

Still wheeling and dealing

Even in retirement, former Red Sox pitcher and current Turner Hill member Dennis Eckersley hasn't stopped pulling any punches

Hall of Famer Dennis Eckersley ranks among the most resilient pitchers in Major League history. The Oakland native was a starting pitcher in the big leagues from 1975 through 1986. After being traded by the Chicago Cubs to the Oakland Athletics in 1987, an injury to teammate Jay Howell thrust the former Red Sox starter (20-game winner in 1978) into the closer role, and between then and 1992 he was hailed by most baseball experts as the finest closer in baseball annals.

"The Eck" is the only pitcher to record 100 complete games and 200 saves. He became only the second pitcher to save 50 games in a season, the first pitcher to save 40 games four times, holds American League records for most games pitched (869), most saves (324) and most consecutive errorless games by a pitcher (470).

Eckersley was the American League Cy Young and Most Valuable Player award recipient in 1992. He won 197 games and saved 390 games in a 24-year career and was elected to the Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility in 2004.

Eckersley and his wife Jennifer moved to Turner Hill in 2006. Eckersley turns 53 in October, but looks so much younger you wonder if he couldn't still be an effective fireman for the Red Sox.

North Shore Golf columnist Gary Larrabee caught up with the NESN Red Sox analyst before a round of golf at Turner Hill and spoke to him about his home course, the Red Sox impressive start to the season and, of course, his golf game.



Dennis and Jennifer Eckersley

1. How did you land at Turner Hill?

We were looking for something quieter where I could be on a golf course, yet a location where we could feel like we're away from it all. We never came up here much when I pitched for the Sox. We'd head straight for Maine. Then last winter we really enjoyed a couple months in a resort setting in Jupiter, Florida and started looking for something up here with the same feel to it. Someone told us about Turner Hill, we checked it out, loved it, and here we are.

2. What is your golf background?

I didn't take up golf until I was with the Athletics. I wasn't very good. But we pitchers played a lot on the road and I lived on a golf course, had my own cart, so I kept plugging away. I was a member at Pine Brook (in Weston) for 10 years but didn't find much time to play. I started to enjoy the game more in the late '80s and became a bogey player. I'm an impatient golfer, sorry to say. I've got to learn how to practice and how to apply it to my playing on the course.

3. What have been your most memorable rounds?

I shot in the 70s a couple times at Pine Brook, shot an 84 once at Pebble Beach. I've had a few lucky days when most everything has gone right. Not bad for a 14 handicap.

4. Do you have a few favorite charity events in which you partake?

I've played in the Deutsche Bank pro-am the last few years. That TPC Boston course is one tough test. I could be playing most every Monday but they won't fit into my schedule. I host a big one-day event in Cleveland (where he began his major league career) every summer for my agent, Ed Keating, for a recovery house.

5. What kind of success have you had playing Turner Hill?

Very little. I've shot around 85 a couple times but nothing special. You've got to have a short game and not be intimidated by all those big bunkers. As generous as the fairways and the entries to most greens are, it always plays tougher than it looks.

6. How serious are you these days about your golf game?

Every time I get serious on the course I get angry with myself, so I try and not get too worked up, despite the competitor in me. I'm pointing to get my handicap into single digits some day. I want to shoot in the 70s regularly.

7. What's the strongest part of your game? The weakest?

I can hit 12 fairways and make solid contact with my metals and irons, but I don't seem to hit the ball as far as I should. Maybe I'll look into new clubs with my pro, George Goich. My chipping seems to go bad every round I play. I make double bogeys when I should be making pars or bogeys. Those little finesse chip shots ruin me. But I'm going to get better this year.

8. Have you done battle yet with your fellow Turner Hill member Mark Bavaro?

We've played, but just for fun. He's serious about his golf, too. He's got a good game and he's a nice guy. We've been out to dinner. Maybe we'll put something on the line this year and test our competitive natures.

9. How much do you miss the Majors Leagues, now that you are seven years removed from a 24-year career?

Even though I went right into working as a TV guy for the A's and now the Sox, I missed being a player from the first day of training camp in '99. It took three, four years to get over the whole thing. I still miss the competition part, the friendships, and I miss the nervousness that builds up before you take the mound, but I don't miss the travel. What's nice about doing TV is you still get the butterflies, but in a different way.

