

Chipper Helping DeRosa's Game

By Mark Bowman/MLB.com
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LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla – Mark DeRosa hasn't exactly provided a lot of promise with his bat this spring. But his good friend Chipper Jones is determined to make sure the Braves third baseman finds success in his first season as a big-league regular.

"We all know DeRo can play," Jones said. "DeRo is our third baseman and he's going to hit. He's just in a little bit of a funk right now."

DeRosa, who is replacing Vinny Castilla at third base this year is hitting just .231 (12-for52) with no extra-base hits in Grapefruit League action. He went hitless in three at-bats in Wednesday's 6-3 loss to the Tigers at Joker Marchant Stadium, and now has just five hits in his past 25 at-bats.

Some of his recent struggles could be a result of DeRosa attempting to make too many mechanical adjustments at the plate. Per Jones' recent request, the Braves third baseman is lowering his hands to shoulder level before beginning his swing.

But Jones wants DeRosa to make these adjustments in batting practice, not in games.

"He's trying to make adjustments in the game based on what we've done in the cage and you just can't do that." Jones said. "You just have to get down in the cage and do it, do it, do it, until it automatically transfers into the game."

While watching video earlier this weekend, Jones noticed that DeRosa drops his hands, cocks his arm back in a "C-like motion" and then moves forward with his swing. This prevents the Braves third baseman from meeting the ball in front of the plate, where he could generate some power.

Over the past three seasons, DeRosa has proved he can hit for average. But in the 666 big-league at-bats, he has 14 homers. In 2,044 minor league at-bats, he cleared the fence just 24 times.

"I don't want to make any major adjustments three days before the start of the season," DeRosa said. "But it's something I have to do to take my hitting to the next level."

Wright again: Although a Bobby Higginson grand slam marred his final Grapefruit League appearance on Wednesday afternoon, Jaret Wright had every right to be proud of his accomplishments this spring.

After proving his once troublesome right shoulder is sound enough for him to become starter again, Wright easily won the battle for the fifth spot in the Braves rotation and at the same time, looked like the dominant pitcher he was when he broke into the Majors in 1997 with the Indians.

“It definitely was a sense of accomplishment for me, because you still have to pitch well to get that spot,” Wright said. “I thought I pitched pretty well over the spring.”

Wright finished the spring with a 4.67 ERA, which saw a significant increase after he allowed five earned runs on seven hits in six innings on Wednesday. Four of the 11 runs he allowed in 21 2/3 innings, came courtesy of Higginson hitting his 3-0, bases-loaded sinker over the right-field wall.

“On 3-0, I wasn’t going to walk in any runs,” Wright said. “I was trying to throw something for a strike that maybe has some movement on it. He got under it and hit it out. Sometimes those [sinkers] are double plays and sometimes they’re a grand slam.”

Injury update: Eli Marrero strained an abdominal muscle while sliding into second base during Sunday’s game against the Astros, and hasn’t played in the past three games.

Braves manager Bobby Cox says there’s a chance Marrero could play again on Thursday and that he doesn’t believe the injury is one that will require a lengthy layoff.

As for Armando Almanza, who had elbow surgery in August, Cox still isn’t sure if he’ll be ready for Opening Day. The left-handed reliever has thrown six innings this spring, but isn’t ready to pitch on consecutive days yet.

“I don’t know if it’s going to take a few more weeks,” Cox said. “We’re just going to talk to him and see.”

If Almanza isn’t ready, right-handed reliever Will Cunnane, who hasn’t allowed a run in his past four innings, could find a spot on the Opening Day roster. Cox said he’s not worried that C.J. Nitkowski might be his only left-handed reliever at the beginning of the season.

Braves bits: Horacio Ramirez, who will make his regular-season debut on April 9 against the Cubs, will pitch in a minor league game at Disney on Sunday. Wright, who follows Ramirez in the rotation, will do the same on Monday. After missing more than a week with a staph infection on his right knee, Jorge Velandia returned to action and went hitless in three at-bats against the Tigers on Wednesday. J.D. Drew produced his team-leading 16th RBI in Wednesday's first inning. Drew is hitting .378 (14-for-37) this spring.