



Jenks taking it slow and easy this time after some unkind cuts

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With the spring-training homestretch a welcome feeling to big leaguers itchy for the real deal after too many weeks of sunny workouts, some teams are still carrying on spirited competitions for their closer's job. One is the White Sox.

And yet among all 30 teams' camps, there's no sign of Bobby Jenks. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is about as weak as possible for the singular skill of throwing a fastball 95 mph-plus.

Jenks, now 33, the man who threw the final pitch that clinched the 2005 World Series for the Sox, is reduced to spectator status for the foreseeable future. He's wondering if he'll ever get that ninth-inning adrenalin shot, let alone back on a competitive mound.

Jenks likely could handle the concept of Tommy John surgery. That's about as established a sports-medicine procedure as they come 40 years after the late Frank Jobe used John as his surgical guinea pig. You get a tendon transplant, you rehab and you get back to pitching in a year. Shoulder surgery is a little less certain, but there are still parameters for comebacks.

But the spine? That's the outer limits.



Bobby Jenks was intimidating with a high 90s mph fastball through much of his six Sox seasons. Photo credit: [Keith Allison](#).

If one surgical procedure on the back is considered huge, what about two? When the first did not fix the original problem, how do you physically and mentally recover from the second? And in between, throw in abuse of pain medication.

Fortunately, Jenks is healthy enough amid his rehab to tell the tale of a walk, a crawl, a near-submission to the pain that finally was fixed when Dr. Robert Watkins infused two plates and six screws in his spine Oct. 8.

Mind is open on the comeback trail

“If there was to be a comeback, I’m not going to label it and say this is what I’m going to do,” Jenks said. “What I’m going to do is do everything I can and at the end of that road, see where I’m at. If the possibility of coming back is there, I’m going to take it. But if not, I’m going to accept it because I’ve done everything I could up to that point to try to get back to the game I love.”

Given what Jenks now knows, it’s a near-miracle he was able to carve out a distinctive career as a closer with the Sox from 2005 to 2010. He frequently endured pain. But it was the ultimate misdirection play.

“It was the same problem that has been there the entire time,” Jenks said. “Where I was experiencing the pain was underneath my left scapula. No one thought to look at the spine. How we actually found out what the problem was, was by complete accident. There was nothing the White Sox doctors or staff could have done different. It was by mere accident the Red Sox doctors found the problem that was actually going on.”

Jenks has not had an easy life. He had a near-hardscrabble childhood in the Pacific Northwest. Academic problems prevented him from playing on his high-school team. But he had a golden arm. Signed by the Los Angeles Angels in 2000, he eventually was put on waivers four years later.

Third closer in '05 was the charm

The Sox ignored some caution lights in Jenks’ background to pay the \$20,000 waiver fee to obtain him in the winter of 2004-05. By mid-season '05 he was the Sox’s third closer of the season, succeeding Shingo Takatsu and Dustin Hermanson. With stories



Bobby Jenks had an absolutely miserable time on and off the field in the employ of the Red Sox. Photo credit: [Keith Allison](#).

that his fastball touched 100 mph on radar guns, Jenks became a sensation with 50 strikeouts in 39 1/3 innings. Jenks pitched in all four games of the World Series against the Astros. He recorded four saves in the six postseason games overall in which he pitched.

The first controversy with the Sox was management's aggravation over his weight. Jenks conservatively was listed at 275 pounds on his 6-foot-4 frame. In spite of the extra weight, he recorded 173 saves through 2010. Jenks gained even more fame for tying Jim Barr's 1972 record of 41 consecutive batters retired in 2007. In contrast with starter Barr doing it over two games, closer Jenks was perfect for 14 appearances spread over 27 days. Amazingly, teammate Mark Buehrle broke his record with 45 in a row, including his perfect game, in 2009.

By 2010, the pain had mounted. Jenks abused pain medication, gulping the pills. The Sox finally cut the cord, non-tendering him a contract after the 2010 season. He signed a two-year, \$12 million deal with Red Sox GM Theo Epstein.

His health woes worsened in Boston, as he appeared in just 19 games with an ERA of 6.32. On Sept. 14, 2011, Jenks was diagnosed with a pulmonary embolism, a sometimes-fatal blood clot in the lungs. Three months later, he finally had his first back surgery.

Dr. Kirkham Wood, head of Massachusetts General Hospital's orthopedic bone unit, remove the two bone spurs as planned from his spine. Wood began to remove still another spur, but did not complete the removal. The remnant of the spur ended up cutting holes in Jenks' back. Spinal fluid leaked out. An infection began. Jenks had to undergo emergency surgery and was bedridden for seven weeks. He has not pitched since.

However, he sees a turnaround after the second surgery.

"I'm not in baseball shape now," Jenks said. "But, I'm in much better shape than I was just by getting healthy again. I couldn't do anything. It was hard to say at the time because I was trying to stay on the field. I was trying to do anything and everything I could to do my job. By being healthy and not having any pain to deal with has made a tremendous impact on my life, not just the game."

Jenks is more measured in his actions now. He was very sick just a couple of years ago. Now he'll take all the time necessary to heal.

"Just do the physical therapy, not rush it," he said. "After my first surgery, I tried to do things too quickly. I had a major mistake. Do it right. When I am healthy, see what happens. With the fusion, it's a tricky thing. It all depends on how your body heals and your physical therapy goes. It could be six months to a year. So there's no time limit. It's when you're ready, your body will let you know."

Until then, he'll always have a home visiting old friends around the Sox.

"Tremendous," he said of seeing the old gang. "Coming back and seeing all those familiar faces. I spent so many years here. Everyone here is a family. It's the same feeling you had when you left. It feels like yesterday."

But in his heart, Jenks still wants a baseball tomorrow.