

# Hamels grew as a pitcher and person in Philly

By William C. Kashatus  
Times Guest Columnist

Cole Hamels pitched the Philadelphia Phillies to a world championship in 2008 and hurled a breathtaking no-hitter last month against the Chicago Cubs in what proved to be his swan song in red pinstripes. In between, he gave the fans many thrilling memories. Now that he has been traded to the Texas Rangers, Hamels will be completing his career away from the city where he came of age, not just as a baseball player, but as a person.

I first met Hamels in early May 2006 shortly after he was promoted to Triple-A Scranton/Wilkes-Barre. As a stringer for a local newspaper, I wanted to get an interview with the highly regarded pitching prospect before he was sent up to the majors. I knew I had a short window of opportunity.

Hamels was being fast-tracked. Despite a rash of injuries, the San Diego native had already advanced from Class A, where he was ranked the organization's No. 1 pitching prospect, to Double A and now Triple A in less than three years. In just 32 minor league appearances, Hamels posted a 12-4 record, 237 strikeouts and a 1.47 earned run average. He was being touted as the organization's first homegrown ace since Hall of Famer Robin Roberts in the late 1940s.

My first impressions were not very good. Hamels was 45 minutes late for our interview, and when he finally appeared I found him to be polite but somewhat glib, and lacking substance in his responses. That shouldn't have been too surprising considering that the 22-year-old lefthander had jumped from high school to the professional ranks with no college experience. I was also wary because of his history of injuries. He did not pitch his junior year at Rancho Bernardo High School because he broke his left arm - specifically, the humerus, a career-ending injury for most pitchers. But Hamels rebounded after surgery and posted a perfect 10-0 record with a 0.39 earned run average in his senior year.

Since his fastball was clocked at 94 mph, many teams were interested in Hamels, including his hometown San Diego Padres, but his arm injury scared them away. The Phillies took a huge risk and made him a first round pick (17th overall) in the June 2002 amateur draft. In the minors, Hamels pitched only sparingly because of more injuries. He missed most of the 2004 season with elbow tendinitis, making only four starts. In 2005, he broke his pitching hand in a bar fight before the season began. He seemed like the most fragile of pitching prospects and one who might not even pitch more

than a year in the majors, if he even reached that level.

But over the next nine years, I saw Hamels grow from a highly talented but immature prospect to the Phillies' most effective lefthander since Hall of Famer Steve Carlton. Success came early when Hamels posted a 14-10 record with a 3.09 ERA in

2008 and led the Phillies to a world championship going 4-0 with a 1.80 ERA in the postseason and earning the Most Valuable Player award for both the NLCS and the World Series.

After that season, Hamels signed a three-year \$20.5 million contract and his performance declined. In 2009, he posted a 10-11 record and a 4.32 ERA for a team that was heavily favored to repeat as world champions. Although he won the second game of the playoffs that year against the Los Angeles Dodgers, Hamels openly berated Chase Utley when the second baseman botched an easy double play. While the Phillies attributed the outburst to Hamels "perfectionist approach to the game" and to being an "expectant father" - Hamels' wife Heidi gave birth to the first of their three children in October - "personal immaturity" was a more accurate explanation.

Later, after losing Game 3 of the World Series against the New York Yankees, Hamels told the sportswriters: "I can't wait for the sea-

son to end. It's been mentally draining. It's one of those things where, a year in, you just can't wait for a fresh start." He sounded more like a "quitter" than an "ace pitcher."

To ease the burden, the Phillies' front office surrounded Hamels with established veterans. Over the last seven years, Jamie Moyer, Cliff Lee, Roy Halladay all mentored the young 6'3" 190-pound lefthander. Hamels still had some unattractive moments when he complained that his win-loss record would be better if the Phillies gave him "more offensive support." But he also matured, both personally and professionally.

Hamels, a three-time All Star, learned to become more comfortable with the stardom foisted upon him by the media and the fans. He pitched effectively in spite of the Phillies' declining offensive support. He learned to temper his remarks to the media. And he also gave back to the community establishing a foundation to fund childhood educational programs in Philadelphia's inner-city.

It was inevitable that he would be traded. The Phillies, who are in a rebuilding process, are at least two years away from contending. Having signed a six-year, \$144 million contract in 2012, Hamels was a luxury the team could not afford. Hamels, at age 31, is in his prime and should not

be held hostage by a losing team when he can certainly help a contender capture a world championship.

Ultimately, Cole Hamels leaves Philadelphia with more than just 114 wins, 1,844 strikeouts, and a 3.30 earned run average. He leaves as one of the best lefthanded starting pitchers in baseball, a husband and father at peace with himself, and, in the minds of many fans, a Phillie forever.

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