

Profile

John Smoltz

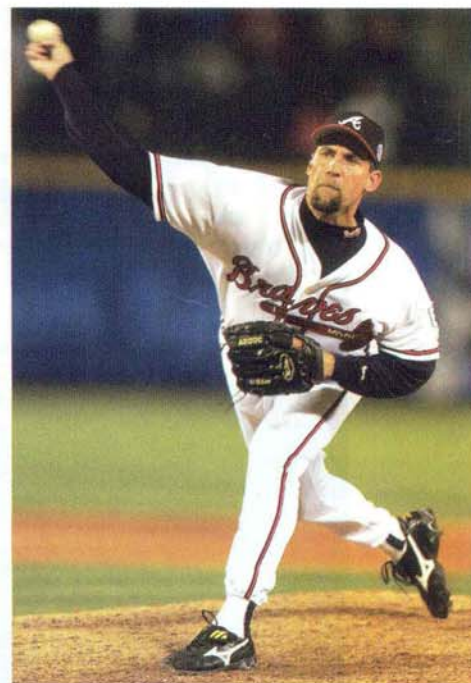
He's Got Games

John Smoltz is a Cy Young Award winner, a World Series champion and one of Major League Baseball's most clutch, steeled performers. In pressure-packed playoff situations – and his Atlanta Braves have had their share of can't-bear-to-watch teeth grinders during a string of 13 straight divisional titles – “Smoltzie” has been an impenetrable rock of confidence poised on the pitching mound. His career 14-4 postseason record, with a miserly 2.70 earned run average, attests to an unshakeable belief in his abilities when much of the sporting world is watching.

Smoltz is scheduled to move back into the Braves starting rotation in 2005 after spending three seasons as the team's closer. In that span, he was one of baseball's dominant relief pitchers. Sauntering in from the bullpen, Smoltz has racked up 154 saves, routinely slamming the door in the late innings with games on the line against Bonds, Pujols and others of the pastime's most prolific hitters.

All of which makes the resolute Smoltz's recent admission to being susceptible to “choking” – his word – even harder to gulp past the epiglottis.

BY PATRICK JONES



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Don't expect the Braves media relations crew to crank out a press release on Smoltz's startling pronouncement. Woe to batters expecting an unsure Smoltz to start grooving 3-2 pitches into their personal wheelhouse. Like always, they will be summarily punched out by Blue and slink back to the bench after weakly waving at one of his sinister sliders.

Smoltz's confession to loss of confidence had nothing to do with his uncanny ability to accurately hurl horseshoe at ungodly speeds with devilish spins. His moments of doubt came while poised over a golf shot. Smoltz was playing at the exclusive Donald Ross-designed Seminole Golf Club in North Palm Beach, Fla., during what he called his "most memorable round." He was in the middle of the fairway on No. 18 with a mere 70 yards left to the hole on his second shot. Finish with a birdie and Smoltz realized he would card a 65 and set the amateur course record.

The fictitious sports-page headline the following day would read: Smoltz Succumbs to Sand Wedge.

"I had seven birdies and an eagle in that round," says Smoltz. "I just got the feeling standing over

The missed opportunity at Seminole aside, the 37-year-old Smoltz leads a storied athletic life. He has been one of baseball's best pitchers for more than 15 years, and he molded himself into a self-taught scratch golfer despite not picking up the game until he was 19. The Michigan native was selected in the 22nd round of the 1985 draft by his hometown Detroit Tigers and shipped off to play Class A ball in Lakeland, Fla.

"I didn't realize how much time I was going to have on my hands when I went into minor-league baseball," says Smoltz. "Mostly to avoid boredom, I had to pick up something, so I learned to golf and fish. I had done neither growing up."

Smoltz, who was also an all-state basketball player in high school, says he has never shot in triple digits, even from his first time on the course.

