

Phils should let Papelbon go

By William C. Kashatus

The Phillies' season of woes hit rock bottom Sunday afternoon. After blowing a three-run lead against the Miami Marlins, closer Jonathan Papelbon walked toward the dugout through a hailstorm of boos. When he neared the steps, the closer slowed his walk, looked into the stands, and grabbed his crotch.

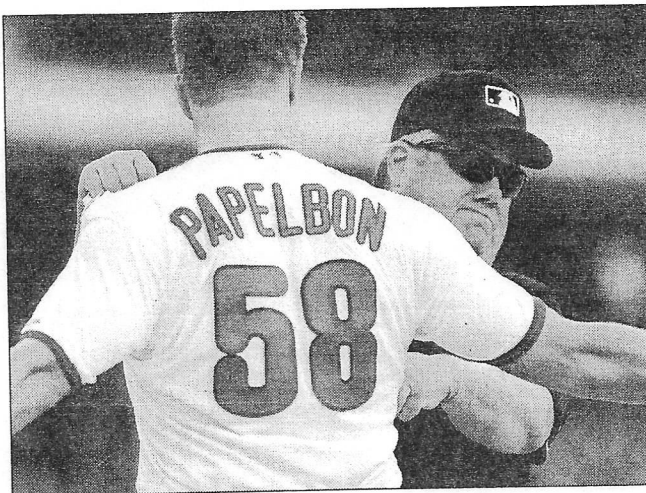
Umpire Joe West got the message, and immediately ejected Papelbon from the game for an "inappropriate gesture." Major League Baseball has suspended him for seven games.

While Papelbon denied any lewd intent, his record of boorish behavior suggests that he wanted to insult the fans. Now, the Phillies must make their own statement: Such offensive behavior will not be tolerated. And the only way to do that is to release the pitcher immediately.

Since signing a four-year, \$50 million contract in November 2011, Papelbon has slowly but surely proved to be a clubhouse cancer. Last July, as the Phillies began their decline into mediocrity, the outspoken reliever, who helped the Boston Red Sox to a world championship in 2007, told sportswriters, "I definitely didn't come here for this."

No player who came to the Phillies in the last three years had "losing" in mind. They came because they heard about the team's great chemistry, and believed that they could return a once hugely successful veteran core to the postseason. Even if disappointed with all the losing, those players didn't broadcast any negative thoughts to the media. That's called "respecting the game."

Papelbon has chosen another path. On April 17, irked by media questions about his declining velocity, he lifted his leg and flatulated during the interview. Such behavior is unbecoming of a professional athlete. It was hardly coincidental that pitching ace Cliff Lee did the same



Jonathan Papelbon argues with umpire Joe West after being ejected from the game against the Marlins Sunday.

H. Rumph Jr. / Associated Press

thing to reporters who were barraging him with questions about being traded as the July 31 trading deadline neared.

In mid-May, during a Sunday afternoon game against the New York Mets, manager Ryne Sandberg asked Papelbon to finish a game in which the Phillies had a two-run lead. The closer refused, saying he was unavailable because of soreness, but he would be able to pitch the next day. The Phillies lost that game, 5-4, in extra innings. Relievers Antonio Bastardo and Roberto Hernandez combined to blow the save in the ninth inning.

How difficult would it have been for Papelbon to throw one inning, especially after he said he was available to pitch the next day? It didn't sit well with Sandberg, who later told the media: "We need a closer who can go three games in a row and close three games. No question about that."

Papelbon's example did not go unnoticed. During the next two months, pitchers Cole Hamels, Kyle Kendrick, and Dave Buchanan openly challenged Sandberg's authority by showing displeasure for being lifted from a game. It's fine for a pitcher to disagree with a manager's decision, but he has to respect his authority. That, too, is part of respecting the game.

The ultimate insult — aimed at

the fans whose hard-earned money pays players' salaries — came Sunday against Miami.

While Papelbon has posted 37 saves this season and has an impressive 2.10 earned run average, he has also poisoned a clubhouse that was once the envy of the National League. No matter how good his onfield performance, no player should be permitted to disrespect the game, the organization, his teammates, or the fans.

I've followed the Phillies for 50 years. During that time, I've suffered through more losing seasons than winning ones. I've disagreed with some of the management's decisions, but I've always respected the way the organization handles problematic players and tries to build a team of likeable personalities who respect the game and the fans.

With the Phillies in the midst of rebuilding, and with so many impressionable young players on hand, the team can ill afford to keep Papelbon. Not only does his boorish behavior threaten to damage that process, but it also alienates whatever loyal fan base remains.

William C. Kashatus' most recent book is "Jackie and Campy: The Untold Story of Their Rocky Relationship and Breaking Baseball's Color Line."

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