



2007

Senators Baseball

Spring Update



Jon Papelbon was a member of the 2000 Senators

Papelbon hoping to close on big dreams

Right-hander envisions himself in the same category as Rivera

By Ian Browne / MLB.com

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- As much as Jonathan Papelbon would love to claim he is parachuting in to help save the 2007 Red Sox by going back to closer, the ambitious righty had a much bigger thought that led to the sudden role reversal.

The way Papelbon sees it, he might just be able to emerge into one of the best closers of all-time, if not *the* best.

Right now, he all but bows to Mariano Rivera. One day, Papelbon envisions himself being in the same club.

"This is something that I've decided that I want to do for the rest of my career and chase records, and, hopefully, make the Hall of Fame and do [some] special things in the game that maybe no other closer has ever done before," Papelbon said.

Upon initial examination, it sounds as if the 26-year-old Papelbon is asking a lot of himself. But then you go back and break down exactly what he did in 2006, and perhaps Papelbon is on to something. Papelbon's 0.92 ERA was the eighth lowest in Major League history among pitchers with at least 50 innings. It was the best ERA put forth by a closer since eventual Hall of Famer Dennis Eckersley's Cy Young and MVP season of 1992.

Papelbon held opponents to a .167 batting average, second lowest in the Majors in 2006 and tied for the best in Red Sox history.

Yankees manager Joe Torre is smart enough to know that Papelbon's return to the closer's role will play a significant role in the American League East race. "For a young kid, he came in there and took an opportunity and certainly ran with it," Torre said. "He had great presence out there. He was a little intimidating at times. It didn't look like he was feeling his way out there. He certainly looked comfortable." And as tough as it might have been, Papelbon tried to get comfortable around Rivera when the two shared a locker room at last summer's All-Star Game in Pittsburgh. "Talking to Rivera is always a good thing. For me, he knows what it's like. He knows how tough of a grind it is," Papelbon said. "He's not going to give me everything he knows -- I know that. But he's set the standard. He set the standard for what it is to be a closer these days." So much so that Papelbon speaks about the man in almost mythical terms. "He's kind of the man that, to everybody who is a closer now, he's like the 'Godfather,'" Papelbon said. "He understands that we're going to be going after him. I think what he's done for the role of a closer and for the game of baseball has been a big thing. Like I said man, he's like the 'Godfather.'"

While Rivera cuts opponents apart with that one pitch -- the cutter -- Papelbon keeps a simplified approach himself, breaking out his explosive fastball and nasty splitter. What about the curveball that Papelbon had been working on this spring to help his transition to the starting rotation? "I probably won't use the curve. I'll put the curveball in the back pocket until beer league softball," Papelbon quipped. It is sometimes confusing to remember what Papelbon was groomed as in the first place. Remember, he was a closer at Mississippi State after making the transition from position player in his sophomore year.

But then the Red Sox drafted Papelbon as a starter in 2003, and that's what he did for the better part of the next three seasons. Then it was back to closing last year, and, albeit temporarily, back to starting this spring.

But it was during that stint back in the rotation that Papelbon truly learned that he was a closer at heart. "I learned the game of baseball -- how to pitch -- as a closer," Papelbon said. "It's almost like I'm going back to my roots of how I really learned the game."

Just observe Papelbon for any length of time and his personality is that of a closer. While starters are typically more cerebral in nature, Papelbon is more about the adrenaline rush. He has that quirky personality of a closer, as evidenced by last year's Mohawk. Perhaps that roar among the Fenway faithful every time he charged out of the bullpen gate last summer was so intoxicating that Papelbon simply didn't want to give it up. Not that the Red Sox had any complaints.

"This kid's too special," Red Sox manager Terry Francona said. "You hear him come through that gate at Fenway and it's a good feeling."

And a bad one for the opposition.

"As good of a starter as he can be, I think him closing is going to help them," Yankees center fielder Johnny Damon said. "He's a good kid and he'll do whatever it takes for his team."

And also, seemingly, whatever it takes to be the best of the best