

COMMENTARY

Rollins vs. Sandberg

By William C. Kashatus

Make no mistake: The Phillies are in rebuilding mode. That's why youngsters Freddy Galvis, Domonic Brown, Darin Ruf, and Cody Asche are already on the roster, and prospects Maikel Franco, Cesar Hernandez, and Jesse Biddle wait in the wings.

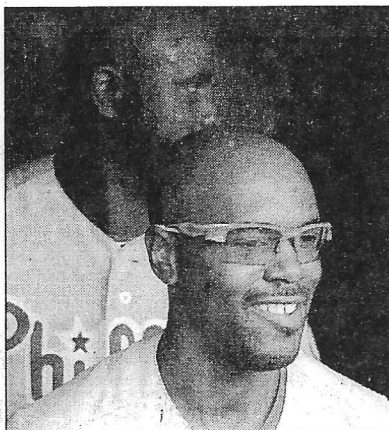
It's also why Ryne Sandberg is the manager. During his six years as a minor-league skipper, Sandberg proved he can get the most out of young players and prospects. Unfortunately, the front office saddled him with an aging corps of veterans who can either help or hurt the rebuilding. Among them is Jimmy Rollins, who for better and worse has been the team's leader.

When asked in spring training about his dismal offensive performance, Rollins replied, "Who cares?" The 35-year-old shortstop also said he wanted to complete his career with the Phillies so he could become the club's all-time leader with 2,235 hits.

While the me-first attitude might have been dismissed as "Jimmy being Jimmy" in the past, it didn't fly with Sandberg, who is trying to instill a team-first culture among the players. Rollins was benched for the next three games.

Sandberg is old school. He believes a player's value is based not only on his ability, but also on his work ethic and attitude. Veteran players are judged by the same standards as the new guys. To ensure team success, they have to make necessary adjustments in their approach to the game and are expected to set an example for the younger players. There is no place for ego.

That's the way Sandberg played during a 15-year Hall of Fame career with the Chicago Cubs. His tal-



Jimmy Rollins after his grand slam against the Rangers last week.

RON CORTES / Staff Photographer

ent spoke for itself: 1984 National League MVP, 10-time All-Star, nine Gold Gloves, and all-time records for a second baseman in fielding percentage (.989) and home runs (282).

What made Sandberg special was his respect for the game, specifically his high standards, exceptional work ethic, and team-first approach. This was a player who ran from the spotlight. He kept his mouth shut and performed superbly. After he was inducted into Cooperstown in 2005, Sandberg turned to managing.

Unlike most Hall of Famers, he wasn't too proud to begin in the minors. He earned each and every promotion from single-A Peoria to triple-A Lehigh Valley, leading his club to the postseason if not winning a championship. Although Sandberg admits that he had to "change his [quiet] personality to communicate with 25 different players," his respect for the game remains as strong as ever.

Rollins, on the other hand, is new school. He believes a player should be judged strictly on ability, and that veterans should be given more slack

than young, unproven players, especially veterans with his success.

Rollins also likes the spotlight. He's at his best when the stakes are highest, and lets everyone know it, too. As with many of today's ego-driven stars, Rollins' game is built around getting on base, stealing bags, and hitting for power. That approach earned him the 2007 National League MVP award. He's also a three-time All-Star with four Gold Gloves, as well as impressive career stats in on-base percentage (.327) and offensive production (.753).

But Rollins has gotten old. Last year he recorded his lowest on-base percentage (.318), fewest home runs (6), and fewest RBIs (39) since 2001, his rookie year. As a result, Sandberg publicly challenged the shortstop to change his game — to concentrate on working more walks and using his speed on the base paths rather than power hitting.

Sandberg will also expect Rollins to set a better example for the younger players, just as Sandberg did for Cubs prospects Shawon Dunston, Rey Sanchez, and Mark Grace when he was an aging veteran with Chicago.

There's an interesting irony here, namely that each man possesses what the other covets. Sandberg never got that World Series ring he so desperately wanted as a player, and Rollins, a borderline Hall of Famer, is just as eager to secure a place in Cooperstown.

Perhaps they can help each other achieve their respective goals. If not, this summer will provide the fans with some interesting theater.

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