncement Perez made to him just after the trade deadline, when the Royals sent Fermin, his backup, to the San Diego Padres.

"You guys have protected me enough," Perez announced. "Now I'm catching every game the rest of the year."

Quatraro reminded Perez this isn't 2015, when he caught 155 games, including playoffs, during the Royals' run to the World Series title.

"We need you to *hit* every day the rest of the year," Quatraro said.

Perez later said he was just kidding, that he will play first base, DH, wherever his manager desires. Whatever his position, his enthusiasm remains unbridled.

The Royals traded Fermin in part because after 15 seasons, they still believe in Perez. True, Perez's OPS+ is right around league average after last season being 22 percent above. But his 24 homers rank second on the team only to Vinnie Pasquantino's 29. He continues to throw well, and remains the team's heart and soul.

This is the final guaranteed season of Perez's four-year, \$82 million contract. The Royals hold a \$13.5 million option, and their decision to pick it up probably will be a

no-brainer. They might even consider adding another option year, giving Perez time to help their top catching prospect, Carter Jensen, acclimate to the majors.

Perez jokes that he feels like he's 25. He is careful with his diet, diligent with his routines. Before games, he said, "I never miss the weight room." After games, he will soak in a cold tub, move to a hot tub, then finish in the cold tub before allowing his body to warm up again.

"One of my goals is to play until I'm 40," Perez said. "I want to be like Yadi Molina. He was the guy I followed when I was young. He played until he was 39."

Chapman, meanwhile, will pitch next season at 38. Unlike Perez, who has only played for the Royals and only wants to play for the Royals, the reliever has bounced around. The Red Sox are his seventh team, and fifth in the past four seasons.

One of Chapman's stops, at Perez's urging, was Kansas City in 2023. Chapman signed a one-year, \$3.5 million free-agent contract with the Royals, produced a 1.71 ERA in 21 innings with Perez as his catcher, then was traded to Texas at the deadline for lefty Cole Ragans.

With the Rangers, Chapman became a World Series champion for the second time. Yet he speaks almost wondrously of his time with the Royals and Perez, saying it was special, part of God's plan.

Few could have imagined their story would turn out like this, that a hitter lining a ball off a pitcher's face would result in the two players forming a lasting bond.

"It's crazy how such a bad moment, such a terrible event, led to this relationship," Peña said. "And it's beautiful to see how much they work together, how much they love and appreciate each other."

Not long ago, Chapman was in a car with someone, chatting with Perez via FaceTime. Rather than try to conduct two conversations at once, he told the person in the car to hold on, explaining that he was talking to his *pana*, or really good friend.

Perez took mock offense at that description.

"I'm not your *pana*," he shot back. "I'm your brother."

The Athletic's Maria Torres contributed reporting for this story. (Photo of Aroldis Chapman and Salvador Perez: Matt Stone / Boston Herald)

https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6600188/2025/09/05/aroldis-chapman-salvador-perez-royals-red-sox/?source=user_shared_article