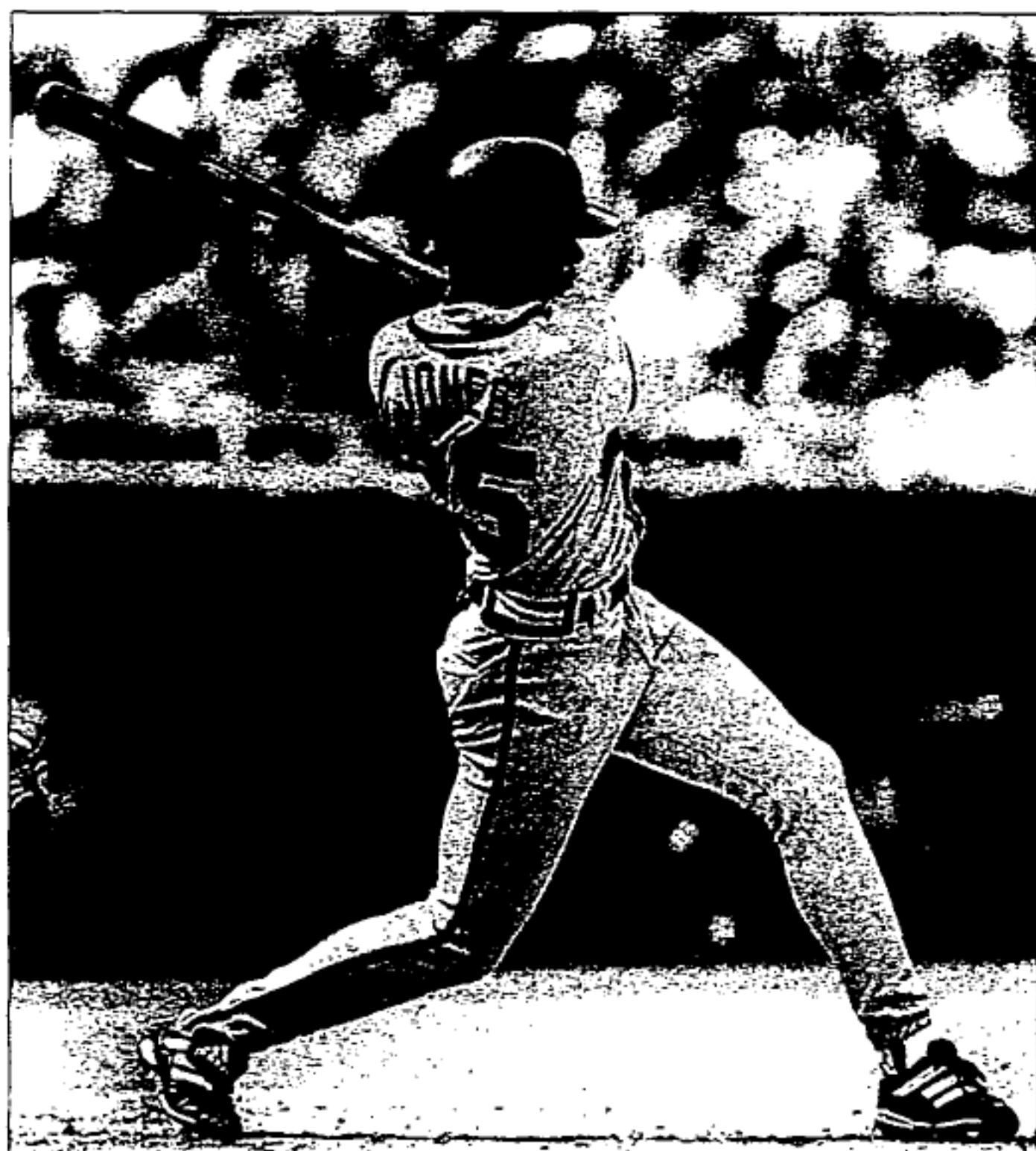


# Nothing minor about Jones' talent



Dave KINDRED



Big-league bat speed: After hitting 34 home runs in stops at Classes A, AA and AAA this season, Jones needed only eight at-bats to hit his first Braves home run.

Andruw Jones, the next great one, hears Greg Maddux yapping. Only pitching is more fun for Maddux than watching a baseball game and yapping. So, on his days off, he takes a front-row seat in the Braves' dugout. From there he says to Andruw Jones, "Let's go, Andy. Hit one out, Andy."

Because such chatter fills dugouts everywhere, Jones has heard those words before. But never has he heard them from a man who'll be in the Hall of Fame. Nor has he heard them in the major leagues, for Andruw Jones is 19, a kid whose inevitable arrival as a star may happen very soon.

