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Resilient Womack always proving self

By Scott Bordow
Tribune Columnist

The season is a week old and Tony Womack is 34 years old, so only time will tell if his career has gotten a second wind. But a journey that spanned six months, four teams and one elbow operation has landed him in the St. Louis Cardinals clubhouse, at the top of the order, playing second base. And if a measure of a man is how he deals with adversity, Womack is standing tall.

"I worked my butt off to try to beat the odds," Womack said. "People said I wouldn't be ready for the season. I guess it was something else for me to prove."

That's Womack, all legs and attitude, a man who says he doesn't care what others think yet spends an inordinate amount of time talking about his detractors.

Womack's four-plus seasons (1999-2003) with the Diamondbacks were punctuated with occasional outbursts about the lack of respect and appreciation that came his way.

Today, though, Womack looks back fondly on his days in Arizona, his memory sweetened perhaps by what has been a difficult and stressful six months.

His career with the Diamondbacks ended last July, when his salary was dumped on the Colorado Rockies for somebody named Mike Watson. Thirty-one days later, Colorado traded him to the Chicago Cubs.

Womack had been with the Cubs for five days when he tore a ligament in his right elbow while sliding into home plate. He played the rest of the season in pain, hit just .235 and was de-activated for the National League Division Series and Championship Series.

Womack underwent Tommy John surgery on Oct. 6 and was told by doctors he'd be out six to eight months.

The Cubs heard the diagnosis and wished Womack well.

"You can't blame them," Womack said. "You tell them you'll be ready by April 1, but they go along with doctors who say he can't be ready.

"You can't play a war on words with people who say what you can't do."

It wasn't just the injury that turned off the Cubs. Womack hadn't hit better than .237 in any of his three stops in 2003. He was in his mid-30s and his career, it seemed, was pointing in one direction - south.

"A lot of people had written him off," said Cardinals outfielder Reggie Sanders, a Diamondbacks teammate in 2001.

Womack, a proud and defiant man, was determined to end his career when he wanted to, not when others thought he

should.

He attacked his rehabilitation, laboring for two to 2 1/2 hours five days a week. By early January, he was playing soft toss and certain he'd be ready for spring training.

"He worked his tail off," said Derek Steveson, who oversaw Womack's rehabilitation at Functional Performance Center in Tempe. "I don't think he cancelled one time. He may be 34, but his resolve is that of a 24-year-old."

The Boston Red Sox signed Womack to a one-year contract on Jan. 24, but when Cardinals second baseman Bo Hart struggled during spring training, St. Louis in late March traded righthanded pitching prospect Matt Duff to Boston for Womack.

"Our first report on him is that he wouldn't be able to play until late April or early May," said Cardinals manager Tony La Russa. "But in his first workout with us he said, 'I feel better than that,' and when we watched him, he was snapping the ball around.

"We said, 'We think we have a player.' "

Womack stole three bases in the Cardinals' season opener, tied a career high with four hits in St. Louis' 13-6 victory over Arizona Friday, and is hitting .455.

"All I wanted was an opportunity to play and show I was healthy," Womack said. "I know I wasn't being bounced around because I was a bad person. I know I wasn't being bounced around because I can't play this game.

"It's part of the game, I guess. You just hope that the next team wants you more than the last one."

Womack doesn't know how long his run in St. Louis will last. But he's playing again, stealing bases again, proving people wrong again.

"I'm still running," he said with a smile. "I'm still running."



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