"I shot somewhere in the 90s in my first official round, though I don't remember the exact score," he says. "I do remember my first birdie. I had no idea at the time which clubs to hit from

THE SMOLTZ FILE

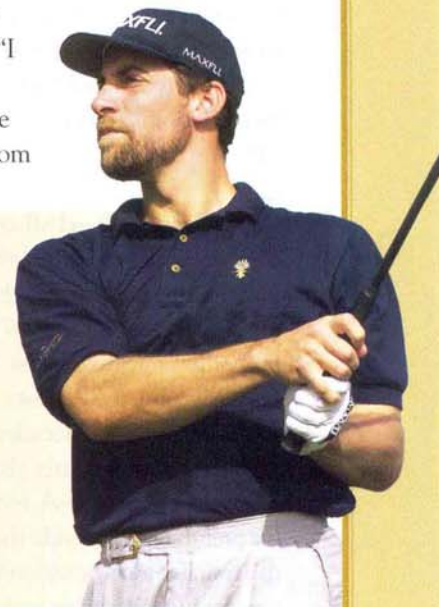
Age: 37

Handicap: 0

Home Course: Hawks Ridge, Ball Ground, Ga.

Other Atlanta Favorites: Golf Club of Georgia, Atlanta Country Club, The Capital City Club's Crabapple Course, Peachtree Golf Club

Smoltz on Smoltz: "Right now, and you're not going to believe it, because it seems like a fish story, but I've been hitting it over 300 yards just about every time. It's scary how far I am hitting it right now. It's actually got me nervous. In Las Vegas, it was stupid how far I was hitting it. I was averaging it 330 yards. I know the air is different there, but ..."



that last approach shot that, 'Oh, my gosh, I'm going to shoot 65 and set the amateur record.' Then I skulled my sand wedge over the green. I choked. I bogeyed and finished with a 67."

Smoltz's menacing goatee and intense glare toward home plate may intimidate opposing batsmen, but heartless golf balls can't be coerced into gimme range.

different yardages. I hit a 5-iron from about 160 yards. (He said he can now muscle a 7-iron 200 yards in "gorilla golf" mode.) I skulled the shot and it rolled up the fairway and went into the cup on my fourth shot on a par 5.

"I picked up the game fairly quickly and I got hooked," says Smoltz. "I just enjoy every day on the course being 'the day' that you're going to shoot

that low number. My dream day is to play 72 holes. People hear that and tell me that I am crazy. I love golf that much. I would rather take a week and get burned out playing 54, 45 or 36 a day, take a week off and then go right back at it.”

Since those introductory days to alleviate boredom, Smoltz has teed it up with some of the game’s greatest players. Tiger Woods has become one of his golfing buddies. Smoltz was once a member of a foursome at Tiger’s Isleworth home course in Orlando, Fla., that included Woods and Annika Sorenstam – both top ranked in the world at the time.

“That was obviously a fantastic day,” he says. “How many people in the world have ever played with the two No. 1 players in the same group? Other than having the top player on the European Tour playing with us, that is as good as it gets right there.”

Smoltz was able to beat Sorenstam in that round. He said she was a bit nervous because it was her first time playing with Tiger. In a subsequent pairing with a more relaxed Sorenstam, a fair-minded Smoltz admits to being “waxed” by the Swedish LPGA star.

Professional baseball arrived in Atlanta in 1966 when the city lured the Milwaukee Braves franchise to town. With the exception of two divisional pennants (1969 and 1982) and the play of individual stars like Hank Aaron, Phil Niekro and Dale Murphy, the Atlanta Braves were mostly inept in their initial two decades in town. What the team delivered in those early years were war dances by “mascot” Chief Noc-A-Homa (who emerged from his prefab tepee outside the left field fence to bless the home team’s occasional four-bagger), dainty powder blue uniforms and strings of 90- and 100-loss seasons.

According to Holy Biff Pocaroba (Braves catcher from 1975-84, .256 average, amusing name), the only summertime sizzle in downtown Hotlanta during those lean years came from onion rings frying in vats of fat at The Varsity. The city’s Boys of Summer Swoons perennially slumped to a cellar-dwelling 30 games out by early September.

Professional championship baseball stealthily arrived in Atlanta in 1987. That is the year of enlightenment when the Braves traded pitcher Doyle Alexander to the Tigers in exchange for

Smoltz. Since his arrival, the Braves have won five National League pennants and a World Series championship in 1995.

Smoltz formed the nucleus of what became one baseball’s finest pitching staffs – Tom Glavine, Steve Avery and Greg Maddux have all come and gone as well as one of its most fervent golfing foursomes

“Playing with those three guys was my dream foursome with the Braves,” says Smoltz. With 81 road games a year, and a sports celebrity’s carte blanche, Smoltz and partners have played some of the country’s finest courses. He counts Oakmont, Pine Valley, Winged Foot and Los Angeles Country Club among his favorites. These days, nassaus with teammates have been harder to come by.

