

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/baseball/238138_jenks26.html

White Sox rookie with 100 mph arm trying to put away troubled past

Friday, August 26, 2005

By JON PAUL MOROSI

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

Bobby Jenks stands 6 feet 3, weighs 270 pounds, and has a right arm that triggers the third digit on radar guns.

He spends his winters with in-laws near the Bothell-Kenmore line. He trains at the Northwest Baseball Academy in Lynnwood. He consults with Mark Potoshnik, the coach who recruited him from an Idaho cabin at age 18 to play summer baseball for the Seattle Bombers.

By now, Jenks is somewhat of a local. You might have seen him around or heard the stories about him -- good or bad. Either way, he makes an impression.

His baseball career is young, but old enough to have oscillated between potential greatness and potential disaster. His Stuff and That Other Stuff. One is brilliant beyond debate. The other is a constant source of questions, speculation and rehashed history.

For the time being, at least, he cannot simply be a power pitcher with a 100-plus fastball and scary curve. He is a power pitcher with a 100-plus fastball and scary curve who once drank in the general direction of hardball oblivion.

Jenks will be at Safeco Field tonight. His new team, the Chicago White Sox, looks like the 2001 Mariners, clubhouse karma included.

Jenks, who earned his first career save Thursday night and has a 2.79 ERA in 14 appearances, declined an interview request for this story. He knows that mention of his success is often couched in the context of previous shortcomings.

His reputation is largely unfavorable -- and perhaps unduly earned. His behavior has not injured others, near as anyone can tell. He is only 24, placing most of his transgressions in an age range common to college students, a demographic often cited for its alcoholic buffoonery.

Yet, while those who frequent fraternity parties might not have a public profile, Jenks is a known commodity. So is his story, for better or worse.

Worse, mostly.

"That's very frustrating to me," Potoshnik said. "The minor leagues are littered with 19-year-olds making stupid mistakes. He never really did anything wrong.

"A couple times, he had a couple too many drinks. That's all. But people hold you to a higher standard when you're blessed with talent."

Low risk, high reward

Why is he here now?

He should be the opening act for Scot Shields and Francisco Rodriguez in the Los Angeles Angels bullpen. The Angels, after all, drafted him in the fifth round of the 2000 draft. They loved His Stuff, but after five years were not as fond of That Other Stuff.

So, as a busy offseason necessitated room on the 40-man roster, they waived Jenks in mid-December. At that point, the White Sox, along with every other team in baseball, had 48 hours to decide whether to claim him.

Chicago scouts had turned in positive reports on Jenks for three years. His Stuff was not the issue. It never had been. Still, crucial questions persisted. One had a straightforward answer. The other did not.

First, they inquired about the health of his arm. He pitched only five times last season because of an elbow injury. It required massive surgery. By last offseason, though, it checked out. He was OK.

After that, they examined his personal past, a sticky-thick history of potential deal-breakers and non-starters. Most revolved around empty bottles.

The White Sox had heard the stories of his alcohol-related misdeeds. A 2003 ESPN The Magazine story recounted instances of drunken belligerence and recklessness. Once, he burned his pitching hand with a lighter, suggesting a stunning disregard for the gift that might make him a rich man.

Clearly, he had a history. Twenty-nine teams wondered if he would keep it as such.

Ultimately, Chicago concluded Jenks was worth the \$20,000 waiver claim and league-minimum salary. Rick Hahn, the assistant general manager, described it as a "low-risk, high-reward proposition."

So far, returns are positive. Jenks recently told the Chicago Tribune that he no longer binge drinks. On the field, he has been versatile, reliable and cheap -- three beautiful words in middle relief. Best of all, he is still a rookie. He could pitch in Chicago for years.

"We hope so," Hahn said. "That's the high-reward side of the low risk."

Continued support

Still, you wonder how they feel about him -- people like Matt Sosnick, the agent Jenks fired after he was demoted to rookie ball; Mike Butcher, his rookie-level pitching coach; and Doug Sisson, the Double-A Arkansas manager who suspended him in 2002.

In the ESPN story, Jenks said he nearly came to blows with Sisson over his desire to bring alcohol onto the team bus. This week, however, Sisson downplayed the incident. He said it "wasn't close" to a physical confrontation.

And, over and over, Sisson said how happy he was to see Jenks in the majors.

"He is where he wants to be. He should be credited for that," said Sisson, now an assistant coach at the University of Alabama. "That's what should be written about. The other stuff is old news."

"If he was flipping burgers now, if he had never figured it out, then you could condemn him. But it's obvious. He stepped back. He turned it around. He did it."

Jenks and Butcher, the former pitching coach, remain close. After Jenks was selected to the All-Star Futures Game, he called Butcher. After he made his big-league debut, he called Butcher.

"He's a very good kid," said Butcher, now the Angels' roving pitching instructor. "I have nothing bad to say about him, nothing at all.

"Bobby has matured. That's the biggest thing. He's married, two kids. It was time for him to grow up, make better choices. He's doing that now."

Jenks fired Sosnick as his agent three years ago, and has had four others represent him since. Sosnick said he "doesn't really know" Jenks anymore. Enough time has passed, though, that Sosnick bears no grudge over the split.

"I'm pretty neutral," Sosnick said. "I don't root for him. I don't root against him. But in life, I do root for him.

"Bobby went through a lot. He didn't have it easy coming up. I had it easier. I don't think I'm one to throw stones at his house."

Sox a good fit

Jenks fits, somehow, with the character of this White Sox team. GM Kenny Williams has fashioned a winning roster out of purported malcontents (Carl Everett, A.J. Pierzynski) and supposed never-will-bes (Jose Contreras, Scott Podsednik). Jenks, as perception had it, was a little of Column A, a little of Column B.

If anything, the negative perception might enable Jenks to fit in more easily among teammates.

"They know that, here's a guy who is being given a second chance, like many of the guys in our clubhouse," Hahn said. "I don't know if anyone knows, or quite candidly cares, about specific instances.

"They've welcomed this guy. He has an opportunity. He's trying. Guys relate to him."

It helps, of course, that he can throw a ball 101 mph. Many agree with an account that he hit 103 in Puerto Rico. Butcher was not there, but does not doubt that it happened.

Butcher has never questioned Jenks' stuff. It is grade A, big-league closer cut -- along with the edge to record the final out in a one-run game. Now, the harsh words Jenks once heard are fading with each appearance.

Success, after all, has a way of writing a favorable sort of revisionist history.

"Obviously, things happened in his past," Butcher said. "You move on. You grow up. You mature. You try to get better. He's moved on.

"Whether the public view is different," he added, "I have no idea."

P-I reporter Jon Paul Morosi can be reached at 206-448-8189 or jonpaulmorosi@seattlepi.com.

© 1998-2005 Seattle Post-Intelligencer