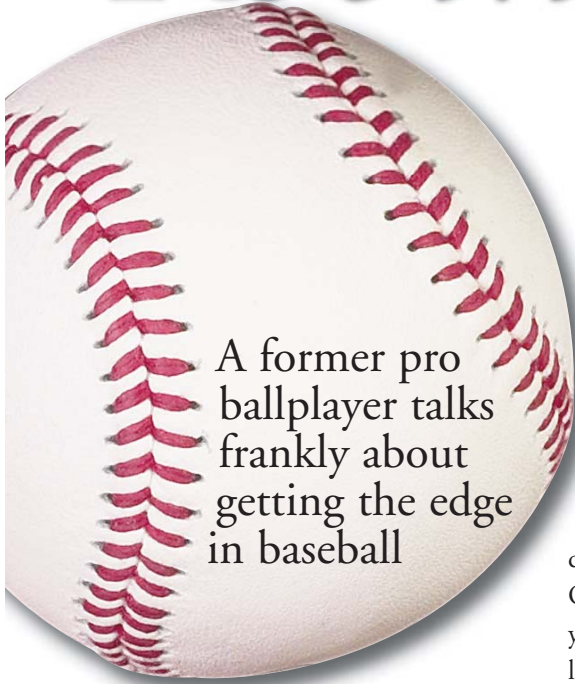


Robin Jennings: An Insider's Look at Pro Baseball



A former pro ballplayer talks frankly about getting the edge in baseball

When you consider how many millions of kids play baseball in this country, the chances of being one of the 750 professional athletes in the major leagues are astronomically slim. Robin Jennings is one of those amazing athletes who defied the odds, playing professionally for 12 years and making it to the major leagues with Cincinnati, Chicago, Colorado, and Oakland. So when Jennings told *BFS* he would be willing to let us interview him, and, more importantly, would answer frankly, we were ready with our questions.

Born in Singapore in 1972, Jennings had early successes in high school as he achieved his goals of being all conference, all region, all state and all metropolitan. He signed a full athletic scholarship to Florida State University after two years at Manatee Junior College, yet decided to sign professionally instead. On April 19, 1996, when he was 24 years old he got called up to the big leagues by the Chicago Cubs. Now he is devoting his life to coaching so he can share his knowledge with young players.

In this exclusive interview, Jennings opens up about the realities of the sport, from the steroid controversy to how the game is changing in the areas of strength and conditioning.

BFS: Looking back at your career, if you could do something differently, what would it be?

JENNINGS: I would have trained smarter in the areas of flexibility, strength training and recovery. I was always dedicated to training, but I did some things the wrong way that resulted in harmful stress to my body. If you were to talk to

some of the players and coaches that I've worked with, they would say that I was injury prone. At the time, I just felt like I played the game hard and got hurt playing – now I know better.

BFS: Are kids who want to play pro baseball getting the right sort of guidance?

JENNINGS: On one hand, I believe there is enough information out there right now about how young people should train for baseball – that is, doing things that are fundamentally sound for their particular level. But too many kids are already worrying about what the pros are doing. I'd like to see young people get back to the fundamentals and a foundation in strength.

BFS: What is your general philosophy about achieving success in baseball?

JENNINGS: This is going to sound very ordinary, but baseball is a repetitious, monotonous sport, and working on the fundamentals is what it takes to get better. It's all about muscle memory and repetition.

BFS: In the past, many baseball players thought there would be too much



Jennings played for four major league teams, and appears in quite a collection of baseball cards.

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stress on the body if they strength-trained during the season, especially on the road. What is the current thinking in this area?

JENNINGS: It's still divided. There are coaches on the professional level who encourage their players to make the effort to weight train on the road, and there's definitely a group that doesn't believe it's necessary for baseball.

BFS: What is your take on the steroid controversy?

JENNINGS: One of the most common misconceptions about the steroid controversy is thinking that it allows people who ordinarily wouldn't be able to hit home runs to hit home runs. Actually, guys who can hit the ball 500 feet with steroids could already hit the ball 400 feet without steroids. It's a matter of degree. Players who take performance-enhancing drugs are looking for an edge.

When I said earlier I'd have done some things differently in my career if I'd known what I know now, I was thinking about how I would approach recovery. The guys on steroids recover faster by taking performance-enhancing drugs, and the fact that they can go out and play without pain gives them a mental edge – and that edge is huge when you play 170 games a year. So it would be

important to find an edge that didn't involve these drugs but still enabled fast recovery and staying competitive.

BFS: But do steroid users have longer careers than non-steroid users?

JENNINGS: I don't believe so. One of the major drawbacks of steroid use is that it can easily shorten your career because the injuries will eventually take over, not to mention the long-term effects they have on your health.

BFS: Are chronic injuries common among pro baseball players?

