

BASEBALL: Recovering focus

Former Braves minor leaguer Joe Winkelsas laments a career sabotaged before it began

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Greenville, S.C. -- When Joe Winkelsas meditates, he sees vivid visions of a forgettable past.

He can see himself coming home from another bar fight at 4 a.m. --- drunk, blood on his face. Bacon grease on the corner of his mouth from eating at a restaurant whose name he can't even remember. Hair all messed up. Drool everywhere.

He remembers how he used to wake up on those mornings and amble toward the mirror for a look at the damage. He didn't just leave the mirror and put his shirt on. He'd always clean up first before facing another day.

These visions are the gift and curse for the former Greenville Braves relief pitcher.

As career-minor leaguers go, Winkelsas has been no ordinary Joe off the field. He spent eight minor league seasons with a Braves organization that held his hand through drug rehabilitation and countless injuries when anybody else probably would have shown him the door.

"Joe showed in the past that he has value. One thing no one knows is when a player has reached his peak," said Dayton Moore, Braves director of player personnel. "As scouts and administrators we have to make decisions, but nobody can predict when a player has finished developing."

But the Braves decided on July 10 that Winkelsas had finished developing with their organization, and when he was finally released, Winkelsas cried. Not just because it ended his baseball connection with the Braves, but because it ended a relationship with a club that treated him like a son when they really had no reason to.

When Winkelsas meditates and looks back on his life, the moments are clear. He can see himself floundering in his first and only shot to pitch for Atlanta in the major leagues. It was April 10, 1999. He lasted all of one-third of an inning. He gave up four hits and left with a 54.00 major-league ERA.

But that ERA is minuscule compared to the emotional puddles he has plodded through: trying to love a mother who spent most of his teenage years in prison; trying to reconnect with his biological father after discovering at 15 he was adopted; trying to kick an addiction to marijuana that tortured his career.

"This game is nothing but fellowship," Winkelsas said. "It's nothing but change. It's a game of failure. . . . Everything you go through in life is taught in this game."

And so he can't abandon the game. Not yet. At 29, Winkelsas is a grandpa by minor league standards. Four years have passed since his lone shot in the big leagues, but he still talks of playing his best baseball one day. He still dreams of pitching in the majors even after the Braves, the organization he calls the

best in baseball, released him after his appearing in 239 minor-league games and going 22-26 with 54 saves and a 3.24 ERA in 327.2 innings. "In order for baseball to end for me, all 30 teams will have to not want to invite me back to camp," he said. "Eight years with one team is not the norm. The Braves have kept me around through drug rehab, quitting in '96 because I'd rather smoke pot than play ball. All of it -- they took me back. They're not like every organization."

So Winkelsas is not bitter. In fact, he's thankful. And still hopeful.

Talented but headstrong

Every morning, no matter how tired or bruised from the previous day, Winkelsas meditates and exercises in front of a mirror and looks both his past and present in the face. He sees the scars of his past, physical and emotional. The surgeries, the heartache, and the burdens of the dreams are never more than two feet in front of him.

Winkelsas loved two things when he entered the Braves farm system as a free agent in 1996: baseball and marijuana. But probably in the reverse order.

Philadelphia drafted him a year into his college career, but he never signed. Winkelsas continued playing for Joe Baxter at the University of South Carolina-Salkehatchie, a small junior college in the USC system.

When Baxter came to Greenville for a home series earlier this year, he hugged his former player, and they gabbed about the past, particularly when Baxter made Winkelsas dig ditches since wind sprints didn't work as a disciplinary measure. He tells Joey how he's the best pitcher he's ever coached.

"A lot of what he's had to overcome, he's now seeing the reasons of why I pushed him," Baxter said. "It's more than wins and losses. . . . He's an example of one of the best parts of this job --- impacting lives."

As a freshman at USC-S, Winkelsas threw 90-92 mph, but after surgery for bone spurs in his pitching arm, he was down to 83-86 mph. And there was the continued marijuana use.

