

He Cost em the Game but Chipper Won Big!

When the Atlanta Braves took the field for their final regular season home game, eight players thought wise enough to remain in the dugout. The Atlanta crowd then paid tribute to the player standing solo at third base. Ironically, twenty two years prior, the Braves didn't even want Chipper Jones on the day they made him the first overall pick in 1990. They wanted Todd Van Poppel who made it clear that he would not play for the Braves.

The Braves did the next best thing and settled for Larry Wayne Jones whose father called him 'a chip off the old block.' Who could have known that they were getting a Hall of Famer? He was the 1999 MVP and the 2000 Silver Slugger Award. He won a World Series championship in 3 appearances. He also finished his career as the only switch hitter with a batting average over .300 and 400 plus homeruns.

As the Atlanta faithful cheered and honored honor him, a daunting question haunted them in the back of their minds- how will it end?

By now that question has been answered. The Braves and Cardinals first ever National League Wild Card game will forever be known as the 'Infield' or should I say 'Outfield Fly' game? That controversial call deprived the Braves of a bases-loaded 1 out situation in a one game playoff at a time when they were trailing 6-3.

Chipper had not played well. Depending on whose score card you agree with, he was 0 for 5 at the plate, but even worse was his throwing error on a routine double play ball that opened the door for the Cardinals and led to three unearned runs in the inning. In the locker room after, a media frenzy took place.

The game had been delayed for 15 minutes after many among the 50,000 in attendance littered the field with bottles, cans, and debris in protest of the call. The box score took a backseat to the chatter and attention given to such a unique call. Who made it? Was it too late? Was the ball hit too deep? Was the shortstop camped? Nearly all the talk was about was about the call, the subsequent delay, how the umpires stripped the Braves of their best chance to come back, and ultimately cost them the game. All except for one player, who instead spoke openly about why the Braves were trailing in the first place.

"There are a lot of guys in there trying to lay blame, and I just kind of kept my mouth shut because ultimately I feel I'm the one to blame," said Jones. "That play should have been a tailor made double play, and they ended up scoring three runs and gaining momentum."

His career was now over. His performance was among his worst. He had a built-in and ready-made excuse but he refused to use it. Instead, he took responsibility for his own play, his own failure!

Skip Bertman, the legendary coach at LSU often spoke about TOB which stood for Transfer of Blame. Transfer of blame wasn't allowed in Bertman's program. His players were accountable for everything that they were and everything that they were not.

"Well, ultimately I think that when we look back on this loss, we need to look at ourselves in the mirror," added Jones again refusing to blame the umpires

He spoke briefly that if he had it to do over again he may have taken a split second longer to get a 4 seam grip on the ball, as opposed to the 2 seam grip that he found as he hurried his throw.

"Ultimately, three errors cost us the ballgame, mine probably being the biggest. I'm not willing to sit here and say that that call cost us the ballgame."

Jones could have taken the easy way out. He could have hid behind the distraction of the call. Most people would understand. Given the volatility surrounding the call most observers had long forgotten his error, but he didn't.

There was irony on the day the Braves first acquired Chipper Jones. There was irony in his final game too when you consider that such a great player had played so poorly. In fact, he played like a loser but Jones had never won bigger. While the city of Atlanta pointed a collective finger at the umpires, he stood in front of the microphones and cameras and made himself accountable.

As I watched the Braves fans heave debris onto the field and witnessed the graceful way that Chipper chose to end his career in defeat, it reminded me of a line I once read in F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby.

"They're a rotten crowd Chipper. You're worth the whole bunch put together!"

