

Chris Capuano laughs when he hears someone call him crafty.

"I don't know why lefties are labeled as crafty," the left-handed pitcher jokes. "Certainly, the lefty we have in L.A., our number one starter, Clayton Kershaw... I don't think anyone's going to call him crafty. But next to him, I may look crafty next year."

Kershaw - and his 96 mile-per-hour fastball - won the National League's Cy Young award in 2011. His new teammate, Capuano, throws with significantly less speed.

"There were times in my career when I was throwing 90, 92 miles per hour, which I didn't consider crafty. I could still get that by a lot of hitters if I put it in the right spot."

The key phrase there being "there *were* times." The 33-year-old southpaw from West Springfield, Massachusetts, is undergoing a career rejuvenation after a comeback season with the New York Mets.

"This season was a great test for me, being able to make 30 starts and really feel good all season long was really what I was after this season so it is exciting," Capuano says. "I'm 33 years old, and I feel as strong, or even stronger, than I did at 25. I feel like I have a great opportunity in front of me, it's nice to be able to go after it full bore and I feel like I'm ready to seize it."

He's had his share of opportunities in the past. In 2002, as a minor league pitcher in the Arizona Diamondbacks organization trying to break into the big leagues, Capuano suffered a major arm injury that required the three words no pitcher wants to hear: Tommy John surgery.

"One thing that really stuck out was that you have to be mentally committed to the fact that you're going to come back stronger than you were before. Not just that you're going to come back, but that you're going to be even better and stronger than before," Capuano says. "And that was the idea I kept in my head going through the first surgery, and it got me back in 10 or 11 months."

Tommy John surgery requires the replacement of the ulnar collateral ligament in the elbow. For some pitchers, it's a career-ender - but not for Capuano.

He finally made his major league debut in 2003, but then experienced one of the downsides that often comes with professional sports later that year - he was traded to another team. That didn't faze the lefty though; in fact, Capuano capitalized on his opportunity with the Milwaukee Brewers. In 2005, he won 18 games in his first full season as a starting pitcher, and the following year, he became an All-Star (oddly enough, Capuano replaced fellow Bay State native Tom Glavine on the National League All-Star roster, a guy after whom he says he modeled his game).

But, in 2008, *it* happened. Again.

"I hurt myself in spring training of '08 and thought I'd be ready for 2009," Capuano says. "When 2009 rolled around and I wasn't ready, and I would get close and then I'd have setback after setback, you feel like you're beating your head against the wall. You feel like, is this ever going to get better? You start thinking about contingency plans."

His resume outside of baseball may be more impressive than his pitching statistics. Capuano was the valedictorian of his class at Cathedral High School, and later graduated Duke University with a degree in

economics. He also earned membership in Phi Beta Kappa, an esteemed academic fraternity (17 U.S. presidents also hold this distinction). But the lifelong baseball player followed his heart over his mind.

“I knew that nothing else was going to be as fun for me or give me as much pleasure or joy as going out there and being able to pitch. So I’m just happy that everything kind of came together and it recovered, for me, just in time where I think any longer and I think it becomes harder to come back.”

Through intense rehabilitation and a tough mental attitude, Capuano came back from Tommy John surgery a second time, though it took twice as long to recover the second time than it did the first. And this time, he didn’t necessarily come back stronger *physically*, but certainly *mentally*. He says the second surgery required him to change his pitching approach.

“I think I’ve definitely evolved, especially when I went through periods of diminished velocity. Now my velocity is where it was up to before, but before, when it was lower, you have to learn how to spot the ball, change speeds, because you’re not going to get away with mistake fastballs over the middle.”

Capuano went almost three years in between major league starts, but finally took the mound again for the Brewers in June of 2010. At the end of the season, Capuano signed a one-year contract with the New York Mets, largely because of the opportunity to be a full-time starting pitcher again.

“The challenge is to consistently try not just to do the same thing, but to get better and stay ahead and maintain an edge. That’s the trick to this game, constantly making yourself better and sticking around, and that’s the hard thing.”

He won 11 games with the Mets in 2011, with the apex of his season – and maybe of his career - coming just one week after his 33rd birthday. The determined pitcher threw a complete game shutout against Atlanta, setting a career-high with 13 strikeouts.

“That was certainly a bright spot. To throw a game that was easily the best game I’ve ever pitched last year was really great,” he says, with a sense of accomplishment in his voice. “I had good velocity, I had good snap on all of my pitches, and that was really encouraging to have a game like that, and to be able to have that in my mind as something to try to harness on a daily basis was big for me.”

Looking for more stability after the season, Capuano sought out a two-year contract, something to which the Mets were unwilling to commit. Luckily, Capuano says, the Dodgers felt differently.

“Secretly, I was hoping that L.A. would be the best suitor, being in the NL West, and L.A. being a great pitcher’s park, close to our home in Phoenix -- we’d have spring training in Arizona -- and in the end, they came in with the best offer, which was great for us because that was kind of the team we were hoping for,” Capuano says, matter-of-factly.

The kind of team, he says, that will contend for the playoffs. Now entering his 10th season in the majors, Capuano has never pitched in the postseason.

“We have some good pieces with Matt Kemp and Clayton Kershaw, the Cy Young award winner from this past season, and that is exciting to me, that over the next one or two years, we could be pushing into the playoffs and maybe make a run.”

So, is Chris Capuano really “crafty”? The better description might be perseverant.