



The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

# Sports

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"It's like being 25 again. I'm going to spring training with a lot to be excited about."

**BRAVES PITCHER JOHN SMOLTZ**

On moving back into the rotation after three seasons as closer



Braves pitching coach **Leo Mazzone** (left) and **John Smoltz** find a lot to feel good about on Feb. 8 during workouts for pitchers at Turner Field. Smoltz, whose closer role goes to Dan Kolb, says he has no doubts about starting again.

Photos by BRANT SANDERLIN / Staff

# Pitching he's fit



# Eager Smoltz to return to his prime condition, slot

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The bald spot and booming voice are familiar, but there's something different about Braves pitcher John Smoltz.

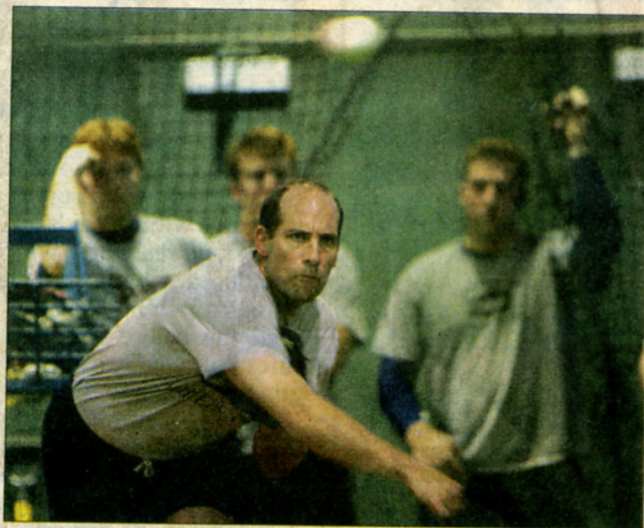
A week before another spring training, the 17-year veteran is brimming with a rookie's enthusiasm. His buzz isn't from the hyperbaric chamber Smoltz sometimes naps in.

He's been on a crest of anticipation since Dec. 11, when the Braves traded for Milwaukee closer Dan Kolb and told Smoltz he's moving back to the starting rotation.

"It's like being 25 again,"

Smoltz said Tuesday during Leo Mazzone's pitching camp at Turner Field. "I'm going to spring training with a lot to be excited about."

He's 37 and a four-time elbow surgery patient, including two procedures



**John Smoltz trained harder this offseason and reports no problems with an elbow that has had four surgeries.**

since he was last a regular starter in 1999.

But Smoltz said he doesn't have the questions and concerns that fans and others do regarding his elbow and the rigors of pitching 200-plus

innings.

"I don't have any doubts," he said. "Zero doubts."

He'll report to spring training in his best condition in years after a winter of increased training interrupted by illness, injury or surgery rehabilitation.

Smoltz increased his throwing, running and core-strengthening regimens to prepare for the move back to starting. He looks leaner and more muscular.

"He's loaded for bear," Braves general manager John Schuerholz said. "John's on a very rigorous training program, always looking for ways to make

himself stronger and better. That's his nature.

"This guy wants to have every edge he can."

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# Smoltz: Ace optimistic about new pitching mix

► Continued from D1

Before becoming a dominant closer and saving 144 games in the past three seasons, Smoltz was a stalwart member of Atlanta's elite starting rotations in the 1990s.

He won 24 games and a Cy Young Award in 1996, and has a 159-115 record and 3.37 ERA in 361 career starts, along with his 12-4 mark and 2.60 ERA in 26 postseason starts.

But now Smoltz, who turns 38 in May, is entering uncharted waters. No such accomplished pitcher has moved back to starting after going from starter to closing for an extended period.

"It's an incredible challenge and exciting to me to know I am going back to starting," he said. "It is what I like."

He could've become a free agent after this season, but instead signed a two-year, \$20 million contract in December that runs through 2006, with a club option for 2007 both parties expect to be exercised.

Instead of a \$12 million

salary and additional \$100,000 per start he would've made this season under his old contract, Smoltz gets a \$6 million straight salary and \$8 million in '06, along with a \$6 million signing bonus.

His renegotiated, reduced salary enabled the Braves to fit Kolb into an \$80 million payroll. After some wondered how Schuerholz would be able to rebuild the rotation on a budget, the GM was able to trade for both an All-Star closer and an ace, Tim Hudson, while also making Smoltz happy.

"Our general manager had a great luxury this off-season by being able to get a starter or a closer," Smoltz said. "I didn't make any demands. I said I'd do either role."

"People thought I demanded to be a starter. No, I didn't."

"[But] I'm happy to be back in this role, because I think the mix is better. We do have a great closer. People might not see that right now, but he's going to be very good."