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HEADLINE: Enrique Oliu, a blind man who does Spanish radio commentary on the Tampa Bay Devil Rays

ANCHORS: RENEE MONTAGNE

REPORTERS: ALAN TOMLINSON

BODY:

RENEE MONTAGNE, host:

In major-league baseball, the Tampa Bay Devil Rays have little to cheer about. They languish at the bottom of the American League East. But Devil Rays' fans were on their feet recently to celebrate an extraordinary success story honoring a man who made his baseball dreams come true. From St. Petersburg, Alan Tomlinson has the story.

ALAN TOMLINSON reporting:

For six seasons, since the Tampa Bay Devil Rays entered major-league baseball as a new franchise, Spanish-speaking fans have listened to color commentator Enrique Oliu describing home games on Tampa's WAMA radio station.

(Soundbite of radio broadcast)

Mr. ENRIQUE OLIU: (Spanish spoken)

TOMLINSON: The lowly Devil Rays may be headed for another losing season, but tonight they're beating the world champion Anaheim Angels in what Oliu sees as the year's best performance from starting pitcher Rob Bell. Well, Oliu doesn't

exactly see Bell's performance. He doesn't actually see the game at all because Enrique has been blind since birth.

Mr. OLIU: Well, yes, I was born blind in Nicaragua, 41 years ago, March 12th, 1962. I guess my parents always treated me the same way as anybody else, so I never thought I was blind. To tell you the truth, I didn't think I was blind until somebody told me I was.

TOMLINSON: Oliu grew up listening to baseball on the radio. It's Nicaragua's national sport and Enrique's father was an avid fan.

Mr. OLIU: My father would listen to it on the radio and he played. So he would listen to Nicaraguan national team playing against Cuba or playing against Dominican or whomever. And you would hear it on the radio. You'd stay up and listen to it on the radio.

TOMLINSON: Not only did he follow the game as a child, at blind school, which he attended in neighboring Costa Rica and later in Florida, he played it, too. Hitting a kick ball off a T and making plays with verbal pointers from the coaches, Enrique learned how to visualize what was happening around him. Today, in the commentary booth overlooking home plate, it's Enrique's wife, Debbie, who supplies the verbal pointers, whispering the plays into his ear.

(Soundbite of radio broadcast)

Mr. OLIU: (Spanish spoken)

Ms. DEBBIE PERRY: Normally I don't have to say very much because you can tell by the sound of the crowd whether it was caught or not, if it--the play at first was good.

Mr. OLIU: ...(Unintelligible) throw in.

Ms. PERRY: Yeah. If it was a good play or a bad play. Every now and then, I may say, you know, there was an error, so then the runner advances second or third, give him a little more detail. But he's pretty good about filling in by the sound of the crowd.

TOMLINSON: You could say that Enrique has a finely tuned ear for the game.

Mr. OLIU: You know, to explain to you how I do it, I don't even know. And I wouldn't even think I was that good, except that I've sat with coaches and they've kind of just looked at me and said, 'This kid knows what he's talking about.'

TOMLINSON: Enrique and Debbie meet before each home game to go over team stats and scouting reports.

Mrs. PERRY Eurstat(ph) 264, three and 15.

Mr. OLIU: That's a--well, he's been injured, though.

Ms. PERRY: Tim Salmon, 280, 14.48.

TOMLINSON: When other sports commentators can refer to the written page as they work, Enrique has to commit all this and much more to his exceptional memory. His broadcast partner, Danny Martinez(ph), who played shortstop or the Phillis in the 1970s, had never met Enrique before joining him in the commentary booth recently.

Mr. DANNY MARTINEZ: To be honest with you, I listened to him a couple of games before I came onboard and he sounded so good, I didn't even know he was blind. Until I came, you know, they told me that and I actually saw him. That was amazing.

TOMLINSON: To any fans still in the dark after six years, they're about to be enlightened. Tonight, Enrique Oliu receives a special award for the example he has set for handicapped people.

Unidentified Man: Please welcome and salute our inspirational friend, Mr. Enrique Oliu, joined by his wife Debbie Perry and his mom, Marilyn(ph).

TOMLINSON: As part of the pregame tribute, Enrique is to throw out the first pitch. Debbie gets him pointed in the right direction and to the crowd's delight, Oliu throws a strike, right over the plate.

(Soundbite of applause and cheers)

(Soundbite of radio broadcast)

Mr. OLIU: (Spanish spoken)

TOMLINSON: Last season, Oliu turned his skills to football, calling games in Spanish for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. For his next challenge, he says he'd like to try his hand on television.

(Soundbite of radio broadcast)

Mr. OLIU: (Spanish spoken)

TOMLINSON: For NPR News, Alan Tomlinson.

MONTAGNE: It's 11 minutes before the hour.

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