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Furcal is Dodgers' return man

By <u>Tim Brown</u>, Yahoo! Sports Oct 7, 12:01 am EDT

LOS ANGELES – There was a day in mid-September, not that long ago, when <u>Rafael Furcal</u> had enough of the pain, enough of the setbacks and rehabilitation and complications.

The Los Angeles Dodgers were in Colorado. Angel Berroa was the regular shortstop. They were winning.

Furcal couldn't play. The back of his left leg was burning again, and it hurt, and he was so tired of it all.

He had tried, tried so hard. He'd agreed to surgery in July to prune a calcified bulge from a lower disc, the one that was leaning into a nerve and making baseball impossible. He'd gone off for two months to Phoenix, endured hours of daily therapy there, and then he was back in the Dodgers' dugout, that close, feeling the same rawness.

So, he told Stan Conte, the Dodgers trainer, "I'm done."

Then he went to the manager's office and said the same thing to Joe Torre and Ned Colletti.

"It never gets any better," he told them.

His season, he announced, maybe his last in L.A., was over. He was getting on a plane the next day, returning to L.A. for a quick consultation with his surgeon, Robert Watkins, then going home.

"I don't want to screw everybody up," he said. "I don't feel like I can play 100 percent, like I used to."

Furcal stood over a blue duffel bag Monday afternoon in the long, narrow Dodgers clubhouse. He packed for Philadelphia and the National League Championship Series, pausing with a couple shirts in one hand, a blue belt in the other

"I couldn't do it anymore," he said. "I couldn't control my body."

He stuffed the shirts into the bag, coiled the belt and slid it in beside them. He'd just hit .333 in the Dodgers' division series sweep of the <u>Chicago Cubs</u>. He batted leadoff and made every start at shortstop. He scored four runs for a revived Dodgers offense.

The Dodgers' best player before his back gave out and the second-best when <u>Manny Ramirez</u> arrived, Furcal wasn't allowed out of Torre's office until he agreed to stick it out a little longer. Torre told him he didn't need to be healthy that day, or the next. Colletti told him to prepare for the playoffs, for wherever it was the Dodgers might end up.

"He needed to hear we didn't have to put a deadline on this thing," Torre said. "I told him if the World Series is the first series we'll have you, so be it."

All they had to do, Torre said with a smile, was get there.

Colletti told him, "Why don't you take it day by day, and we'll take it day by day, and our season might not be over in 15 days."

Furcal nodded.

"I understand," he said. "I'll stay. That flight tomorrow? I don't need to do that." $\,$

About a week later, Furcal took a shaky at-bat, his first since early May, when the back pain had become too great to bear. By the end of the regular season, he had nine more at-bats. And now, a team that added Ramirez and <u>Casey Blake</u> at the trading deadline, had – from out of the sky – Rafael Furcal batting leadoff, playing shortstop, running the bases, energizing the clubhouse and dugout.

"I'm getting there," he said, the past three weeks having brought stability to his lower back and hamstrings, and just in time for Game 1 against the Cubs. "I feel much better. I feel like every at-bat I take is a good at-bat."

The season wound down with the light-hitting Berroa at shortstop and batting eighth, and <u>Russell Martin</u> or <u>Matt Kemp</u> batting leadoff. It was imperfect, but all they had, and probably wasn't going to carry them very far into the playoffs. From the top, Furcal gives the <u>Dodgers</u> a lot of what <u>Jimmy Rollins</u> provides the <u>Philadelphia Phillies</u>, and another reason these <u>Dodgers</u> aren't your ordinary 84-win team.

The credit for these new Dodgers goes to Ramirez, and his bat, and his attitude. But, Furcal carries the same weight in a clubhouse that grew up in the past six months. He was the club's spirit before Manny. He was a leader when he felt like

it, and when he didn't. Then he came back and turned 10 at-bats into a full spring training.

"It's a credit to his body, a credit to his ability, a credit to his ability as a baseball player," Blake said. "He's really impressed me. It's unbelievable. It goes to show you how good he is. His swing is so efficient, he can get by doing that."

Without the benefit of a big-league game for $4\frac{1}{2}$ months, Furcal picked up a glove, picked up a bat and strolled into the playoffs. He's mostly healed, mostly back to his game, and the Dodgers are a lot better for it.

"He has a special talent," Torre said, "in not only his physical ability, but the leadership stuff. I can't tell you, I mean, he's huge for you at the top of the order. He does a lot of the things Jimmy Rollins can do, no question. ... Then, his presence in the clubhouse, in the dugout, I know it sounds kind of hokey, trust me, it really elevates the mood."

Back in the clubhouse, Furcal stood over that duffel bag with his hands on his hips, looking from his locker to the bag and back.

"I think everything is here now," he said.

Yeah, it's starting to look that way.