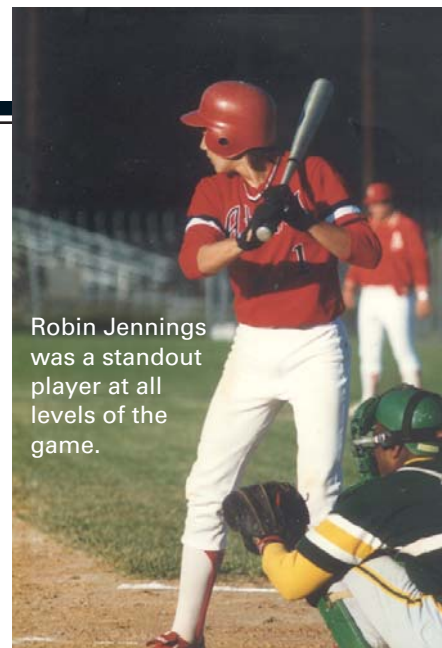
JENNINGS: Almost every player will tell you that he's ailing in some fashion during the season almost every day. That's because you don't have the recovery time in baseball that you have in some other sports, even though it's not as physical. That's why strength training is really coming to the forefront in baseball, and coaches are trying to figure out what works and what doesn't.

BFS: Is it possible for baseball players who use a sound conditioning program year-round to compete against players who are using steroids?

JENNINGS: You would have to be unbelievably disciplined and dedicated to be at the same level as the person who is taking steroids. But I'm not saying it can't be done.



"I think most players understand that without the fans they wouldn't have a job," says Jennings.



Robin Jennings was a standout player at all levels of the game.

BFS: With stricter drug testing and tougher penalties for those who get caught, do you see that many players and coaches are taking a closer look at their strength and conditioning programs?

JENNINGS: I hope that in all sports that they are taking a closer look. Is it idealistic to think that we will all be on a level playing field? Yes, unfortunately, because since the dawn of time some athletes have cheated to be better in sports – whether it was a spitball or a corked bat, there's always someone trying something to get the edge on their competition.

BFS: How can baseball players overcome slumps?

JENNINGS: I believe a slump is a breakdown of the confidence you normally have about your natural ability. It's almost never a physical thing, but some athletes try to deal with it as if it were because it's a lot easier to attack things from a physical perspective. The best book that I ever read dealing with sport psychology was a book my agent recommended to me: *The Inner Game of Tennis*. The book had to do with success and failure and how to deal with the mental side of sports. It just so happens to be a book about tennis, but the concepts directly relate to what is happening in baseball.



Professional baseball players get to meet many celebrities. Here Jennings is shown with Andre Agassi.

BFS: When you watch baseball on TV, do you think the sports commentators really understand what's going on in the game?

JENNINGS: There are some great baseball commentators, and then there are some who are – let's say – not so great. My favorite baseball commentator was Harry Caray. Did he get the game right all the time? Probably not, but I loved listening to him.

BFS: What do pro baseball players think about their fans?

JENNINGS: I think most players understand that without the fans they wouldn't have a job, so I hope that most of them keep that at the forefront and treat their fans with respect. Do I think some fans go to excess? Yes. When you walk out of the hotel to get some breakfast and the fans insist you sign all sorts of stuff, that can be annoying.

BFS: What is your opinion of Michael Jordan's attempt to play professional baseball? Did he give up on baseball too soon?

JENNINGS: I saw Michael play in a number of games. He's probably the greatest athlete of our generation, but his abilities in basketball just didn't translate into exceptional skills in baseball. Besides, it was late in his athletic career

when he took up the game. The athletes who can go from one sport to another are truly amazing; because once you get to that level, all the skills are so sport specific. Deon Sanders, a prime example, was impressive; and Bo Jackson was one of the most phenomenal all-around athletes ever. But that's two guys in...how long?

BFS: At the high school level, do you think it's better to play multiple sports?

JENNINGS: It's up to the individual, but I think playing multiple sports when you are young makes you a better athlete. I loved basketball and track, so I ended up doing those sports in high school and actually played football in my senior year. The time to concentrate on one is when you get feedback from an unbiased source that says you might go to the next level. That being said, you need to be realistic, as 96 percent of all high school athletes will never play past high school.

BFS: Do you think athletes can burn out if they focus on one sport too early?

JENNINGS: Absolutely, and you have to think about what you could be missing. You know, one of my biggest

regrets in life has nothing to do with sports – it was stopping playing an instrument in sixth grade. I'm 34 years old now, and I wish more than anything that I could play an instrument. In life you need to try as many things as you can because you only have one shot at it.

BFS: What sort of goals do you think are important for kids?

JENNINGS: I've always tried hard to set goals for myself, but realistic ones I can attain. In my freshman year in high school, I set a goal to play varsity. I came from a school in the Northern Virginia area, where that was a hard goal. I achieved that goal and then set higher goals.

I think that some kids, as well as some coaches and parents, forget that a lot of confidence comes from achieving incremental goals. Instead of setting a goal to play in the major leagues, a kid should start by focusing on making the Little League all-star team, and then on making the high school baseball team, then on being a starter. Set and achieve goals one at a time, and eventually you may be prepared for playing in the big leagues. **BFS**



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