

Making a difference in world a mission for Rays' Chris Archer

Marc Topkin - Tampa Bay Time

Posted March 28, 2015



PORT CHARLOTTE — Like other talented young pitchers on the front end of promising careers, Rays opening day starter Chris Archer hopes to help his team win lots of games over the next few years. Getting a few All-Star selections, making a couple of World Series appearances and earning a Cy Young Award or two would be even better.

Then Archer wants to get on to the really important stuff.

“I feel the reason we are on this earth is to be a positive influence,” he said. “And to positively impact as many lives as we can.

“I try to use baseball and my success in my industry as a platform to do that. ... And hopefully one day I can reach millions.”

He has his reasons, his ideas, his philosophies.

And he’s not shy about sharing them.

That’s why he asks the Rays for opportunities to speak to youth groups, make charitable appearances or visit hospitals during every home stand. Why he offers unsolicited opinions on topics such as nutritional advice and training tips for kids to avoid injuries. Why he invests time and money building his Archway Foundation into what he hopes

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will become a national organization of youth centers.

"I feel like I'm good at baseball and can use baseball to help people," Archer said. "And the more success I have in baseball, the more people I can help. So it's dual-purposing the entire way through."

Archer, 26, is a bit different anyway.

Born to a white mother and black father (whom he has met just once), Archer, in an extraordinarily unusual family situation, was adopted and raised by his maternal grandmother and her husband and considers them his parents.

Graduated from public high school with middling grades, Archer pushed himself to become a voracious reader of thick historical, motivational, "self-growth" books, developing an intellectual, thoughtful perspective and advanced vocabulary that befuddles some Rays personnel and definitely presents as college educated.

Surrounded by teammates who often are bland and detached by design, Archer has earned a reputation with fans and media as one of the game's most engaging, conversational and gregarious players.

New Rays manager Kevin Cash didn't need long to get the sense Archer was special. "A deep thinker, highly intellectual and very caring," Cash said. "He cares about what he's doing, but he cares about the people around him a lot. We had lunch and we didn't talk about him at all. We talked about his teammates and some different things he brought up ... impressions he's had."

Get Archer going and he talks like he wants to save the world. And right now, this second.

But he understands, albeit frustratingly, that entering just his second full season in the majors, playing for the small-market Rays, having just 20 wins for his career, he is more of a local than marquee attraction.

When he goes out to speak, it's typically to small groups, such as at the Pinellas County Juvenile Detention Center or, when representing the Good Sports equipment donation group, the St. Petersburg Police Athletic League Center and, last week, the Charlotte High baseball team. (He did get an opportunity in December to go to South Africa as part of Major League Baseball's Ambassador Program. He found that rewarding and enriching, and is eager for more trips.)

While appreciative, Archer is hoping to advance, via his onfield success, to grander stages. "But I have to get to a point," he said, "where people would reach out and would want me to come."

Similarly, he was motivated during his winter workouts at Tampa's Performance Compound to speak out against excessive youth league demands that endanger players' health, but he didn't have the proper forum.

"If 10 News or the Tampa Bay Times or ESPN or whoever wants to do a story to grow awareness or how to prepare, I'm down (to do it)," he said. "But I know I'm not the premier guy. I'm not the (Giancarlo) Stanton, I'm not the Mike Trout, I'm not the Clayton Kershaw."

Whom he would like to be is David Price, the former Rays ace traded to Detroit. Though Archer considers his adoptive father, Ron Archer, his biggest role model, his onfield icon, ahead of Torii Hunter and Derek Jeter, is Price.

"He is that genuine, caring person who is elite in his profession," Archer said.

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Price has mutual admiration. "Arch is the guy that treats people the right way and sees the good in everyone," Price said Friday. "And he works as hard as anyone I've ever seen."

Archer speaks reverently about the lessons learned from Price, about what to do to become a better pitcher and a better person and how to do so.

Among several examples, Archer recalls a day shortly after he was sent down a few springs ago when Price arranged for Sonny's BBQ to bring lunch for the all the minor-league players — an upgrade from the usual fare — as something of a good-luck sendoff.

So a week or so ago, Archer did the same. "I knew how much that meant to me," he said. "So I was going to pay that forward."

That desire to do good and to be positive is at the core of Archer's message on all platforms.

He stresses it in his speeches, such as when he tells the wayward boys and girls at the detention center about his own youthful transgressions, vandalism and petty theft and challenges them to turn their own lives into even better turnaround stories.

He insists on it for programs administered by his foundation, such as requiring the 9- and 10-year-old kids on the two travel-ball teams he sponsors in his Clayton, N.C., hometown to earn their free participation by doing community service, helping their parents with chores and reading assigned books.

He tweets about it regularly on his @ChrisArcher42 account, providing an almost daily offering of inspirational and motivational quotes he collects from "spiritual coach" Howard Falco (whom he has befriended), plus books and other sources.

"I think we can all agree that there needs to be more positive-ness in the world," Archer said. "So I feel like I'm doing what we're all here to do."

He is constantly looking to do more, formulating new plans (such as joining with players from the Bucs, Lightning and Magic to speak to kids as a team), seeking to connect with similar-minded successful athletes (Derrick Brooks, for one), taking on additional responsibilities (serving as the Rays union rep) and incessantly trying to learn.

One of the first things he asked Cash, who previously was Cleveland's bullpen coach, was how 2014 Cy Young Award winner Corey Kluber had his breakthrough season. When new commissioner Rob Manfred visited camp last week, Archer cornered him with a series of questions, including whether Manfred could help arrange for him to take a business or sports management class at an Ivy League school.

Archer can also have a defiant side, taking on Boston's David Ortiz in a bit of a verbal tussle last season, noting he doesn't "necessarily agree with how the traditional education system works," mocking those who question whether he is too cocky, too smart for his own good, too concerned with his off-field pursuits.

"The ignorance in this world is sad," he said, "and this is why there needs to be more positive influencing."

Though he is involved with Good Sports, Boys & Girls Clubs, Big Brothers Big Sisters and the Reading With the Rays program, Archer's legacy will be built with the Archway Foundation (archwayfoundation.com), the name a play not just off his way of doing things but the concept of an arch bridging otherwise unconnected points.

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From small beginnings in his home state, Archer envisions a growth organization with community centers in multiple cities similar to the Police Athletic League, "where we can take in kids, make sure they are doing their homework, making sure they are getting fed a good meal, making sure they are physically active."

Archer, with the security of a six-year, \$25.5 million contract, said he realizes he has so much more to learn, off and on the field, and that the progression can be, hopefully, interrelated. He just wants to get to it.

"I'm not perfect by any means," he said. "But I try to be a positive influence and make good decisions and be morally sound. And that's kind of like 'the Archer way.'"

"The thought of positively impacting as many lives, that's my thought. I didn't read that in a book. I read in a book to find what your purpose is. I found that to be my purpose."