

UP CLOSE WITH Chipper Jones

Interview by Patty Rasmussen

Q: How do you know when it's time to call in your dad to take a look at your swing?

A: When I lose all hope! I'm stubborn, and I feel like I'm a pretty good player. I like to make my own adjustments. But when it gets to the point that I've exhausted everything, that's when I make the call.

Q: Does he ever call you?

A: Oh, yeah. Sometimes I wait a little too long, and I let my pride stand in the way. But eventually, it comes around to, "Hey, get your butt on a plane!"

Q: Who covers the airfare?

A: I do! I can watch footage (of myself) and can pick up glaring stuff, but I can't see the little stuff. I can with other people, but I can't with me. The coaches I've had over the years have also seen the glaring stuff, but not the details. My dad can come in and watch 10 game-situation swings from the side and be able to tell me exactly what the problem is.

Q: What was it that he told you when he came in the second week of August? It appeared to make an almost immediate impact.

A: The big thing that I was doing earlier this year was landing on a soft-front side. To illustrate (stands up and takes a left-handed batting stance), when I land on a soft front side, all my weight is shifted forward (the front knee-the right-is bent), my head moves forward, and it's hard to get out in front of a pitch coming in at 95 miles per hour. So, what we worked on was landing hard, landing on a stiff-front side so that my head and my weight don't move forward. Changing that means I went from popping up a lot and hitting weak groundballs to my contact point being-just boom! I was hitting everything on the sweet spot, and I was starting to get this (he moves his hand in an arc trajectory), up and out of the park. (Dad and I) had talked about this on the phone when I was in St. Louis. He came to the San Diego series, but when we were in St. Louis (series before San Diego), I asked Bobby (Cox) for the day off, because I wanted to get in the cage and start working on stuff.

Q: Had you ever done that before, asked for the day off just so you could hit in the cage?

A: No.

Q: What was it, like 200 swings?

A: I took probably 300 swings. It takes that many swings before you're really making progress. Your hands are going to blister, and it would be hard to play. I said (to Cox), "I'm not contributing. I'm frustrated. Let me take a day off, get in the cage, do my 200, 300 swings, give my hands a day and take it from there." I actually swung the bat pretty good the last two days we were in St. Louis, but when we got back here and Dad was here, it seemed like it really took off.

Q: Do you ever think about having your dad stay in Atlanta during the season?

A: (Laughs) He's got too much to do at the ranch (in Texas)! Dad's one of those people who doesn't want to be seen. He's very humble and modest, but between he and I, we know what makes me click. I've had four hitting coaches; I'm not knocking any of them. You always have one coach that you click with, and I have two. One is obviously my dad, and the other was Don Baylor. You can't explain it, and it doesn't make the other guys bad hitting coaches. It seemed like Don could look at me-I don't know if he studied me a tremendous amount or not-but he picked up little things, and that was probably one year (1999, the only year Baylor was a Braves coach and the year Chipper was NL MVP) that I didn't have Dad in. I didn't need to.

Q: You've had a pretty good year by most standards, but maybe not a "Chipper Jones" year. How do you feel about your production this season?

A: I feel that this has been, possibly, my worst year.

Q: Why?

A: If I could explain it, maybe I could fix it!

Q: Maybe it seems that way because the guys around you are being so productive?

A: Probably. We've had so many guys have such tremendous years that a lot of times, I've been the monkey in the middle. Sheff's knocked in a ton of runs, and I've gone through periods where there haven't been a lot of opportunities for me to do anything. It's been frustrating, and I'm not what you would call a prototypical No.-4 hitter. I'm basically a protection guy for Sheff, to get him pitches (to hit) I'm not comfortable with that, because I've been the guy in the three hole (prior to 2002), and I've been the guy who's had that protection and been able to put up my numbers. It's been a little bit of an adjustment, but that said, hopefully by the end of September, I'm right around 30 homers and 100 RBIs and 100 runs scored and .300 average. It's been my least-consistent year, and I've been frustrated by my inconsistency.

Q: How important to you is the 100 RBIs, 30 home runs, .300 average? It's been almost a mantra for you.

A: It's important for a guy who hits in the middle of the lineup, especially on this team. We've scored so many runs this year. My goal every year is to account for at least one run a game. If I take that approach, by the end of the season, I'll come out with right around 200 runs produced, whether it's 100 runs scored, 100 RBIs, whatever. I don't think about the streak (100-RBI seasons). I just concentrate on letting the game come to me and taking advantage of opportunities when they come.

Q: What do you do when the mental frustration makes you impatient at the plate?

A: Part of this game is being disciplined and letting the game come to you. The whole season is cyclical. In '99, when I won the MVP, I might not have been the MVP on this club, because Brian Jordan toed the line in the first half, getting the hits and the big runs. And then when he cooled off, I started to get hot. It's kind of been the same thing this year. Sheff has carried this club for most of the year, and when he and Andruw cooled off, I picked it up. It's going to work like that through the course of the season, and you just have to stay patient and know that the opportunities are going to be there. Just be ready for the situation when it comes.

Q: How much of the struggles of this season have been a result of injuries that the public either knew about or didn't know about?

A: I haven't been real public, because there have been so many of them! One or two over the course of the season is fine, but when you've got something going on almost every day, people don't want to hear it. I can just see the headlines, "Chip's Got Turf Toe" and someone at home saying "Gee he makes \$15 million and he can't play with turf toe!" I've run the gamut this year, starting with the first day of spring training when I sprained my thumb. That set me behind. I've had knee problems, foot and shoulder problems, and of course, my wrist. It's been a plethora of things that maybe in some ways kept me from being as consistent as I wanted to be.

