

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Full speed ahead for Tommy John surgery alum

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The ability to throw 100 mph or even a hair faster is a special gift from higher sources. It's almost singular with just a couple of handfuls of pitchers in the entire world blessed with lightning-charged arms.

Maybe humans aren't really qualified to handle such power. Sometimes the stresses of torque and violent arm action simply break down the elaborate linkage of muscles and sinew in elbows and shoulders. In 2014, it was Nate Jones' turn to yield to this backfire of energy.

Now completely recovered from Tommy John surgery, a procedure after 42 years seemingly perfected, White Sox right-hander Jones can concentrate in spring training laying a claim to closer David Robertson's No. 1 setup man. He'd pick up where he left off as buddy Addison Reed's setup guy.

But in this bullpen-dominated 21st century where the four-headed Royals bullpen locks down games starting in the sixth inning, Jones will handle closer-style responsibilities without the reward of saves in the seventh and eighth.

"I believe that every role in the bullpen is important [even the fourth and fifth innings]," Jones said. "I have no problem throwing the seventh and eighth inning, that's my role."

And if Robertson somehow moves on before his contract's expiration in 2018, the re-constructed Jones is there to take over.

A future closer's role for Jones was predicted from the moment he broke in with an 8-0 record and 2.39 ERA setting up Reed in 2012. Their portion of the Sox clubhouse was Fastball Row. Chris Sale lockered there, too. If a visitor wanted a description of how effortless a mechanically-sound pitch between 95 and 100 mph felt to its thrower, this was the place to be.



At the recent Pitch and Hit Club Banquet, Nate Jones could talk about season goals rather than a schedule of rehabbing from Tommy John surgery.

These pitchers' power helped the Sox hold onto first place until the closing weeks of the 2012 season. It hasn't been as good since. Sale went on to cement his dominance as the AL's top lefty. But Reed was traded and Jones got hurt.

How the departees handled change would go vern their futures. Reed found himself on a World Series team with the Mets. Jones had to bide his time, first after minor back surgery in May 2014, then the Tommy John procedure two months later, when top orthopedic surgeon James Andrews transplanted a no-mileage ligament in his right elbow. He was fortunate to still have a contract with a Sox medical staff whose track record was either keeping pitchers healthy or successfully rehabbing the injured.

'Put your head down' to rehab

"There is doubt, but you can't pay attention to it," the affable 6-foot-5 Kentuckian said. "You just have to put your nose down, put your head down and get after it. There's a lot of work involved in the rehab that a lot of people don't see. They see the end result when you're on the mound. That's the mentality going into it. You know it's going to be a lot of work.

"I knew the work I was putting in was all going to eventually pay off. I was going to be back. The medical staff that surrounded me during this whole process, they're one of the best. [Trainers] Herm Schneider and Brian Ball, they're there for a reason."

Jones did not need affirmation of his comeback when he recorded his first 100 mph pitch in his 19-inning late-season return in 2015. He was unaware when the scoreboard pitch speed meter first registered three digits. At the end of the season, he must've been playing a good enough game of hardball. He had 27 strikeouts and just six walks with a WHIP under 1.00.

"The first person I came to [after his return] was Herm. I gave him a big hug. I was done [with rehab]. It's awesome. Come back and see the results. I want to pitch back-to-back days, three of five, four of six. Be one of the guys again."

The comeback was not a total breeze, though. Sox pitching coach Don Cooper would spot anything off-kilter for tune-ups.

"We did clean up my mechanics a bit, to make sure I had all my energy going toward home plate instead of falling off toward first or stepping toward third," Jones said. "It wasn't major. A little thing we concentrated on [through a series of bullpen sessions]."

Jones is part of a new breed of hard throwers. The slider-sinker practitioners are an endangered breed. But the more baseball science knows about proper mechanics, the more candidates for Tommy John surgery seem to line up at the orthopedists' offices. It's a strange dichotomy.

The gain still outweighs the potential pain. There's nothing like lighting up the meter to 100. And there's nothing like talking to one of the lucky – and healthy – ones about such special talents.



Nate Jones set high expectations with an 8-0 record as a rookie in 2012.