

Big Unit can't say how old is too old

by Chris Jenkins

TUCSON, Ariz. - The clubhouse is empty, save for the most accomplished player in Arizona Diamondbacks history, not to mention the tallest. Just sitting still on a stool, Randy Johnson occasionally punctuates his sentences with a grimace, followed by a gentle twist at the waist that's designed to chase away the pain near the base of his spine.

All the other Diamondbacks are across the street in the grass, doing preworkout stretches that seem fairly unnecessary, given the fact that so many of them are still colts in their early 20s. One of the best of them is Justin Upton, born in 1987, one year before Johnson's own rookie year in the major leagues.

"When the guys are in here, I look around and see teammates so young I'm old enough to be some of these kids' dad," Johnson said. "I mean, I don't feel like I'm 44 years old. My arm doesn't feel like a 44-year-old's arm is supposed to feel, especially after 20 years and 3,000-plus (approaching 4,000, actually) innings as a power pitcher.

"Funny thing is, all I ever heard about was my age, my age, my age. Back when I was in New York (2005-06) and when I first came back here (in 2007), the question about me used to be whether I was too old to pitch. Now nobody wonders about my age anymore. Everything's all about my back."

A natural wonder. To hear some, Johnson's back could be the difference between the Diamondbacks' NL West Division championship of last year and the National League pennant, which last year went to the Colorado Rockies in a most improbable matchup with Arizona.

Much was amazing about the Diamondbacks' run to 90 wins and the NL Championship Series, most notably the fact that Arizona was outscored by opponents on the season and ranked way down near the bottom in most offensive categories. But it was downright discombobulating to think that Arizona's stunning success was achieved largely without Johnson, a five-time Cy Young Award winner who helped deliver the World Series title of 2001 to the Valley of the Sun.

Arizona may have missed Johnson's presence in the rotation after the August surgery to re-repair a herniated disk - he was limited to just 10 starts - but the Snakes somehow didn't miss a beat. Relegated to the unfamiliar role of clubhouse counselor and provider of moral support, Johnson was the one who felt he was missing something as the Diamondbacks staved off the Rockies and Padres for the division title, then swept the Chicago Cubs in the division series.

"I was happy that the team did so well, but personally, it was very, frustrating," says Johnson. "For one thing,

to put all the time and effort into coming back (from surgery in October '06), then have it happen again was difficult. And then to not be able to help out in what was going on, that was really hard. I was still coming to the ballpark, dressing out, watching and talking up the guys.

"What they were doing was unbelievable. The way they were winning was unbelievable. I couldn't have been prouder of them, especially since they were so young. It just made me feel like I could've been helping, but I couldn't.

"We did something that wasn't supposed to happen. Maybe this year we can make it happen because it's supposed to happen. I know one thing. I wouldn't be here today if I didn't think I could still pitch. I may not throw as hard as I did before, but if I'm healthy, I can pitch. And I can help."

Therein, indeed, is a notion that's keeping people from simply dismissing the Diamondbacks as flukes who cannot repeat as division champions. With the offseason trade with the A's for right-hander Dan Haren, the American League starter in last year's All-Star Game, the Diamondbacks might already have the best rotation in the best pitching division in baseball.

"If" remains one of the biggest two-letter words in the language, but if Johnson can keep his disk in check, and if he can perform the way he did those few games last May and June, even the Padres' league-leading rotation could be usurped by Arizona.

"The big question is, how much can we get out of Randy?" said Josh Byrnes, the Diamondbacks' young general manager. "When he was feeling good last year, I didn't see a lot of difference from the Randy Johnson who won all those Cy Youngs. Over 60 at-bats, he had three walks, 50 strikeouts. Fastball in the 90s. Disappearing slider. Randy Johnson."

Johnson won four straight decisions, including victories over each of the eventual World Series participants, shutting out Colorado and striking out nine Boston Red Sox in a six-inning stint on June 10. The next time out, though, Johnson was pummeled by the Los Angeles Dodgers and limping as he left the mound, and he didn't pitch to another batter until a few mornings ago.

"My optimism now comes from those games where I pitched well," said Johnson. "That told me I can still be successful at what I do. If my body allows it, I have the ability to validate that I can still pitch."

Never one to baby his scar-free left arm and shoulder, Johnson now must be overly cautious with his delivery, especially when it comes to his landing foot. For all the benefits he enjoyed from being 6-feet-10 and the intimidating ability to make it seem as if he's releasing the ball directly into the batter's ear, it also requires

a different sort of leverage and torque, far more demanding on his back.

So while the rest of the Diamondbacks are out on the practice fields or playing in Cactus League games, Johnson's on his own. He said he began last season "walking on eggshells" - obvious in a first-start loss of 10-5 to the Padres - and he's being even more cautious this spring in Tucson. He didn't face live hitting until Feb. 28, throwing 53 pitches, no doubt with everyone's focus trained on his every movement and facial expression.

He followed that up with a pitching session Saturday, and a 36-pitch outing Tuesday with his full repertoire of pitches that manager Bob Melvin described to the media as "free and easy."

"Everything feels good right now," said Johnson last week. "I know there are a lot of people who don't expect much of me anymore. We've got three pretty good pitchers in Brandon Webb, Dan Haren and Doug Davis. Micah Owings is a young starter who's pitched well and is learning. Put me in there with them and things could get exciting.

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