

Former Bronco's death leaves many questions

By DENNIS SILVA II
LAREDO MORNING TIMES

Published: Wednesday, March 4, 2009 2:38 AM CST

The tale of John Odom, the former minor league pitcher whom the Laredo Broncos acquired for 10 maple wood bats on May 27, came to a tragic end on Nov. 5.

It was on that date that Odom, at age 26, died in Georgia, due to an accidental overdose from heroin, methamphetamine, the stimulant benzylpiperazine and alcohol, according to a medical examiner.

Many of those associated with Odom found out about his death only recently.

"I found out from Tim O'Brien from Ripley's Believe it or Not!," Broncos General Manager Jose Melendez said. "They were putting the bats acquired for him in their museum, and I wanted to see how it was going. Tim told me it would be hard to get it done because he had died.

"I was shocked. It was unbelievable, and up until recently, no one had even known of his passing."

According to the Associated Press, details of Odom's final days are elusive, as his death was obscure.

There is no record of where he was living, no explanation of how his body wound up at a hospital, no police report and no public record of where he is buried.

Therefore, Odom's story continues to leave many searching for answers.

Troubled start

The 6-foot-2 right-hander was once considered a future prospect for the San Francisco Giants' organization, which drafted him in 2003.

But injuries plagued him throughout his stay with the Giants, and he never advanced past Class A in four years.

He lost one season due to an elbow injury and another to a dislocated left shoulder.

After San Francisco released him in 2007, the Calgary Vipers, of the independent Golden Baseball League, offered him a job in 2008, but he could not get into Canada due to a conviction for aggravated assault that occurred in 1999.

That led to the trade between Melendez and Calgary team president Peter Young.

"It was not done as a publicity stunt," Young told the Associated Press. "I talked to John several times and told him this wasn't done to embarrass him."

The odd transaction made headlines everywhere, from ESPN.com to msn.com to yahoo.com.

Odom was interviewed by the Associated Press and even did a morning sit-down for ESPN's "First Take."

Initially, it appeared he was taking all the attention in stride, as he welcomed interviews and stayed long after them to joke around with the media. He laughed about the trade, spoke of proving himself to make Calgary look sillier than it already did, and was always in smiles.

He even showed up to his ESPN session 10 minutes late, but was chatty and friendly with the television crew.

But there was always something more to Odom.

"He was very hot-and-cold, in terms of personality," Melendez said. "He would be gung-ho to do something, and then the next minute he would be disconnected. He was always changing his mind and mood.

"He was great when he got here, and then that same day he wanted to quit. He would go back and forth like that.

"I think he handled the media very well, and I never thought it would be a negative. He had a lot of problems before he came here."

Said then-teammate, and fellow pitcher, Andy Schon, "John was pretty energetic, very upbeat. He had a great personality, but he also was kind of a loner. He liked to be by himself, but he was very much a people person."

Manager Dan Shwam said he could see the signs of potential trouble from the start.

"My time with him was very awkward," Shwam said. "I had little understanding of him. Now I've found out he was more troubled than I ever imagined.

"He had issues with booze, drugs, et cetera, and I think eventually that lifestyle beckoned him back."

Laredo heat

More than 2,000 fans showed up to see Odom's first start as a Bronco, at home on May 31 against Edinburg.

Odom pitched just two innings - he was on a pitch count due to a slow rehab from the dislocated shoulder - and allowed one run on two hits for a no-decision.

It was his second start, however, that many Bronco officials felt would ultimately be his downfall.

On June 5 in Amarillo, Odom was introduced by the "Batman" theme song, and then proceeded to surrender eight runs in 3 1/3 innings.

The large crowd taunted him to no end.

"The chants, the catcalls, they were terrible," Shwam said. "He was falling apart right in front of our

eyes."

His third, and ultimately final, start for the Broncos on June 10 at San Angelo went well, but apparently not well enough.

"I know all the attention and bat stuff was wearing on him," Schon said. "It eventually contributed to him just leaving the team. People would yell stuff all the time.

"It turned into a gimmick, and that was an insult to John."

It was on the bus trip back home from the San Angelo game that Odom told Shwam he needed to go back home to Georgia, saying that his dad was sick and he felt he needed to be by his side.

"The whole deal with the media, and him not playing well and all the attention that followed ... I think he crumbled," Shwam said. "He had some problems, and he was a kid you had to watch all the time. In college, he always had unpaid parking tickets, was always in trouble for disorderly conduct. He had been through rehab a few times.

"With us, he tried to fit in but just always seemed uncomfortable. There always seemed like something was wrong."

Great potential

Still, even though Odom acquired a mediocre 0-1 record and 6.01 ERA as a Bronco, striking out six and walking 10 in 10.1 innings, Shwam saw vast potential in him.

Odom owned a sharp curveball, good changeup and a 90-mph fastball.

"He absolutely had great stuff," said Shwam, who has managed in minor league baseball for 21 years. "He had the body and arm to play in, at least, Double-A, if not Triple-A. I don't know if he would have been a major leaguer, but he would have had as good a shot as anyone.

"In that respect, he could have been a great player. But he never gave himself a chance."

Odom's raw baseball talent was enough for Shwam to call him twice over the offseason to see if he would be interested in playing for him again.

Shwam felt Odom needed to get away from all the limelight and just focus on baseball. He said he would have made it clear that there would be no mention of the trade at all, and that Odom would be treated like any other baseball player.

He had tried to implement the same practice in Laredo, but fans and the hovering eye of the media never enabled Odom to be just "another baseball player."

Shwam called Odom in October and December - getting Odom's voicemail each time - and was going to give him another call soon before learning of his death.

"He had such great talent, and I felt if he gave it another shot, he could take his time and we could get him back in the groove of things," Shwam said. "I think if he fell completely away from the 'bat man' story, he would be fine. He should've had the chance to see where his baseball talent could take

him, instead of some trade.

"That trade hurt him a lot more than it helped."

Melendez said he was not shocked at hearing of Odom's death, given the pitcher's past and makeup.

"Even when he was here, he always wanted to go back home, and even contemplated retiring," Melendez said. "I knew he had problems but I didn't see anything as a possible distraction. I didn't know the full extent of his past and just how troubled he was. When he left the team, he told us his dad was sick and that's why he wanted to leave. But he never went back home to Georgia. He went back to Arizona (the site of Giants training camp).

"I heard from him in August and he told me he was getting back in shape and that he would keep in touch. It seemed like things were getting better.

"After that, though, I never heard back from him."

(The Associated Press contributed to this report).