

Spring Training: Chipper Jones Sees His Best Days Ahead “I don’t think I’ve had my career yet.”

Chipper Jones has driven in 100 or more runs in seven consecutive seasons, scored 100 or more in six of seven seasons and been booed lustily by opposing fans at an untold number of stops along the way.

He has hit more than .310 in five consecutive seasons, hit 32 or more homers in six of seven, been wildly cheered (and sometimes jeered) in Atlanta, and heard fans in New York and elsewhere derisively chant “Larr-ry, Larr-ry” more than he can remember.

He has a .318 career average batting right-handed, and a .306 career average batting left-handed.

He is Chipper Jones. And to many observers, his is the face of the Atlanta Braves.

He has decided it’s time for that face to smile more. Time to lighten up a little.

“I just got to a point in my life and career, where I came to the realization I have a lot to be thankful for and be happy about,” said Jones, a five-time All-Star who:

- Reached the majors at 22 and was a five-time All-Star third baseman at 29;
- Had his image stained when he admitted publicly to marital infidelity;
- Volunteered to switch from third base to left field in his prime to help the team;
- Has four seasons remaining on a franchise-record, six-year, \$90 million contract;
- Is funnier and far less intense in person than he seems in television interviews.

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During this past offseason, sometime between his sponsor-paid trip to the Mizuno factory in Japan and deer hunting with actor Kurt Russell on Jones’ Texas ranch, the fair-haired Brave came to a conclusion.

“I realized I may have been taking this game too seriously and not enjoying it as much as I could,” Jones said. “I decided I’m going to laugh more, hand around with my teammates more. . . .

“I don’t like being interrupted at dinner [by people who recognize him], so I’ll still be careful about that. But if a couple of guys ask me to do something like go to a movie on the road, I might be more likely to do that now.”

Before his critics start to dissect this statement, Jones makes it clear he fully appreciates his station in life, not to mention being drafted by the Braves instead of some sad-sack franchise.

“I feel extremely lucky,” he said. “I could be looking at the other end of the spectrum. I could be losing 100 games a year, struggling to get to the postseason. . . .

“How many guys have 10 years in the majors and know nothing but postseason appearances, 100-105 wins a year, having the opportunity to win a World Series every year? Nobody’s complaining from this end. I’ve got the greatest job in the world.”

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He is driven professionally by at least three things:

1. The strong desire to add to his one World Series ring,
2. to continue with his unwavering offensive production, and
3. the belief he hasn’t had that one magical, maximum everything-went-right season.

“I don’t think I’ve had my career year yet,” said Jones, who had a personal-best .330 average in 2001, a personal-best 111 RBIs in 1997 and 2000 and 45 homers in ’99.

“Maybe home-run wise, I’ve had my career year,” he said. “But run-production wise, I don’t think I have.”

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He came to spring training with 15 pounds of added muscle, the strongest he’s been since 1999. After considering a possible move to first base over the winter if that’s what the team needed, Jones I back in left field for a second season.

He made seven errors last season, though only two in his final 86 games as he grew accustomed to his new position.

He hasn't ruled out an eventual move to first base.

There was an uncharacteristic power drought for Jones early last season, but he finished at .327 with 26 home runs and 100 RBIs, the fifth player in NL history to have at least seven consecutive 100-RBI seasons.

"He'll put the same numbers up every year," Braves manager **Bobby Cox** said. "Chipper's kind of a throwback. Doesn't show a lot of emotion, because that's his way of focusing. He's smart. Very knowledgeable player. He comes in and studies pitchers. Anything to get the little edges, he does it.

Right-handers and lefties, power pitchers and junkballers. Jones doesn't discriminate.

He has five straight seasons with more walks than whiffs, at least 95 walks annually.

"He's got some of the best eyes in the league," said Marlins right-hander **A. J. Burnett**, who had 203 strikeouts in 204 1/3 innings last season and ranked second in the NL with a .209 average allowed.

Jones is 10-for-27 (.370) against him with just two strikeouts.

Jones speaks from the heart

Chipper also has a well-deserved reputation for speaking honestly, often bluntly.

"I'm not going to beat around the bush or sugarcoat anything," he said. "It's hard for me to bite my tongue when I feel strongly about something."

He knows his words have stirred the emotions of opposing teams and fans.

For instance, in October 1997 when the Braves played the wild-card Marlins in the National League Championship Series.

"He made a couple of comments when the Marlins were up 2-1," said **Gary Sheffield**, Florida's right fielder at the time. "He said, 'We've got them right where we want 'em.' That comment always stood out in our minds."

The Marlins won the series in six games.

“I was probably a little spoiled by what we’d done, playing in the World Series in ’95 and ’96,” Jones recalled. “I fully expected us to get the job done. But we ran up against a good [Florida] team with a lot of veterans. I tip my cap to them.”

In his 1999 MVP season, Jones goaded Mets fans. First, with his sublime offensive production against New York at the climax of the division race. Then, by telling them near the end of the season to go home and “put their Yankees stuff on.”

Each time the Braves return to Shea Stadium, he’s booed mercilessly.

“My brash mouth got me in trouble,” Jones said, unable to keep from smiling as he characterized his thing with Mets fans. “They love to boo me, and that’s fine.

“I don’t think most opposing fans realize that when they boo you loudly, that’s a compliment. I mean, you’re booing because you hate somebody, right? But why do you hate them? Because they’re good.”

Still, he said he’s more likely now to think before speaking. Most of the time.

“I’m not as quick to spout off at the mouth,” he said. “Do your job and you can talk smack after it’s over.”

**Adapted from article on the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution’s* web site.
March 22, 2004**