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Catching On

The Royals' **John Buck** is establishing himself as one of the elite backstops in baseball

BY MATT FULKS

John Buck and pitching coach Bob McClure talk briefly in the Royals clubhouse before

Buck, the Royals' catcher, yells out to the pitchers: "45." He walks by each pitcher's locker, taps that player's padded chair and reiterates: "We're meeting at 5:45."

It's the first game of an early July series against Seattle. Eight minutes before the pitchers and catchers will go over the Mariners' hitters one more time.

As Buck walks toward his corner locker in the clubhouse, he looks confident, relaxed, as if he's been the club's catcher and team leader for a decade.

It's obvious the other Royals respect Buck. He's established himself as a great teammate, a hard worker and a good guy in the community. He's a player who can be counted on for Royals-sponsored clinics during the season and the Royals Caravan during the offseason.

"Baseball is kind of a learning process," Buck says like an old veteran. "You have to get beat down and be humbled to learn. I had a (minor-league) coach, Jayhawk Owens, tell me that even at your lowest point, if you take something and learn from it, you'll never get that low again. That's helped me progress and mature as a player."

Buck certainly has come a long way since he was first thrust into the Royals' starting lineup against St. Louis on June 25, 2004, the day after the Royals acquired him as part of

the deal that sent Carlos Beltran to Houston. Not only was that Buck's first game with the Royals, it also marked his Major League debut.

Although he came to Kansas City with the tag of being a catcher who could hold his own defensively, there was some concern about his ability to hit.

This season, Buck's eliminated that thought. Despite sharing catching duties with Jason LaRue, Buck has been the Royals' biggest power threat. Through the first 81 games, he led the Royals with 14 home runs, two more than his regular-season high of 12, which he reached in 2004 and '05. No other Royals hitter reached double digits in homers before the All-Star Break.

Buck, who turned 27 on July 7, also spent much of the first half among the top home run hitting catchers in all of baseball, mostly trailing only Cleveland's Victor Martinez.

"(Buck is) a big kid that you expect over the course of the season to be capable of hitting 20 or 25 (home runs), something like that," said manager Buddy Bell. "I never expected that this quickly, especially from a catcher because of the workload they have. But I'm most impressed with his progress on defense.

"I think all of it is a matter of him understanding and all of a sudden believing that he belongs up here. That goes through every young player's mind. Do I belong? Will I get sent down? A lot of crazy things go through a kid's mind.



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