

Around the Horn: Corner infielders

Chipper back at third; Franco, LaRoche at first

By Mark Bowman/MLB.com

ATLANTA – There was a time when Chipper Jones was considered by many to be one of the game's top third basemen. Heading into the 2005 season, the former National League MVP is simply happy to once again call third base home.

With Jones back at his familiar position, and the duo of Adam LaRoche and Julio Franco ready to platoon at first base once again, the Braves appear to be solid at the corner infield positions heading into the 2005 season, as well as in future years.

During his rookie campaign last year, LaRoche showed he has the potential to be an All-Star caliber player for many years. The same may one day be said about Andy Marte, a 21-year old third baseman who is the club's best prospect since Andruw Jones.

But for now, Marte will have to wait. Chipper has no intentions of going back to the outfield, and it would be nearly impossible for the Braves to move the veteran and his hefty contract elsewhere.

While being selected to five NL All-Star teams during a six-year span from 1996-2001, Jones was constructing what some believed would be a Hall of Fame career and there wasn't reason to think there would be a need to trade him.

But his unselfish decision to go to the outfield to accommodate Vinny Castilla before the 2002 season has completely changed Jones' career. Unhappy in left field, his offensive numbers dropped and he was looking like anything but an All-Star.

Providing that happiness can improve a player's production, Jones turned things around when he moved back to third base in mid-June last year. Mark DeRosa's struggles and Jones' troublesome hamstring opened the door for the move that enabled Braves fans to see a dramatic turnaround.

Heading into the All-Star break last year, Jones, who had entered 2004 with a .309 career batting average, was hitting a meager .213 with 12 homers and 34 RBIs. A stint on the disable list and the constant tweaking of the hamstring played a part. But it was also evident he simply wasn't happy in the outfield.

After the All-Star break last year, Jones hit .269 with 17 homers and 56 RBIs. He was back at third base, where his hamstring wouldn't be subject to the same stress.

Along with providing some offense, Jones also played splendid defense back at his old position. While playing the hot corner from 1995-2001, his glove was subject to criticism. But he committed just six errors in 96 games at third base last year and had many Braves coaches saying they had never seen him play the position so well.

While solid play at third base was a definite benefit, Jones' other impressive contribution came through his mentoring of LaRoche. The two formed a solid friendship that enabled the veteran to come down hard on the rookie when necessary.

When Jones saw LaRoche swinging in the batting cages during Spring Training in 2003, he said the youngster already had one of the organization's best swings. By August of last year, Braves fans were realizing this, too. But like most rookies, the 25-year-old first baseman had some growing pains.

Before suffering a broken collarbone on May 28, LaRoche was batting just .242 with two homers and 12 RBIs. But after returning from the disabled list on July 2, the youngster began turning things around.

After a bad at-bat during an Aug. 6 game in Arizona, Jones let LaRoche have it. The verbal lashing worked two innings later when the young first baseman responded with a towering two-run homer that provided the difference against the Diamondbacks.

More importantly, Jones' message seemed to have a lasting effect. LaRoche hit nine of his 13 homers in the season's final two months and batted an impressive .345 (30-for-87) over his final 28 games.

LaRoche's rookie success should open the door to more playing time. But Franco, who celebrated his 46th birthday on Aug. 23, didn't exactly give the Braves any reason to think his career was on his final leg last year.

Franco, who hit .309 (99-for-320) with six homers and 57 RBIs last year, will likely share time with LaRoche again. With both being solid glove men, Cox doesn't lose anything defensively with the platoon.