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Larry Stone

Sweet redemption for Jenks

CHICAGO — They chant his name in Chicago when he takes the mound. He is a new cult hero, the portly savior of a special White Sox season.

The fans love the fact he looks like them, a Regular Joe in a disheveled baseball uniform. What they love even more is the 100 mph fastball blowing past hitters.

What they loved most was the 100 mph fastball blowing past Red Sox hitters, two excruciating innings worth of crucial outs to nail down Game 2 of the American League Division Series.

He has a right arm from the heavens, the steely eyed composure of a veteran closer and now an unlimited future in the major leagues.

Bobby Jenks, all 270 pounds of him, all 24 years of him, has changed the story line heading into tonight's opener of the AL Championship Series.

Who knew it was going to be a feel-good tale of redemption? This looked, for the longest time, like another tear-jerker about talent squandered, a tragedy in the making about a reckless kid from Idaho who couldn't grow up, who would drink and carouse himself right out of baseball.

He had landed in the Seattle area in 1999, a high-school dropout rescued by Mark Potoshnik of the Northwest Baseball Academy in Lynnwood. Potoshnik had merely wanted an arm for his summer-league team, the Seattle Bombers, but he ended up as a mentor to a kid who had been living with his family in a log cabin in Spirit Lake, Idaho.

To help save his draft eligibility, Potoshnik took Jenks into his home and enrolled him in Inglemoor High School in Bothell, where he graduated in 2000 but never played baseball. In fact, Jenks barely had a high-school baseball career, having been academically ineligible for three of his four years.

But he had that golden arm — "far and away, the most talented individual I've ever been around, in terms of arm strength," said Potoshnik.

"Everyone who saw him back when he was younger, it was never a matter of ability. It was whether he was going to be healthy. And, with his background, is he going to be able to overcome some things and learn how the rest of society works, and be able to flourish in that environment."

For a long while, the answer was no — an emphatic no at that.

Potoshnik set up scouting showcases. The story of Jenks' first workout for 30 scouts has become the stuff of legend, his first pitch sailing 6 feet over the catcher's head and nearly decapitating the San Diego Padres' scout.

"Guys were diving all over the place," said Potoshnik.

The Angels took Jenks in the fifth round, and it didn't take long for word to get around the minors about the electric arm that reached 102 on the speed guns.

But it was also getting out what a load this kid was — and the world found out in 2003 through an amazing article in ESPN the Magazine that painted a sordid picture of binge drinking and reckless behavior.

The article told of Jenks getting suspended from the Angels' Class AA team for repeatedly bringing beer on the bus. It told of how, "in a drunken stupor, he took a lighter and burned the backside of his pitching hand, opening a wound the size of a silver dollar. He then torched his left hand and the underside of both forearms — before passing out."

It told how he would refer to his agent, Matt Soshnick, as D.J. — short for Dirty Jew (Jenks has denied this). Soshnick, now one of four former agents of Jenks, told the magazine:

"Imagine being in the top five in the world at what you do, and your demons are so terrible that your ability is dwarfed. That's Bobby Jenks. The worst thing that could happen is if he gets to the big leagues. If he gets to the big leagues, he'll free fall. He can't handle success."

For a long while, the demons seemed to be winning. Jenks was demoted to Class A, sidelined last year with a serious elbow injury and eventually taken off the Angels' roster last winter. The White Sox, who saw the electric fastball and figured they could work with the attitude, claimed him for \$20,000.

Meanwhile, Jenks was seeing the light. He married Adele, a Seattle-area woman whom he met at Dick's Drive-In. They now have two young kids, Cuma and Nolan.

"That would settle anyone down," he said yesterday before the White Sox's workout. "Knowing when I come home, even if I had a bad game, my daughter and son will still come over and give me a big hug."

The tales of excess and debauchery are in the past, he insisted.

"I don't think I did anything out of character from what any other 21-year-old would have done," he said. "Being a young kid and doing some things, I mean, everyone's gone through it. I was just under a bigger magnifying glass.

"I didn't go through the college scene at all. So everything I did would have been my college years early on."

The White Sox say they haven't seen any signs of the tormented Jenks, only an attentive pitcher who follows the rules and ends the rallies. The arm has fully healed, and since coming up from the minors in July, he has emerged as the essential closer to replace faltering Dustin Hermanson.

"There's never been a smudge on his slate, as far as I'm concerned," pitching coach Don Cooper said. "I don't judge anybody until we get him. He's been great. There hasn't even been a question. Anything in the past is simply that: the past."

Back in Seattle, where Jenks now makes his home full-time, Potoshnik watches the transformation with pride.

"I never lost faith in him, just because I've known Bobby so long," he said. "He generally is a nice guy. My kids just love him to death. He's just not worldly. From where he's come from to where he is is phenomenal."

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