

Padres happy to grin and Barrett

by Nick Canepa - CNS

SAN DIEGO - If Michael Barrett came to San Diego with baggage, it was clean enough to get through security. GM Kevin Towers, the Padres' chief luggage inspector, did a thorough search. He found no contraband.

Before making the Wednesday trade that brought the catcher here from the Cubs, Towers talked to everyone but Condoleezza Rice, who was unavailable. Towers is much like Chargers GM A.J. Smith. He doesn't want jerks running around his building.

But Barrett arrived with a hothead reputation, thanks to a few highly publicized - and photographed - incidents.

Not long ago, he became a "SportsCenter" staple when he got into it with Cubs starter Carlos Zambrano in the dugout at Wrigley Field, and the bout spilled over into the clubhouse. There were words a few weeks ago between Barrett and another Cubs starter, Rich Hill. Last year there was a fight with White Sox catcher A.J. Pierzynski.

So what's this loose cannon doing on the Good Ship Padres' sturdy deck? Sure, Towers wanted a right-handed bat with some pop, which Barrett has, and some athleticism behind the plate, and Barrett is a good athlete. But at what cost?

Well, he went through security without the airport being cleared.

"I talked with several players and major league scouts about Mike," Towers said. "I talked to some friends I have in the Chicago media with access. I didn't have one guy say, 'Don't touch him.' I didn't have one guy say, 'He's a bad teammate.'"

"Mike's issues have been on the field. Because he cares."

That seems the consensus, and include Barrett in the vote. A few incidents have made good visuals because they were photographed outdoors. But this isn't "Pacman" Jones.

"I love the game," Barrett said. "I love playing the game with everything I have. I play on the edge; I think it's one of my strengths, although some will argue that it's one of my weaknesses.

"I don't overly concern myself with what people think of me. I want to be judged on how I play the game. Things that have happened this year happen in a lot of places where the cameras aren't on you. I've had on-the-field incidents that wouldn't be a big deal if not for the exposure."

Still, it's possible the "incidents" hastened Barrett's exit from Chicago. The Cubs, who went fiscally berserk during the offseason, spending close to \$300 million on salaries, have played light-years from their payroll. The unwanted publicity wasn't helping.

"I don't know if that had anything to do with it," Barrett said of the trade. "I don't have a good answer for that. I feel I've put it behind me now and I have a new start here. I'm going to take full advantage of it. Coming here was a relief. It's an honor to be a part of this organization.

"Everything's pitch-to-pitch for me. When I'm catching, I'm trying to help the pitcher. When I'm hitting, my job is to contribute offensively, to help produce runs. When I get between the white lines, I'm focused."

As Towers put it: "Who are you going to get rid of, a Barrett or a Zambrano? Then, who's going to be painted the bad guy?"

"The guy who gave Mike the strongest endorsement is a friend of mine, the Cubs' GM, Jim Hendry. He told me, 'I love Mike Barrett, but a change of scenery is what he needs.' I trust Jim Hendry."

Former Toronto manager Buck Martinez, who now does TV work on Orioles games, managed Barrett for Team USA in last year's World Baseball Classic. He thinks Barrett has spunk. He likes spunk.

"Mike Barrett is an exceptional person," said Martinez. "Because he's brutally honest in an era of political correctness, sometimes he rubs people the wrong way.

"He knows how to play the game. He's a competitor. He doesn't like losing. He will tell you to your face. I love the guy. He'll give you an identity. Right or wrong, San Diego has that laid-back image. He's going to add some character."

In situations such as the one in which the Padres now find themselves, a midseason transaction could be disturbing. This is a first-place ballclub. A lot of baseball people don't like messing with chemistry, especially when the experiment can be volatile.

"I've looked at his altercations and they all came in the heat of battle," Towers said. "I don't see much risk in this at all. I certainly wanted to do my homework, but all the research I did, I couldn't come up with one bad thing on the guy."

Padres Manager Bud Black, who as a former pitcher knows catchers, tossed his endorsement on the trade.

"I think there's a bad rap," Black said. "Things that have happened to him usually go on behind closed doors. This is a good player. People I trust tell me we've got a guy who will help us win games."

Not Thursday. Barrett struck out three times, had a passed ball and let a wild pitch on a strikeout get by him that set up two Orioles runs in the eighth inning. Baltimore 6, Padres 3. One game. Bad Padres series.

No "incidents," at least.

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