“It seems that the pitchers we have been getting lately have not been golfers. It’s been tough trying to find guys to play,” he says. But not too difficult considering Smoltz says he expects to squeeze 400 holes from the Grapefruit League this season. There is more to baseball spring training in Florida than fielding fungoes.

During the regular season, Braves management puts no limitations on Smoltz’s golfing jones other than not playing on days he is scheduled to start.

Smoltz has invested much of his adult life into the two sports that have captured his heart, talent and passion. He draws from his experiences playing both. He also finds strong correlations between the two.

For instance, to steal Henny Youngman’s classic delivery, take Smoltz’s baseball swing ... please. With the exception of, say, Babe Ruth, major-league pitchers normally don’t make great hitters. With a lifetime batting average of .172, Smoltz is not an anomaly.

Smoltz says “without a doubt” that swinging his Pings is easier than connecting bat with ball. But regardless of his personal levels of proficiency, both motions, in his opinion, have marked similarities.

“I think the two swings complement each other,” says Smoltz. “There is a theory out there that some position players have ruined their baseball swings playing golf. I think that swinging a golf club and a baseball bat are the same, just at different planes. Both require a quiet lower half of the body and you have to be able to fire with all parts moving in a combined effort to maximize the blow. The only differences are in weight distribution and faster

clubhead speeds versus bathead speeds.

"I'm not one of those who believes that if you play golf that your baseball swing is going to start dipping and you will start getting into bad habits," says Smoltz. "I just don't buy into that."

What he wholeheartedly invests in is that the mental rigors that forged his toughness in baseball – going head to head with Minnesota Twins pitcher Jack Morris for 7 1/3 scoreless innings in Game 7 of the 1991 World Series – have also made him a better golfer.

"First and foremost, what I bring to the golf course from my baseball experience is knowing how to deal with pressure," he says. "With the mental game, I have a little bit of an advantage having already been battle tested with unimaginable pressures through my own sport. Pressure motivates me. It puts me in a zone that I call hyper-focus. If there is nothing on the line, then I am more apt to mentally wander," he says. "What I have learned is that I am going to fail sometimes, that it is OK to fail and then to learn from my failure. That is the greatest advice I can give to someone who has the putting yips or is struggling with a particular part of their golf game."

"Some people handle pressure better than others based on their tolerance level of being afraid to fail. You see it in baseball and golf, whether it's a pitcher leaving their best stuff in the bullpen and not being able to bring it to the mound, or a golfer being the best range player in the world and then their muscles tense up and their smooth swing disappears when they have to pull the trigger for real on the golf course."

Though the academic credentials are not on the wall, Smoltz's real-world insights could qualify him to moonlight as a sports shrink.

"In the game of golf, the demons are there every day, every time you go out," he says. "A lot of the mental things that I use in pitching, I also apply in golf. I try very hard to quickly get over a bad golf shot, just like I try to get over a bad pitch. And I will have a lot

more bad golf shots than (baseball) pitches – hopefully."

Smoltz has long been the heart of the Atlanta Braves. It is his right elbow – he has had several surgeries on it – that will likely end his glorious run. The joyous image of catcher Greg Olson leaping into Smoltz's arms when the Braves clinched the division title in 1991 will be forever etched in the city's consciousness.

Smoltz, of course, does not plan to retire to a rocking chair when the time comes. He has four children and has always been heavily involved in civic and political pursuits. He was chosen by his peers as the Major League Baseball Players Association Marvin Miller Man of the Year in 2002 and 2003. He has also received the Roberto Clemente Award for community service.

Always the competitive athlete, Smoltz, not surprisingly, harbors dreams of trying to qualify for one of the professional golf tours.

"Unless the desire changes, that is still a long-range goal," says Smoltz. "I would say there are probably more polished golfers than me, but I think that my ability to be creative and to come up with

shots, well, I'll match it with anybody. I don't have the

perfect swing, but if I fix some things with my body, I really believe that I can take golf to the next level.

One of the things that I will find out pretty quickly after I retire is if I have the ability to learn how to practice my golf game like I'll need to do. And if I do, and if I can put in that time like I have in baseball, I'm going to play on some form of tour."

There is a horde of Smoltz strikeout victims ready to wish him luck in his new endeavor – and hoping that he makes the transition from mound to course much sooner than later. ●

