

Prospect Flowers shows power, potential

By [DAVID O'BRIEN](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Published on: 03/06/08

Lakeland, Fla. — Tyler Flowers considered a career that would've involved hammering running backs and receivers coming across the middle.

Fans on a grass berm beyond left field Thursday can be thankful the hulking Braves prospect opted to hammer baseballs for a living. Some of them have souvenirs today because of him.

The Flowers travelin' power show made a stop at Tigertown in Lakeland, where the 250-pound catcher/first baseman (and former linebacker) littered the berm with gifts for fans who reached skyward as one after another of his towering batting practice fly balls fell to earth at Joker Marchant Stadium.

Did went mention this strapping lad from Marietta hits with quite a bit of power?

"His swing is so damn good," Braves manager Bobby Cox said of Flowers, who hit .298 with 34 doubles, 12 home runs and 70 RBIs in 106 games at Class A Rome in his first full season of pro ball.

"He's got a great, nice swing. No moving parts. So simple."

The non-roster invitee and No. 12-rated Braves prospect won't make the team this spring barring events unforeseen. But he's certainly making a big impression on players and team officials — and everyone else who saw his titanic blast in batting practice Monday.

The wind-aided drive at the New York Mets' spring home in Port St. Lucie, Fla., was estimated at about 500 feet by longtime observers, who couldn't recall one hit as far at that ballpark.

"I've been impressed with him," Braves hitting coach Terry Pendleton said of Flowers, who had three hits including a homer in his first four at-bats this spring (he's 0-for-5 since).

"He's a beast," said second baseman Kelly Johnson, who got to know Flowers while hitting and lifting weights with him at Turner Field the past two winters, and introduced him to other Braves veterans.

For a player with no experience above low-Class A, Flowers has played more in Grapefruit League games than most any such Brave in recent memory.

"I really didn't have any expectations [entering camp], because I didn't think I was going to play too much," Flowers said. "So I'm real happy with that. I'm learning a lot out there."

He's learned plenty of lessons since his days at Blessed Trinity Catholic High in Roswell, where Flowers said he received more recruiting interest for football than for baseball.

He was a middle linebacker and fullback and said he considered a football offer from Wisconsin before opting to play baseball at Chipola Junior College in Florida, with an eye toward the draft.

The Braves selected him in the 33rd round of the June 2005 draft and signed him 11 months later. Flowers learned a hard lesson soon afterward, when he tested positive for a performance-enhancing substance in May 2006 while playing rookie ball at Danville.

He called it a mistake made while in junior college, and the Braves say they're not worried about any repeat episode. Flowers drew a 50-game suspension and missed the first part of the 2007 season.

After arthroscopic knee surgery for a cartilage tear in March 2007, Flowers was used at first base for much of the '07 season to ease the stress on his knees from crouching.

He moved back behind the plate late in the season, and is considered a solid defensive catcher. He's only a serviceable defensive first baseman, though Cox believes he will improve with more playing time at the position.

The Braves invited Flowers to spring training to give him a taste of big-league camp, but he's been anything but a wide-eyed kid in over his head. Folks pay attention when he steps into the cage, especially after his monumental long ball at Port St. Lucie.

But what Pendleton and others like about him is that he doesn't try to pull every pitch to the Everglades.

He uses his strong hands and stays inside the ball better than most young power hitters. In batting practice Thursday he hit line drives to the right-center gap, blistered balls up the middle and hit tape-measure shots to left-center that nearly cleared the big grass berm.

The Braves aren't suddenly changing their plans and considering him for the opening day roster. But his major league future looks bright, and might be nearer than previously expected.

"We're a long way from the barn," general manager Frank Wren said. "But he's been a pleasant surprise of camp.

"We knew he could hit, but he's kind of maturing before our eyes."

From a physical standpoint, any more maturity might be frightening. Flowers is 6-feet-4 and 30 pounds above his listed weight of 220.

When he hits a ball there is a splendid "thwack!" that reverberates from the batting cage.

After his auspicious first week in the Grapefruit League, some fans on blogs began to speculate Flowers could replace Mark Teixeira if the veteran slugger leaves as a free agent next winter.

As Wren said, they're still a long way from the barn when it comes to a major league arrival for Flowers, who'll likely begin the season at high-A Myrtle Beach.

But when a reporter mentioned to Cox the possibility of Flowers becoming a future first-base option, the manager said, "Yeah. I don't know. Maybe I'm out of my mind, but I like what I see."