

CHIPPER'S AGONY

SEARCH FOR HEALTH AND PRODUCTION LEADS TO THIRD BASE RETURN
BY JON COOPER

What are three positions Chipper Jones didn't figure to find himself filling much this year?

Designated hitter.
First Baseman.
Third Baseman.

Where is Chipper Jones likely to find himself most of the last four months of the season?
See above.

Beats where the leftfielder spent most of his first two months of the season on the bench.

Plagued by a nagging injury to his right hamstring, the cornerstone of the Braves offense endured the longest unproductive period of his career in April, May and the first two weeks of June.

"It's very frustrating," said Jones, who through 56 games was hitting only .232 and had almost as many missed games (22) as hits (23). "This team needs me in the lineup, and I need to be in there, feeling like I'm helping out. Unfortunately, my body just hasn't allowed me to do that this year.

"I'm used to playing 150, 155, 160 games a year," he continued. "I've got to come to grips with the fact that I'm not going to be able to do that this year. But it's important that I get as healthy as possible for the second-half run."

Jones, who has never played fewer than 153 games in a 162-game season (he played a career-low 140 in strike-shortened 1995), has suffered a series of nagging leg injuries that put him on the disabled list for the third time in his career – the first time since 1996 – and turned one of the team's best baserunners into a pinch-hitter.

Only the beginning of interleague play on June 8 finally enabled the 32 year-old Jones to return to the starting lineup as the DH. Speculation was that if he could remain healthy, the Braves would return Chipper to the infield at first or third base when the club returned to Turner Field June 15. It turned out to be third base, which he hadn't played since 2001.

Jones' injuries began April 11 against the Cubs, when he felt a twinge in his right hamstring. He sat out the next two games. Then a week later, in the seventh inning of the April 18 game against the Marlins, Jones was chasing a Luis Castillo ball in left-center when he collapsed, grabbing his hamstring. He had to be carted off the field.

While the injury was diagnosed as only a strain, it still resulted in Chipper going on the 15-day disabled list. He came back on May 8 against Houston and tried to find his swing, but the rust showed. He hit only .210 (12-57) with 18 strikeouts over the next 18 games. The Braves were 10-8 over that stretch.

Then on May 28 at Philadelphia, things went from to worse.

In the top of the first inning, a pitch by Phillies lefthander Randy Wolf hit Jones above the left knee, forcing him to leave the game and sit the next day, as well. Unfortunately, there was even more to come.

In the fourth inning of the June 1 game against Montreal, while running out a routine grounder, Jones pulled up halfway down the line and hopped the rest of the way to first. The troublesome hamstring reared its ugly head again. Jones was so frustrated that he uncharacteristically fired his helmet to the ground as he entered the dugout.

Jones sat out the next three games. He pinch-hit June 5-6 against the Phillies at Turner Field but was 0-for-2. Interleague play in mid-June and early July gave Jones two weeks to DH without having to play the field.

The nature of his injuries, as well as Atlanta's struggles without him (the Braves are 9-13 in games Jones has not played) add to the frustration.

"It's been hard," he said. "You sit off to the side, and whenever the team makes mistakes, it's awfully tough to digest. It's tough to digest when you're out there on the field and that happens. But at least when you're in the field, you know that you're going to have a couple of opportunities with the bat or with the glove to help make up for a mistake."

Jones is mystified by the injuries considering he followed his usual off-season conditioning program and came to spring training in superb shape.

"My off-season regimen has stayed the same. I've been successful with it too long – I'm not about to change it now," he said. "I don't understand why these injuries are happening. Obviously, you can't control being hit by pitches and whatnot, but this whole string of injuries started with the hamstring and being out in the outfield and not being able to get it back fully healthy."

Chipper says he's not against moving back to the infield while nursing the hamstring – anything to get back in the lineup.

“We’re looking at other options,” he said. “Hopefully, I can come back to the infield and get this thing healthy in case I am pressed into duty back in the outfield later on this season.

“It would be a lot easier to put it out of my mind if I were playing the infield,” he added. “It’s always on my mind in the outfield, because in the outfield, the ball dictates how hard you go, and sometimes it dictates that you go full-bore. And right now, I’m not able to go full-bore. In the infield, these are reaction positions, and you’ve got to make short, quick movements, but not the full-bore movements. You’ve got to stay under control. Even running the bases is a controlled run, because you have to hit each base. It’s not the wide-open style that you would have in the outfield.”

Though he hasn’t been able to contribute on the field as he’s accustomed to, Chipper has tried to help in the clubhouse, acting as mentor to youngsters DeWayne Wise, Mike Hessman and Nick Green.

“I have to be,” he said. “If I’m not out there on the field playing and leading by example, then I need to be giving up as much knowledge as I can to these guys. Some of these guys haven’t faced these pitchers before, and I’ve faced them many times. So, if I can give them a little bit of information that helps them during the course of an at-bat against a particular pitcher, then I’m continuing to help this ballclub even though I’m not playing.”

His clubhouse leadership appeared to be paying dividends. In spite of using 51 different lineups, the Braves were still in the thick of the NL East race. Remarkable, heading into play June 16, the Braves were only 3 _ games behind the first-place Marlins, whom the Braves beat five times in the first six games they played against each other.

“I’ve missed most of the first half, and we’ve been without [Marcus] Giles, [Adam] LaRoche and J.D. Drew for some of it, and we’re still only 3 _ games out,” Jones said. “So I’ve got to think that once the second half gets here and we get healthy, we’re going to -be right in the thick of things and ready to make a run at another division title.”

But Jones, known for strong finishes (he hit .362 with nine homers and 38 RBIs in his last 44 games of 2003), realizes he’s going to fall short of some of the personal standards he’s set, even if he has his usual strong finish. His eight straight seasons of at least of 100 RBIs is in serious jeopardy.

“I’d have to go on quite a run,” said Jones, who had 19 RBIs starting play June 17. “I’ve been rally pressed to get 100 RBIs the past couple of years playing 150 games, and this year I’m probably only going to play 120 to 130. So, it’s going to be awfully difficult.

“But that’s not what drives me,” he continued. “I would like to have a good, typical second half, a strong one. If I don’t get to 100, it’s no big deal; I know it’s because of the injuries that I wasn’t able to attain it, and that’s beyond my control. Personal goals are nice; they’re icing on the cake after you get done. But the team’s goals remain first and foremost.”