

Welcome back, Derrek Lee

by Mike Nadel

MILWAUKEE - I'm not a Cubs fan, I simply like good baseball. And what all of us saw from the Derrek Lee-less losers last season wasn't even good baseball's third cousin twice removed.

So, yes, for the sake of disaster-avoidance in Cubbieland, it's nice to see big No. 25 back at first base.

I mean, how 'bout that difference-making double play in Saturday's 6-3 victory over the Milwaukee Brewers?

Fourth inning. Cubs up 2-1. J.J. Hardy on first base. Nobody out. Carlos Zambrano starting to struggle on the mound. Prince Fielder pulls a shot destined for the right-field corner. But wait! Lee dives to his left, snags the ball an inch off the ground, scrambles to touch his glove on first base and, while still on his knees, throws a strike to shortstop Cesar Izturis for the tag on Hardy.

The fact that the next two Milwaukee batters reached base (via a walk and a hit) underscored how precious D-Lee's gem was. The Brewers could have had a huge inning, one Zambrano might not have survived. Instead, the Cubs escaped with the lead and Zambrano went on to pitch seven strong innings.

"It was one of those plays in a game that takes the life out of (the opponent)," second baseman Mark DeRosa said. "That's why he's a Gold Glove-caliber player. I don't want to say you expect it, but when he does it, you're not surprised."

I wasn't surprised, just reminded. The Cubs wouldn't have won the World Series had Lee stayed healthy last season, but I'm guessing they would have avoided the distinction of being the only sixth-place team in the majors. The broken wrist that robbed him of 112 games also robbed the Cubs of their best player, their quiet leader and their hope.

"When I see what he did today, it reminds me how much we missed him last year," Zambrano said. "When you're missing your leader, it's tough. He's healthy again now. He's making plays. He's hitting well. I feel happy for him. And I feel happy for us."

Not content merely to guarantee a championship for his team and the Cy Young for himself, as he did during spring training, Cra-Z on Saturday predicted a trophy double play for his first baseman.

"He'll win another Gold Glove, of course," Zambrano said. "And I think he's got a great shot at the National League MVP, too."

Five games into a season, such talk sounds silly. Lee is MVP good, though, and he's off to the kind of fast start (.429) that in 2005 propelled him to the NL batting title.

His sensational fielding play against the Brewers overshadowed his contributions at the plate: a first-inning double into the right-center field gap, an infield single to start a three-run sixth-inning rally and an RBI single up the middle in the seventh.

"There's not one aspect of his game that lags behind," Michael Barrett said. "He makes diving plays. He picks throws out of the dirt. He saves runs. He hits the cover off the ball. He can run. He steals bases. He's smart. He's that rare player who makes everybody around him better. And he's such a class act, you can't help but root for him."

In 2006, Lee became one of the most sympathetic figures in recent Chicago sports history. Not only did he miss two-thirds of the season with his first career injury, but he also learned his 3-year-old daughter, Jada, was afflicted with a rare disease that is slowly making her blind. When he cried while talking about Jada at a September press conference, it tore my heart out.

Jada's situation has stabilized, Lee said, and his wrist feels so good it's as if he never had the injury. That obviously is tremendous news for the Cubs, who started hitting as soon as they stepped in front of their "home" fans at Wrigley Field North (a.k.a. Miller Park) on Friday. Add in the four consecutive fine performances they've received from their starting pitchers, and it's enough to make Cubbieland denizens dream of October glory.

"It's early and we have a long way to go," Lee said. "It's just a matter of playing like we played today on a consistent basis, because this is what we're capable of: getting good pitching, scoring runs and playing good defense. As long as we show up every day with that in mind, we'll see where we are at the end of the year."

Gold glove. Silver bat. And pure platinum perspective, too.

Barrett is right: You can't help but root for Derrek Lee.

Welcome back, Derrek Lee by Mike Nadel