

MY OFF SEASON -

As the League Championship Series are set to begin, it is beginning to sink in that we won't be there this year. I am already down at my ranch in Southwest Texas, and I'm trying to keep busy working and getting to know the land. It is really tough knowing that we are done for the year. After a season that began in middle February, it seems like it went so quickly. Now, I must confront the fact that our season is over.

We simply did not play very well at the end of the year. Right at the top of that list was me. I let my team down the last game of the year by not coming up with that ground ball. We win that game and this may be a whole different series starting off in Atlanta. I suppose we will never know, but that thought is with me now. Don't get me wrong - that didn't change the way we played in the playoffs. We weren't very good. I am also not taking anything away from the Cardinals. They are really peaking as a team right now and simply put a whipping on us. It's over and now I have got to work to make sure this doesn't happen again.

I am not going to really stop hitting in the off-season like I did last year. Instead of taking off until late December or early January, I might only take 3 or 4 weeks off to relax and let my body recuperate. After that, I will start lifting, hitting, and fielding on a regular basis (5 or 6 times per week). My mom and dad have moved out to the ranch full-time, so I will have a work-out partner. Who knows - we may even get the old man in shape. Hopefully, by working out the entire off-season, I can be that much stronger during the year and avoid some of the nicks and bruises I experienced this year.

I am excited about the ranch. My dad and I have talked about this for so long, and my mom is so happy around horses that I know she will be having the time of her life. We have built a batting cage and work-out facility on the ranch, too. It will be nice having that there. It will give me unlimited access to soft toss, tee work and hitting in the cage. That way, in January, I can begin to concentrate on fielding, which let me down this year. I am going to work extremely hard to get that part of the game back where it belongs. I am better than I showed this year.

Make no mistake about this. My new long-term contract with the Braves, and my commitment to myself and the fans of Atlanta, will push me to improve my game to a point where I know I belong. I will be working out this off-season with a sense of urgency and hunger. I promise the fans a better effort next year, and even better than that the year after. We will come back, believe me. This team is too experienced and competitive to let this happen again. Keep the faith and stick by us.