

## Chipper has '99 in sights

Expects a return to MVP form and a Series run

By Mark Bowman/MLV.com

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KISSIMMEE, Fla. – Never before had Chipper Jones spent any significant time on the disabled list. Nor had he ever entered an All-Star break with a batting average that would have even been embarrassing to Rob Deer.

Yet by the time the 2004 season concluded, Jones could actually look back and find some promise. A 13<sup>th</sup> consecutive division title had been captured by the Braves, and minus one statistical category, history will show the veteran third baseman actually was rather productive.

“He had a very ordinary year for Chip and he was still [near 100 RBIs],” Braves manager Bobby Cox said. “When you do that, you’ve got talent and know what you’re doing with the lumber.”

There’s no doubt Jones will go down as one of the greatest hitters in Braves history – and one of the most productive switch-hitters of this generation. But for three months last year, he limped through frustration and left people wondering just how a career .309 hitter could be batting .206 on June 17, 2004.

“I know deep in my heart that the injuries had a lot to do with it,” said Jones, who slightly tore his right hamstring on April 18, 2004 – earning his first trip to the disabled list since a four-game stint at the start of the 1996 season.

By the time the season ended, Jones found himself with a .248 batting average and some respectable power numbers that came courtesy of a productive and confidence-building second half of the season.

Jones’ 62 RBIs after the All-Star break, which were the fourth most in the National League, helped the Braves rise from the same depths of despair that had housed his statistics during the season’s first three months.

Despite missing 25 games, primarily because of his hamstring, Jones finished the 2004 season with a team-high 96 RBIs and 30 homers. Not bad for somebody who had just 20 RBIs and 10 homers on June 24.

“I take great pride in the fact that I had a really good second half, bounced back from just an abysmal first half and got back to respectability by the end of the season,” Jones said. “I look at that as a positive that I was able to put up those numbers. I look forward to staying a lot more healthy this year.”

One of the numbers Jones couldn't repair last year was his batting average, which came to its final resting point at .248. It was significantly higher than the .214 average he had entering the All-Star break. But it was one that he and most others never expect to see attached to his name again.

"I think he'll pick up where he left off -- good -- like he always has," said Cox of Jones, who had never hit below .295 since 1996.

Along with looking to put last year in the past, Jones also enters this year hoping he might have the opportunity to close out his career with the Braves. Past icons from the organization like Dale Murphy, Tom Glavine and Greg Maddux haven't been afforded the opportunity either because either because of diminishing talent or finances.

Jones realizes he could be serving as a financial liability to the organization. It would be very feasible for him to make \$67 million over the next four seasons. This wouldn't be as big of a deal to pay somebody an average of \$16.75 million per year if they were producing numbers like Jones did in his 1999 National League MVP campaign.

But over the past two seasons Jones has hit .278 with 57 homers and 212 RBIs. Still, the veteran third baseman, who will celebrate his 33<sup>rd</sup> birthday on April 23, believes he's capable of continuing to produce numbers closer to those ones he did in 1999.

"I figure I've got six or seven more good years left in me," said Jones, who ranks fourth on the Braves' all-time list in homers (310) and hits (1,705).

With six or seven more solid years, Jones would be on the verge of reaching the 500-homer milestone and making a case for possible enshrinement in Cooperstown. Another factor helping him get closer to the Hall of Fame will be that he's back at third base, where it will be easier for him to regain the All-Star status he had lost as an outfielder the past few years.

Along with being a consistent threat at the plat, Jones' legacy as a Brave will also be marked with unselfishness. While he never liked left field, he at least made the move there before the 2002 season and remained there until his hamstring wouldn't allow last year.

Now he's offered to rework his contract, which contains a \$5 million bonus that he'll receive if he reaches the very attainable figures needed to exercise his option years in 2007 and 2008.

“Chipper has always been willing to make sacrifices for this team,” Braves general manager John Schuerholz said. “We are very appreciative.”

Schuerholz would be even more appreciative if Jones could rebound and help the Braves claim a World Series championship that has eluded them since the third baseman’s rookie season in 1995.

At the same time, Jones says he’s not sticking around just to hear the Tomahawk Chop “few more thousand times.”

“To punctuate this run with another World Series would be the icing on the cake for me personally,” Jones said. “The only thing left to solidify our status as one of the best organizations of this era is to win another championship.”