

Affable Odom takes 'bat story' in light

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With the Broncos desperately in search for starting pitching help, they were willing to do whatever it took to acquire the necessary arm.

To their surprise, all they had to give up were bats. Ten maple wood bats in exchange for 26-year-old starting righthander John Odom.

“At first, I thought they were joking,” Broncos General Manager Jose Melendez said when told of what the Calgary Vipers desired in return. “I mean, teams sometime joke like that when it comes to trades. But then I realized they were serious and I was kind of surprised. But if it meant getting the guy we wanted, well, so be it.”

After negotiating with Calgary for two weeks, and with the Vipers turning down Laredo's offer of an undisclosed amount of cash after one of the Broncos' best hitters refused to be traded, Odom finally became a Bronco on Tuesday.

“I had driven all the way down here, thinking I was going to be traded and then I found out a player had jumped ship,” Odom said. “I was upset, and then I was sitting in Jose's office when he told me, ‘We traded you for 10 bats.’ I was like, ‘Cool, whatever. I hope it's good wood.’”

Little did Odom know how much of a story his situation would become.

On Thursday night, the trade crossed the Associated Press sports wire. On Friday morning, Melendez was called by an AP writer looking for his thoughts on the deal.

“But he didn't ask me many questions and the conversation didn't last long,” Melendez said. “I definitely didn't think he'd do a story. I thought he was just inquiring.”

An AP story regarding the peculiar trade crossed the sports wire early Friday afternoon.

Within minutes afterward, the story was posted on ESPN.com, yahoo.com and CNN.com, and later was a storyline on the 5 p.m. edition of SportsCenter, as well as a topic of interest on ESPN's Baseball Tonight.

“I can’t believe this,” Odom said of all the attention the trade was receiving. “I was talking to my friends and they’re just in disbelief. It’s a funny story, though. I don’t know if it warrants all the attention, but it’s an interesting story.”

An interesting enough story, it appears, that ESPN phoned Melendez on Friday wanting to know when it could come to Laredo and speak with the general manager and Odom for a future SportsCenter feature.

“They told me they loved stories like this,” Melendez said. “I’d never seen anything on it but they said they wanted to come out and speak to us and do a follow-up story.”

But while any publicity is good publicity, as the old’ adage goes, the Broncos are more concerned with how Odom can help mend an ailing pitching staff.

Entering Saturday’s contest against Harlingen, Laredo was in the middle of the pack in United League Baseball in ERA (6.44) and had surrendered the most home runs (16).

The Broncos are hoping Odom, who was drafted by the San Francisco Giants in the 2003 amateur draft, can help bandage some of the bleeding.

Melendez said the team hopes to activate Odom on Monday, and if all goes well, his first start will be either Friday or Saturday against Edinburg at Veterans Field.

“I like to pound the zone and go after hitters,” said Odom, who has not pitched since 2006 after missing last year due to a dislocation in his left shoulder. “I like to battle. Point blank, I’m out there to get ground balls, get outs and save my pitches. That’s my main approach.”

In 38 minor league games, 21 of which he started, Odom, who was 22 when he inked his first professional baseball deal, has compiled a 9-8 overall record with a 4.05 ERA, averaging 7.26 strikeouts per nine innings.

In 2006, his last season of action, he went 6-3 with a 3.18 ERA, striking out 51 and walking 16 in 73.2 innings pitched with Salem-Keizer of the Northwest League, an affiliate of the Giants.

Odom said his experience in the Giants system was all he could have hoped for.

“They’re a good organization,” he said. “They treat the players well and I got along great with them. It’s good baseball and I learned a lot. It’s a lot of fun.”

And what was the most important thing he learned while with the Giants?

“Stay calm all through my delivery,” Odom said. “Think through things and don’t get all antsy and hyped. I tend to get nervous but I’ve learned to stay calm and throw through the mitt.”

When asked what he knew of the Broncos, or even Laredo, Odom smiled.

“I knew nothing,” he said with a laugh. “I knew it was independent ball and that was about it. I hadn’t heard much and didn’t know how serious independent ball was. It’s good baseball, though, from what I’ve heard.

“I just want to play. I’ve been out of the game, been through injuries, and I’m just drooling and foaming at the mouth to get out there and go play. It sounds like Laredo knows baseball and understands the game well and that’s exciting for me.”

And, if nothing else, his Broncos career has gotten off to an intriguing start.

The trade story only surged on Saturday as Melendez continued to be flooded by calls. All across national news wires and radio talk shows, everybody was speaking of Odom.

“Batman survives,” Odom said, grinning. “It’s a funny story. People ask me if I’m offended. No way, I’m not taking it hard.

“The game has done so much for me that I can’t be bitter about something as odd as this.”

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