

Feature News

08/07/2004 3:13 PM ET

Notes: LaRoche has worthy mentor

Third baseman has been one of rookie's toughest critics

By Mark Bowman/MLB.com

PHOENIX – From the moment he first saw Adam LaRoche take a swing in the batting cage, Chipper Jones has had the utmost confidence that the Braves rookie first baseman possessed endless offensive capabilities.

But while being LaRoche's biggest supporter, Jones also can be his biggest critic, as he was when he delivered a severe tongue-lashing after the young first baseman struck out with the bases loaded in the fourth inning on Monday night.

Jones isn't willing to divulge his specific message. But any Braves player or coach, who was in earshot, confirms that there were plenty of words used that would have been unsuitable for print.

"I see a lot in Adam," Jones said. "Once he goes up there every at-bat thinking situationally, he'll be a much better hitter." After Diamondbacks starting pitcher Brandon Webb issued back-to-back walks to Jones and Johnny Estrada to load the bases with nobody out in the fourth inning, Andruw Jones displayed little patience swinging at every pitch in a four-pitch at-bat that resulted in a harmless popout.

While Andruw's lack of patience has saddled him throughout his career, Chipper doesn't want LaRoche to follow that path. Thus when the rookie first baseman swung at a pitch out of the zone to make the count 2-2, his mentor fumed and then boiled when the strikeout was completed on the next pitch.

"It's not that he struck out," Jones said. "It's the way that he struck out. His approach in that at-bat wasn't good. You can't strike out there. He's better than that."

Two innings later, with Chipper's message entrenched in his mind LaRoche drilled a 418-foot, two-run, game-winning home deep into right field seats. Patiently, he awaited the sinker-balling Webb to make a mistake up in the zone and then took advantage.

"If it takes me riding him every time he's goes up there for all four at-bats, every day with that kind of approach, that kind of smarts, playing the game the right way, I guess I've got to do it," Chipper said.

Since entering Wednesday's game in Houston hitless in his previous 14 at-bats and mired in a 3-for-24 skid, LaRoche has recorded five hits in his past 12 at-bats. An 0-for4 performance on Saturday stalled his streak.

LaRoche entered this season with high expectations. Many thought he would hit .300. But he's made some typical rookie mistakes. That's what Chipper wants to minimize through his guidance and sometimes harsh tutoring.

"I think that I have a lot to offer," Chipper said. "I want to offer as much knowledge as I can because we relate to each other really well."