10. What was the most gratifying aspect of your Hall of Fame career?

The winning. Nothing is better than winning and we had five great years in Oakland (four AL West titles and the 1989 World Series, where he recorded the final out). I had some enjoyable personal seasons before that - Rookie Pitcher of the Year, 20 wins one year with the Red Sox, a no-hitter, the All-Star games. But those years with the A's, playing where I grew up and beating the Giants in the World Series were the ultimate.

11. How do you assess your six seasons as a Red Sox hurler?

It was thrilling coming up with the Indians and helping them for three years, but when I got traded to the Red Sox? It was, "Oh my God! This is what players had been talking about. The really big stage." This is where I had my first true awakening as a major leaguer. The media coverage, the passion of the fans, the big crowds every game. I won 20 games my first year (1978) and I thought I might be here for the rest of my career. Things were going good, even with the heartbreaking finish in '78, until I came down with tendonitis before the '83 season. I should have sat out the whole year, but instead kept throwing (9-13, 5.61 ERA) and they traded me to the Cubs for Bill Buckner. That turned out to be great for me. It was time to get out of Boston. But I kept coming back in the off-season and having fun because my wife at the time was from here. Looking back, the fans treated me like a Hall of Famer long before I got my big break in Oakland. Red Sox management couldn't have been nicer to me either. That's why I'm thrilled to be back contributing to the broadcasts.

12. How do you see your legacy to the game?

I hope I gave more guys the chance to become relief pitchers and closers. Maybe I gave managers and front office types a new perspective on the ways pitchers can be used beyond a starting role.

13. Would you like to see your role on NESN's Red Sox coverage expanded?

I would never say never if Jerry (Remy, the analyst on all NESN Red Sox telecasts) had to cut back his duties because of work with a national cable network and they asked me about filling in. I love live TV, getting nervous before we go on. But I wouldn't care for the travel. I've had enough of that. So maybe right where I am is the best fit.

14. Ever thought about managing or coaching?

Not at all at the major league level. I loved playing in the bigs for 24 years, but I never thought I'd be a good teacher. Some guys have a calling for that, but you've got to want to do it, when you consider the travel and the headaches caused from dealing with some of these multi-million dollar relievers.

15. What are your career ambitions beyond your NESN work?

I'd like to do more public speaking, because I think I have interesting things to say about my life and baseball. Most important, I'm happy to talk about my life in recovery. I was right in the middle of my baseball career (the 12-year mark) when I got sober. Funny how that worked. Twelve years of starting and drinking, then 12 years of relieving and recovering. I'd like to give others like myself hope that they can turn their lives around. I did, so they can.

16. How do you assess the state of Major League baseball?

It couldn't be any better. Everyone's making a ton of money. The fans are turning out like never before. There's more baseball on television. The owners and players just signed a new collective bargaining agreement. The only negative these days is the steroids issue and the sport seems to be working through that with little or no backlash from the fans. The fans are willing to forgive. They just want to watch their favorite team.

17. How do you explain the Red Sox' phenomenal start this season?

The starting rotation is the biggest reason, though we had pretty high hopes for them during spring training. Matsuzaka has been as good as we could have expected and Okajima has been the biggest surprise, considering he was not impressive in Florida. The best part about him is he's become as tough on right-handed batters as lefthanders, especially with that split-finger changeup. He's the ideal set-up guy right now. At the plate, Mike Lowell had a good first half in 2006, but nothing like this. But the big addition on offense has been Kevin Youklis. He's showing he's the real deal. He's become the toughest out in the lineup. As high as management has been on him, who thought he'd turn out this good?

18. The Sox are up 11 games (as of June 26). Is the AL East race over?

The Yankees will make some kind of run. It's just a question of how good a run, or if they can make more than one good push on the Sox. I'm surprised the Yankees have been so bad, but with 15, 20 different guys being tried out as starters, it's no wonder I guess. Roger (Clemens) will make a difference, but most likely not enough of a difference to bring the Yankees back all the way to first place.