Despite leading junior college Division II in ERA as a sophomore, Winkelsas wasn't drafted.

"The scouts probably knew that I had problems with drugs --- because they know everything," Winkelsas said. "No one would take me except for the Atlanta Braves."

A shocking discovery at 15

The prospect of not making it in baseball is tough for the 6-foot-1, 185-pound pitcher to ponder, as were many things for Winkelsas growing up in Buffalo, N.Y.

When he was 15, Mariann Winkelsas had just divorced his father, Ken, after one of her stints in prison on drug-related charges. She was on a binge. Joe hadn't heard from her in days. He went to her dresser looking for clues.

Instead, he found pictures of himself at Ken's and Mariann's wedding. Joe had uncovered a lie. His parents had told him they wed before he was born, but they had married three years after his birth. This

discovery led to an even more shocking one: The man he knew all his life as his biological father had actually adopted him. He met his biological father, Joe Privitera, through a phone call at age 16.

In the confusion, Joe Winkelsas smoked his first joint.

"It was a pretty awkward time in my life," Winkelsas said. "Drugs were a way out. I was fighting with all my friends. So all the shame and the guilt and the resentment and the anger and the bitterness and the fear --- I had to hide that in some way. So I did."

All the while, he continued to rip up the baseball diamonds that were fast becoming his only refuge.

Call-up was chance for vindication

After spring training in 1999, Winkelsas was the last player cut from the Atlanta Braves' 40-man roster. His surprise call-up in April was in some ways a small chance for vindication.

Mark Wohlers, the closer at the time, was having trouble throwing strikes. So Winkelsas was there "not to embarrass them on national television," he said.

He entered the clubhouse and spoke with Braves manager Bobby Cox.

"Joe, you're here for six days," he remembered Cox saying. "We need you for six days. You can strike out the side or give up 15 home runs, but you'll be here for six days because you gotta pitch in Double-A."

In his only game, Winkelsas remembers every pitch, every pitch count, everything that resulted in the 54.00 ERA that is on his career major-league stat line.

He retired one batter --- on a sacrifice bunt.

"I thank God every day that Chipper [Jones] took the sacrifice bunt because if I would have taken it I probably would have thrown it into the stands," Winkelsas said. "That's how [unsettled] I was on that hill."

The shot of lifetime blown, Winkelsas was sent back to the minors. Two months later, his wife, Therese, gave birth to his son, Jackson. A year later, he was in Triple-A Richmond with an out-of-control marijuana habit.

"I'd go to sleep with it," he said. "I'd wake up with it."

Near the end of that season, the Braves placed him on the disabled list and sent him to drug rehab in Atlanta. For five weeks, he shared tears and the pitfalls of his life to strangers.

"With my addiction, I was cheating my wife, I was cheating baseball, and I was cheating a chance to be a father to my son," he said. "That was the greatest experience of my life. I realized that I had a lot of tears built up in my life that I'd never shed."

Today, Winkelsas seems to be moving forward with that part of his life. His mother accepted Christ in prison and has reconciled with her son. He still has a good relationship with Ken Winkelsas and has even developed a "brother-type relationship" with Joe Privitera.

But in a modest apartment in Greenville, Winkelsas now plays a different, yet familiar, game. He teaches his son to fly in two-to-three second intervals. Tossing Jackson in the air, the boy rebounds off the bed and explodes in laughter.

At the child's insistence, his father does it again. Again he bounces off the forgiving mattress, but this time his neck and shoulder aren't so giving and he erupts in tears.

Mom comforts her son and tells Dad that he can't be so rough. He's not big enough, she says. Jackson is approaching 4 and is scared of fireworks and elevators. But not of learning to fly with his dad.

"I really hurt him this morning," Winkelsas says shaking his head.

He rubs his son's head. Jackson hugs his Dad.

They will try flying again tomorrow maybe.

And Daddy will try pitching tomorrow.

Maybe.