

TRADE SECRET



In the reliability and competitiveness of Jake Westbrook, the Cardinals tapped into a formula that's been a frequent difference-maker down the stretch By DAVE WILHELM

Jake Westbrook had been traded before. Three times, in fact.

But on this occasion, it was different. So much more was on the line.

The Cardinals acquired Westbrook from the Cleveland Indians at the trade deadline July 31. At the same time, they squarely placed a weight of responsibility on the 32-year-old righthander's broad shoulders:

Hello, Mr. Westbrook. Welcome to the Cardinals. Now help pitch us into the playoffs.

Westbrook never flinched.

"It's a good feeling that they have confidence enough in me that I can be that guy – to come in and fill that spot when they need somebody," Westbrook said.

"Hopefully, I give them every reason not to doubt that trade at all.

"To pitch in games that are meaningful and to have that opportunity to go to the

playoffs, that's huge. You only get better when you pitch in games like that."

The maturity Westbrook gleaned from past experiences no doubt helped him steer a steady course through a situation that presented other twists.

Not only was Westbrook suddenly pitching for a contender, but he came to St. Louis in a largely unpopular three-team trade for right fielder Ryan Ludwick, a former teammate.

But that's not all.

Westbrook was pitching for his future. A pending free agent, he could be in line for a lucrative multiyear contract, perhaps with the Cardinals.

"I try not to worry about those things," Westbrook said. "I try to (think) about things I can control, which is going out and giving my team a chance to win a ballgame

every opportunity I get to pitch.

"If I try to worry about and think about all the things that I can't control which are out of my hands, I'm only going to cause myself headaches and problems."

WOODY REDUX?

The acquisition of Westbrook was just the latest example of a club maneuver that has paid dividends several times: the addition of a starting pitcher via a mid- to late-season deal, often on the cusp of baseball's nonwaiver trade deadline. (See the related story, page 33.)

Chuck Finley helped the Cardinals to a division title and trip to the NLCS in 2002. Jeff Weaver filled a hole in the rotation down the stretch in 2006 and then played a standout role in the playoffs and World Series. And no pitcher made an impact on a



Westbrook's sinker is prominent among his arsenal of pitches, but Cardinals manager Tony La Russa said the team liked the 32-year-old righthander for a variety of additional reasons.

playoff push like Woody Williams in 2001.

Williams, acquired from the Padres for Ray Lankford in August, went 7-1 with a 2.28 ERA in 11 starts, including a 5-0 mark and 0.94 ERA in his last six outings. He was also a galvanizing force who provided leadership in the clubhouse, as the Redbirds rallied from a 7½-game deficit on Aug. 1 to tie Houston for the NL Central title.

Like Westbrook, Williams wasn't overwhelmed by the expectations of others.

"I definitely wanted to go in there and make them feel that I belonged, even

though you really don't need to do that because they wouldn't trade for you if they didn't feel like you did," Williams said. "That's just human nature for someone to put pressure on himself.

"I didn't know what to expect at all. I had not one clue what I was going into. But the first time I put that uniform on, I knew there was something different about that organization."

Williams said his eight-year foundation in the big leagues was of tremendous value coming to the Cardinals. To him, it was

just baseball, but for someone without that experience, it might have been a dire situation.

"I think one of the main things is that the player who's acquired has experienced ups and downs, so the highs aren't so high and the lows aren't so low," Williams said. "They pretty much are able to stay steady, no matter what the situation is from day to day or game to game. Individual makeup of the player is just as important as what they do on the field."

YEARS OF UPHEAVAL

Westbrook's career path has been shaped by a seeming unending cycle of ups and downs, alternating distinct achievements with the distinction of being traded four times.

Like many young players, Westbrook, a native of Athens, Ga., envisioned himself developing and then starring with the team that drafted him. He was selected by the Colorado Rockies in the first round (21st overall) of the 1996 draft, signed quickly and enjoyed a strong debut in Rookie ball. He excelled again in his first full season, winning 14 games for Colorado's Class A affiliate in the South Atlantic League.

But the Rockies handed Westbrook the first shock of his career that November, sending him to the Montreal Expos in a deal for second baseman Mike Lansing.

Two years later, Westbrook was on the move again. After an 11-win season at Double-A in 1999, he was shuffled to the New York Yankees for pitcher Hideki Irabu.

The Yankees gave Westbrook his first taste of the big leagues in June 2000, when he made two starts and a relief appearance in a six-day stretch. But Westbrook, just 22, wasn't ready, and he was returned to Triple-A. One month later, he was sent to Cleveland to complete a trade for outfielder David Justice.

"I learned early on, before I was 23 years old, that you can't be surprised by much of anything in this game," Westbrook said.

The lesson was certainly reinforced in Cleveland, where in recent years the Indians have been sellers as the trade deadline approaches: In 2008 they traded lefthander CC Sabathia, and in 2009 they dealt

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