

New York Daily News - <http://www.nydailynews.com>**Tony's 2nd coming**

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TAMPA - There are several players in the Yankees clubhouse who have the elbow scar that Tommy John surgery leaves behind. Mariano Rivera, Tom Gordon and Steve Karsay are the most notable, just three among the hundreds of major-league pitchers who endured the reconstructive operation and lengthy rehabilitation in order to return to the mound.

But then there is Tony Womack. He does not fire a high-90s fastball, did not try to bend curveballs before his 14th birthday and has not ever thrown 200-plus innings in a single season, yet he too has the scar.

The Yankees' new second baseman is a rarity, a position player who needed Tommy John surgery to save his career. Womack's procedure came in October of 2003, when the Cubs were trying to get ready for the playoffs and Womack was trying to figure out what was wrong with him.

"I don't know how I did it or when I did it exactly," he said. "I just know that it got to the point where I couldn't throw."

The injury could be traced to a collision at home plate in August of that year, but the source of the pain didn't matter to Womack; he simply wanted to know when he'd be able to play again. When doctors informed him he'd need Tommy John, the prognosis was for a midseason return.

"They told me May or June," said Womack. "I told them 'Nope. I'll be ready for Opening Day.' And I was."

The typical recovery time for a pitcher who has Tommy John is between a year and 18 months, a standard that is widely accepted in baseball. The Yanks, for example, signed Jon Lieber after his surgery in 2002, fully aware of the fact they wouldn't be able to pitch him until the 2004 season. But position players are different. Over the past 10 years, Dr. James Andrews has performed about 900 ulnar collateral ligament reconstructions (the technical term for the procedure) and only 10% have been on non-pitchers, according to Lanier Johnson, executive director of the Sports Medicine Institute in Birmingham, Ala. "Those guys throw sliders and changeups - I don't," Womack said. "I just have to throw it straight. I still have a lot of demands, like turning the double play or throwing a relay from the outfield, but it's not the same."

Still, Womack's proclamation that he'd return in six months, ready to play, was met with skepticism. Womack's surgeon, Dr. Tim Kremchek, tried to keep Womack from getting ahead of himself, but was overwhelmed by his determination.

"We would go back and forth at each other," said Kremchek, the Reds' team doctor. "I mean, he didn't just have a typical Tommy John surgery. He tore all the muscle and ligaments off the inside part of the elbow, so it had to all be put back together.... That he was able to come back in 5-1/2 months is amazing. Really, I don't think anyone will ever be able to come back faster."

The typical rehab for a Tommy John surgery involves a three-month period after the procedure where no throwing is done, according to Arizona-based physical therapist Derek Steveson. After that, players generally begin throwing, with pitchers obviously needing much longer to get their repertoire back in shape. "Position players have a shorter ramp up to being ready," said Steveson, who worked with Womack during his recovery. "But even with that, Tony came along faster than I expected and it was because of his dedication. We worked out five days a week for almost six months and he never missed one session. Not one. That's never happened before."

Womack's recovery was so incredible that the Red Sox, who signed him as a free agent on Jan. 24, 2004, were leery of his fragility, according to Kremchek.

"They kept saying 'maybe he'll be ready by the end of April,' that sort of thing," the doctor said. "I talked to them and told them his progress was extraordinary, but they weren't convinced. Finally he ended up going to St. Louis and played for them on Opening Day."

Sox GM Theo Epstein didn't return a call about Boston's decision to let Womack go, but Womack said there were no hard feelings. He hit .307 in 145 games for the Cardinals and, after St. Louis delayed in offering him a contract and the Yankees reached an impasse with incumbent Miguel Cairo, Womack slipped into the Bombers' plans just before last Christmas.

"I've been through a lot," Womack said, "but I'm not complaining at all. I'm just going to keep working, keep doing what I've been doing. I'm happy to overcome all the challenges I've faced and I'm happy to be where I am right now."