

# Chipper Jones' numbers reflect superstar status

By **Bill Zack**

*Savannah Morning News*

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. – The following numbers are provided as a public service for Atlanta Braves fans and are not intended to disparage any other major league hitter, living or dead.

Number of consecutive seasons with 100 RBIs by third baseman Chipper Jones:6. Number of major league third basemen who have matched that production since 1900:0.

Number of home runs by Atlanta switching-hitting third baseman in a single season:45. That's a National League record.

Number of hitters who have equaled Jones' 1999 season -- .319 average, 116 runs, 41 doubles, 45 home runs, 110 RBIs, and 25 steals:0. "He hits the fastball from either side of the plate, he'll take walks, he doesn't overswing, and he wants to be at the plate with the game on the line," Tampa Bay Devil Rays manager Hal McRae said. "That's basically what you're looking for with any superstar."

McRae offered that assessment before Jones' first-inning clinic Saturday against Tanyon Sturtz, Tampa Bay's opening day starter.

With two outs and nobody on base, Jones worked the count full, fouled off several pitches, then lined a clean base hit to right field. Four batters later Sturtz was down by five runs, a rally that started with Jones' refusal to give away a spring training at-bat.

"I can't remember the last time I saw him give away an at-bat," four time CY Young winner Greg Maddux said. "He's pretty good at knowing how he's going to be pitched, and he got really good when he started taking his walks."

There's a general consensus among pitchers and managers that tossing four pitches wide of the plate might be the best approach to Jones. The scouting report on the five-time All-Star is simple enough: Don't let him beat you.

"It's the correct thing to say, but how are you going to stop Chipper Jones?" right fielder Gary Sheffield said.

“Every team that comes to face the Braves, their priority is to neutralize Chipper. If anybody is going to beat you, it has to be somebody besides Chipper. You just hope when he’s at the plate it’s not a game-winning situation.”

You want to know the dumbest thing New York manager Bobby Valentine has ever done? Pitch to Jones during the heat of the '99 pennant race.

Jones, who hit .349 during the last three months of the season, single-handedly destroyed the Mets and nailed down the MVP award with a performance for the ages. In six games against the New Yorkers, he was 7 for 20 with four home runs and nine RBIs.

When the two teams met for the first time on Sept. 21, the Braves led the NL East by one game. By the time the Braves left Shea Stadium a week later, the Mets were done, eight games out.

“That was the most fun I’ve ever had in baseball,” Jones said. Is there a more consistent hitter in the game? Before hitting a career-high .330 last year, Jones’ average had never been lower than .295 or higher than .319 in the previous five seasons, and his RBI total had varied by four during the same stretch.

“I look at (last year) as kind of an average season,” said Jones, who hit 38 home runs and knocked in 102 runs. “I think I can go out and do that every year. I’m looking for that one year when I hit .330, hit forty-plus home runs and drive in 120-130 runs. Now that’s a good year. The seasons I’ve been having for the last six or seven years, I feel I can do that pretty consistently.”

Just when it seemed Jones’ legend had run its course, he reached back to conjure more magic last fall, hitting .419 during the final month of the season, and trumping the Astros with a home run against closer Billy Wagner in Game 1 of the division series.

Maddux was asked how he would pitch Jones and after a moment’s hesitation, he offered, “I don’t know. I’d come up with something. I could always walk him and try and pick him off. That’s always good way to go.”

Not any more. With Sheffield riding shotgun behind him in the lineup, Jones, who has moved to left field this spring, can expect to see more pitches in the strike zone. And with the return of leadoff man Rafael Furcal, he can expect his RBI opportunities to increase.

“I think I’m going to have a little help this year,” Jones said. “I think we’ve turned a corner. I think you’ll see more of our team scoring six or seven runs and our pitching holding them to nothing.”

Jones, Sheffield said, is among the game's elite hitters. And that makes him a target, for opposing pitchers, managers, and fans. Jones acknowledged the blame will inevitably fall on his shoulders if the offense doesn't produce big numbers.

"No matter what I do, if it doesn't work out for the Braves, I'm basically going to be the fall guy, and that's fine," he said. "I don't have a problem with that. I'd much rather have it on my shoulders than anybody else's. When that at-bat in the bottom of the ninth comes and it's me against the pitcher and he has to pitch me, that's the moment we all live for. I want to be up there. Put it on my shoulders. I don't want anybody else up there except me. That's the way I was born and raised."

But he doesn't take the game home with him now like he did in the past. Following the well-publicized breakup of his first marriage, he remarried, moved his parents to his 4,000-acre ranch in Texas, and became a father for the second time.

"Now baseball is not the most important thing in my life," Jones said. "It used to be, but it's not anymore. I get just as pumped up when we win a game, and I get just as angry when we lose. But walking through my front door and seeing three smiling faces saying Daddy and hubby is home, that makes my whole day."