

Feeling just Chipper

Despite his youthful persona, the popular Braves star acknowledges his advancing years.

By Rick Maese – Sentinel Staff Writer
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Looking as if he just woke up, Chipper Jones strolls through the double doors and into the Atlanta Braves' clubhouse.

“Man, I didn't know today was photo day,” he says to the first person he sees, realizing that 30 minutes of his morning just disappeared because he has to smile and be Chipper.

He walks as slow as he talks, taking a seat at his locker. When he takes off his cap and runs his fingers through his hair, Braves coach Terry Pendleton walks by and says, “You thinking about getting a haircut anytime soon?”

It's one of those things you can say to a guy named Chipper, like “Chipper, go to your room” or “Chipper, do you know who broke the lamp?” Jones' bio indicates he's every bit the full-grown man – he'll be 33 on April 24 – but somehow he still strikes you as the 18-year-old kid with the toothy grin, a blue-collar background and an “aww, shucks” innocence spitting out of every pore.

But if you think that, you'd be wrong. In fact, Jones would be the first to correct you.

“I certainly don't feel like a young guy anymore,” he says, without even cracking a smile.

He was born Larry Wayne Jones, but when you slap a nickname like “Chipper” on a kid and when he looks every bit like a “Chipper” should look, well, it's not easy convincing everyone you actually have grown up a bit.

“Maybe it's the name,” he says, “but I also have a big face. People see it and kind of know: Chipper.”

Things are a bit different at this spring training. He's coming off the worst season of his career, and the Braves shuffled their roster enough in the offseason where they aren't considered a preseason lock for the NL East title.

And Jones is being especially reflective this time around, saying out loud what few athletes even want to contemplate quietly: Suddenly, the end is closer than the beginning.

The Evolution of Chipper, Part 2:

It's true that he once was a young man, and he was fortunate that the "young" part seemed to last longer than normal.

Chipper Jones emerged from the fields of Pierson, the self-proclaimed "fern capital of the world," where most young men grow up picking vegetation, not hitting baseballs.

"He was good when he first started, damn near the finished product since Day One," says Atlanta Manager Bobby Cox, who was the Braves' general manager when they made Jones No. 1 pick of the 1990 June amateur draft.

It's tough to imagine that they knew what they were getting. Today, with the possible exception of the Yankees' Derek Jeter and the Astros' Jeff Bagwell, Jones is more identifiable with one team than any other player in baseball.

"In the last decade, there aren't many players who have that kind of position and have really served as the face of an organization the way Chipper has," Braves General Manager John Schuerholz says. "His image, his personality – fans of all ages seem to relate to him."

The key is in the formula. Jones' fan base continually evolves and replenishes. Schuerholz explains that even as fans age, there's a younger crop discovering the game that's instantly drawn to Jones.

"Younger people seem to relate to him," Schuerholz says. "A new group of young fans are always there, cheering for him. It's like a continuum, and it's remained that way."

Success doesn't hurt. Jones joined the Braves' roster full-time 10 years ago. They've reached the postseason every season since, including a World Series championship in 1995. He was the NL MVP in 1999 and drove in at least 100 runs in eight consecutive seasons (1996-2003).

Somewhere along the line, though, Jones grew up, his success spiked with humiliation.

His largest public growth-spurt came in 1998, when he disclosed that he had an extramarital affair with a Hooters waitress. The pair had a child together. He later divorced his wife and has since remarried.

In Atlanta, he still was the tall, lanky kid giving it his all at third base, his public mistake perceived as a youthful slip-up. Even though he was affected internally, his image was only slightly bruised.

The Evolution of Chipper, Part 3:

Unlike your own children, growth in baseball isn't measured once a month with a wall chart. It's quicker and more public. It's popping up with a man on third. It's going 0-for-4 for the fourth game in a row. It's Matt from Macon calling into the drive-time show, obsessing because he's discovered a hitch in Jones' swing.

Last year, Jones suffered through his toughest season, posting the worst numbers since his rookie campaign.

"It was embarrassing at times and hard for me to swallow," he says now.

He was plagued by a series of nagging injuries: from his foot to his hamstring to his hand. Of course, failure is a relative term.

"Last year is the roughest year he's ever had, and still he drove in right at 100," Cox says. "That's how good he's been."

Jones hit 30 home runs and had 96 RBIs. It was the first time since 1995 he didn't knock in 100 runs, though, and his batting average was a career-low .248, the first time in seven seasons it was below .300.

You learn a couple of things suffering through a season like that, he says. No.1, enjoy the game because it can be taken away from you. And No. 2, there's successes outside of baseball.

A season like last year's would have paralyzed Jones when he was younger. Today, he says, he has reached a point where he's able to keep it in perspective.

"The game means a lot to me, don't get me wrong," he says. "But it doesn't mean as much as it used to. I don't bring the game home the way I used to. I used to fret over a bad game for a couple of days. I used to come home, get ticked off all over the house. Now I don't do that.

"I live 30 minutes from the stadium and that ride is a good cooling-off period. The second you walk through the door, your kids don't care if you go 0-for-4 and make two errors. All they care about is 'Daddy's home!' It helps you forget everything else that happened that day."

Jones had his third son last year (named Shea, after the Mets' stadium, where he has had plenty of success), and he's expecting a fourth child in October.

Set to make \$15 million this season, Jones has two years remaining on his contract, with a couple of option years waiting at the end.

Baseball doesn't get easier as you get older. It's tougher to wake up in the morning, it takes longer to loosen up and you have to spend more time with the trainer and with a chiropractor.

He likes the idea of retiring in Atlanta, and even if he follows the cliché and takes it one game at a time, he's starting to realize there is a final game out there and it's getting closer.

"This is 12 years now that I've been playing, and I ain't playing 12 more, I can tell you that," he says. "I'm certainly not as young as I used to be. Longevity-wise, I'm on the backside of my career, I know that.

"But ability-wise, I still feel like I'm still here and can play with the big boys. At least for a few more years."