

CHIPPER'S WILD RIDE

When the Braves broke spring training, Bobby Cox expected 150 games, somewhere in the neighborhood of 30 home runs and 100 RBIs from Chipper Jones, then his leftfielder, Jones had not played fewer than 150 games and hadn't driven in fewer than 100 runs since 1995, his rookie season. He was one of only four National Leaguers – Mel Ott and Willie Mays (8) and Sammy Sosa (9) are the others – to drive in 100 runs in eight consecutive seasons.

But Chipper strained his right hamstring on April 18 and went on the disabled list for only the third time in his career on April 26, missing 16 games. On May 28, he suffered another setback when Philadelphia's Randy Wolf hit him on the right knee with a pitch. Then on June 1, he re-injured the hamstring and missed three more games.

Basically swinging on one leg, Jones' average plummeted. He hit .200 in the month of May and bottomed out at .206 on June 17.

But the turning point of Chipper's season actually came two days earlier, when Cox, looking to save wear on Jones' injured leg, moved him back to third base, where he'd been an All-Star five times.

"I had to prove myself all over again. The only way to do that was to go out and play good third base," he said.

"I think it's safe to say I wasn't going to hit .210 the whole year," he added with a laugh (he finished at .248).

Chipper, who is signed through 2006, began the second half at .214 with 12 homers and 34 RBIs. The Braves were 45-42, a game back of Philadelphia.

The second half was a different story. The Braves went 51-24, led by Jones, who hit .278, with a team-leading 18 homers and 62 RBIs. Chipper nearly doubled his first half output in August alone, when he hit .337 with 11 homers and 29 RBIs, and the Braves were 20-8. In August, Jones homered in a franchise-record-tying five consecutive games (Aug. 13-Aug. 17), hit his 300th career homer (Aug. 16) and drove in his 1,000th run (Aug. 15).

On Aug. 27, against San Francisco, Jones hit his 25th homer of the season, marking his seventh consecutive 25-homer season, tying him with Henry Aaron for the club lead for most consecutive 25-homer seasons.

Slowly but surely, he also marched toward 100 RBIs. Chipper's RBI double against the Mets on Sept. 28, gave him 96, with five games remaining.

He would get no closer – due in part to getting hit by a pitch on the right hand by Chicago’s Carlos Zambrano in the next-to-last game – but he took pride in making it so close.

“I really didn’t [think I’d get close],” he said, “especially where I came from at the All-Star Break. The guys in front of me did an outstanding job of giving me opportunities to drive in runs.”

With the hand obviously hampering him, Chipper went 0-for-11 in the first three games of the Division Series against Houston. But again, he came off the canvas, going 2-for-4 in Game 4, including starting the game-tying rally in the sixth inning, and going 2-for-5 in a losing effort in Game 5.

The fact that Jones never quit and played through the injuries was not lost on his teammates.

“This is his organization,” added Drew. “He definitely stepped it up a notch during the second half and put the team on his shoulders and carried us through.”