His itinerary and numbers this season suggest as much. In his third year as a pro, he played 66 games in Class A, hitting .313 with 17 home runs. Then came 38 games in Class AA: .369, 12 homers. And a dozen games in Class AAA: .378, five homers. Adding it up, it comes to .339 with 34 home runs. He stole 30 bases and is a sensational outfielder who not only throws well but to all the right places.

He also has the glowing good looks, happy smile and lean, lithe, powerful body of a young Willie Mays.

From Durham to Greenville to Richmond to Atlanta—all in the four months following his 19th birthday—and suddenly the kid with a bat in his hands hears Greg Maddux telling him to hit one out. And he hears John Smoltz as well.

Smoltz is the righthander working on his 20th victory. As Andruw Jones picks up his bat, it's 1-1 in the fifth inning last Friday and he hears Smoltz shouting, "Hit one out, Andy, it's \$500."

Well. What's a kid to do?

What's a kid to do after a triple off the right-center field wall in the first inning of his first game before the hometown folks? What's a kid to do in the eighth at-bat of his major league career?

If you're Andruw Jones, you do what your elders say. You hit a home run. You hit one out even if the pitcher is a veteran having the best year of his life. Pirates ace Denny Neagle throws a good pitch, a changeup away, a piece of deception that has you off-stride and reaching.

"I try to stay back and keep my shoulder in," Jones says, meaning the kid knows what some old hitters never learn. He knows that being off-stride isn't the same as being defeated. He stays in balance and keeps the bat back. He stays at the plate rather than falling away. With that solid base, with the strength of a kid built to play the game, Andruw Jones takes a good pitcher's good pitch over the left field fence.

"I was just trying to put the ball in play," Jones says, his voice little more than a whisper. Then comes a smile born of the wonder of it all. "And it went out."

His voice suggests a story as astonishing as his talents. Jones

speaks softly and with a musical lilt, the sounds of the Caribbean. English is his third language, after Papiamentu (an English/Spanish/Dutch blend) and Spanish.

Thirty-eight miles long, two miles wide in some places and eight at the most, Curacao is an island of 170,000 people just above the northwest shoulder of Venezuela. Some time ago, Captain Bligh took the Bounty there. Amerigo Vespucci had stopped by, as had merchants, pirates and other rogues. Then, late in the 20th century, came the Braves.

Anywhere there's a baseball, the Braves have a scout. Their man in Curacao is Giovanni Viceisza. Four times he invited Andruw Jones to tryout camps in the island's capital, Willemstad. Only the fourth time did Jones go. He was 15. His father, Henry, went with him.

"We ran 60 yards for the scouts," Jones remembers. "My time was 6.6 seconds. My father ran, too. He did 7.0 seconds," which is flying for a man 46, an outfielder a generation ago. "My father might have been a professional player. But in those years, no scouts came to Curacao."

From the Caribbean and its coastal countries—from the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Panama and Puerto Rico—major league baseball has signed

hundreds of players, four now in the Hall of Fame: Juan Marichal, Luis Aparicio, Rod Carew and Roberto Clemente.

For the \$12 million the Braves invest annually in their farm system, they have earned phenomenal dividends. The system has produced Tom Glavine, Steve Avery, Ryan Klesko, Chipper Jones and Javier Lopez. Now comes the kid from Curacao, Andruw Jones, whose gifts are so obvious that Atlanta's supervisor of scouts, Paul Snyder, tells this story of first seeing Jones:

"He hit a ball to right-center. He came around first at full speed, saw the outfielder come up with the ball and just hit the brakes. He skidded standing up. The only other time in my life I had seen something like that was in 1960 in Philadelphia at Shibe Park." That player was Roberto Clemente.

Amazing, all this. Perhaps the greatest amazement is that Jones has been promoted to the big leagues by the defending world champions because they believe he can help them win again. "This is rarefied air he has moved in," Braves general manager John Schuerholz says. "But Andruw is a remarkable talent. He is un-intimidated by his place on the baseball field."

After his home run on the night when Greg Maddux and John Smoltz asked him to hit one, Andruw Jones came to the dugout's top step and lifted his cap to a standing ovation by people who knew what they'd seen. They'd seen the future.

"I'm really happy," Jones says, "that they clap like that. I have never played in front of so much people."

He laughs when someone asks if he had collected the \$500 from Smoltz. "I think he was just joking."

Not at all, Smoltz says. "He'll see," the millionaire says of the kid making minimum wage. "He'll be happy tomorrow."

Dave Kindred is a contributing writer for THE SPORTING NEWS.

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—Braves G.M. John Schuerholz

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