Q: The catch you made (Sept. 5 vs. the Pirates, running toward the wall, over the shoulder), did it impress you?

A: (Laughs) It was a good play, but only because I made it into a good play! It should have been a routing play. In a lot of ways, I'm still learning to play the outfield, and balls that are hit right at me, on the line, until they get over the roof of the stadium, are hard for me to judge. You know I saw (the batter) out on his front foot, and he just waved at it. Off the bat, I'm thinking, "In, in, in", and it got over the stadium roof, and I'm thinking, "Oh, no!" But luckily, I was able to run it down. But you see a guy like Andruw, and he makes those plays routinely. I didn't mean for it to be a great play; it just turned out that way.

Q: If you had your choice, where would you play?

A: I would want to play back on the infield, because it keeps me, mentally, more into the game. You know what pitch is coming and where you have to position yourself. In the outfield, there's so much down time. You don't have somewhere to go whenever the ball's hit, every time. I might come back in at some point...We'll see.

Q: There was a lot of significant change in the roster this past off-season, and there probably will be more of the same this winter?

A: You're probably right. This organization is going through an up-in-the-air period with management not knowing what the payroll will be and having to let guys go for no apparent reason; you never know what's going to happen from year to year. I'm sure that within a week or two after the season's over that John (Schuerholz) or Bobby (Cox) will come to me and let me know whether they want me to make another change. I'll do whatever personnel allows us to do. Bobby may not want me to move. But if we don't sign Fick or Julio or Vinny, there are a lot of things up in the air. Sheff? There are a lot of things.

Q: Do you feel that bringing back Sheffield should be a priority?

A: If I'm management, yes. Without a doubt. For him to do what he's done, to let him go somewhere else would be a tragedy, as far as I'm concerned. He's basically carried our ballclub this season. It makes a pretty good 3-4-5-6-7 in our lineup. It makes our lineup turnover that much quicker. I know that deep down in his heart, Sheff wants to stay here.

Q: Does (management) talk to you about issues like that since you've been here a long time?

A: Some-a little. I feel like I was pretty instrumental in getting him here. Sheff, when he played in Florida and L.A., every time our two teams got together, he'd say, "Get me over here. I want to play here." All it takes is mentioning it, and if the situation arises, John will look into it, as it did in L.A. John called me and asked, "What's it going to take to get Sheff here?" And I'm on the phone with Sheff! When it comes down to brass tacks, John's the guy who's doing it, but in the early stages, maybe I can be of help.

Q: The Braves took an early exit from the post-season last year when you grounded into a doubleplay with the potential tying runs on base to end Game 5 of the Division Series. How long did that stick in your gut? Do you think about it now, as you're about to enter another post-season?

A: I know for me, it was probably the most disappointing 10 seconds of my career, because those are the situations I get paid to produce in, and I didn't come through. I sat in the tunnel and was on the verge of crying. I felt so bad and felt as though I'd let everybody down. But the fact of the matter is there was an All-Star pitcher (San Francisco's Robb Nen) out there, one of the top closers in the game. It's not an easy task to go up there and produce against somebody like that. They want to win as much as we do. He beat us on that particular exchange. I can remember just two months earlier being in the same situation, and guys were on second and third, and I got a base hit off him to tie the game. How I wish the two instances had been reversed! It didn't work out that way. You fail in this game 70 percent of the time, and that makes you a .300 hitter, meaning you're a good player. But I didn't come through in the most-crucial point of the season. I felt it about a week. It stung. Then you get perspective and you keep it in mind during your off-season workouts. It motivates you to get better and be more prepared the next time it comes about.

Q: What do you say to the possibility of the Braves going all the way to the World Series and winning it?

A: I think we're certainly strong enough. That said, we're going to have to pitch and play better defense than we have to this point. We're not going to go out and score six or seven runs in a game facing the kind of pitching that will be out there. If we go out and score four or five runs in a game during the post-season, we have a great chance of winning it all. We have the club this year that we can expect to score that many runs. We have some weaknesses. This is a team that has been predicated on pitching and defense, and we obviously don't have the (pitching) staff, top to bottom, that we've had in the years past, and this year we're near the bottom of the league in defense. That's going to have to change, come post season. We're certainly capable.

Q: Would you trade a couple of the division titles for another World Championship?

A: Believe it – in a heartbeat. If, somewhere along the line, we had come along as a wild card and won a World Series, that would've been fine. We've won, barring a spectacular miracle, 12 (division titles) in a row. There's only one red flag (World Series banner hanging in Turner Field). It's something to be proud of, don't get me wrong, but I think every one of us would trade a couple of (division banners) for a wild card and a World Series. It would be awfully nice to punctuate this run with another one. I think it would calm all the critics.

Q: Are you still having as much fun playing baseball as you always had?

A: Yeah, I'm having fun. I'm a lot older now. I don't take the game as seriously as I used to, which has helped me. I used to live, breathe, eat, drink and sleep baseball. I don't do that anymore. I have two little boys, 3 and 5 years old. My marriage is perfect, and all facets of my life are great. There's nothing to be uptight about. There's nothing to walk around mad about. You play hard every day, and let the chips fall where they may. All we can do is go out and have fun and hopefully be the last team standing. That will make life a lot better for the people in Atlanta!