



ALEXANDRIA, La. — An umpire teasingly calls him "Bat Man." His teammates consider it an embarrassment and a "slap in the face." His former ballclub sees it as a bit of harmless fun.

Sure, it sounds like the punchline of a cruel joke, or maybe an episode from baseball's more colorful past.

But minor league pitcher John Odom sees the crazy trade that sent him from the Calgary Vipers to the Laredo Broncos for 10 baseball bats as a shot at redemption.

And that opportunity for the 26-year-old right-hander begins Saturday, when he's scheduled to pitch against the Edinburg Coyotes of the independent United League.

"I'm still in shock from this phenomenon, I guess," Odom said as his teammates warmed up Wednesday. "I don't know how to describe it. It's mind-boggling."

The deal that sent Odom to Laredo in exchange for the load of high-quality lumber is part of a baseball journey for a man not yet willing to give up the idea that he can pitch at a high level.

The trade has made Odom the butt of jokes, yet he's not angry.

"What's up, Bat Man?" umpire Dewey Larson said as he walked past Odom, who was sitting for an interview. The pitcher just smiled and said, "If he wasn't my umpire ... "

"In all honesty, he has been the bigger man in the situation, the bigger man," said Odom's roommate, Nathan Crawford. "What's happened to him - I'm going to go ahead and say it - it's pretty low. It's kind of like a slap in the face. And it could taint your career if people don't know who you are."

Maybe expectations about Odom are low, but three Broncos players who were in the San Francisco Giants' minor league system say they've seen him throw in the 93 mph range.

"I don't know why he got traded for bats," Broncos pitcher Benny Cepeda said. "That ain't right. He's a good guy. He has really good stuff."

Odom grew up in Atlanta playing baseball, but then gave up the sport.

"I didn't play baseball from 17 to 21," he said. "I was a lost youth. I was a very troubled kid. I was just lost is all I can say."

He moved to Tallahassee, Fla., got in touch with the coach at a community college and threw in the high 80s and low 90s in a tryout observed by a major league scout.

"They were like, 'Oooh, wow, who the heck is this kid?'" Odom said.

San Francisco drafted the 6-foot-2 Odom in 2003, but he was beset by injuries - a chipped bone in his foot, elbow surgery in 2005. He pitched a full season in low Class A ball in 2006 before dislocating his left shoulder in a collision, missing 2007.

He was 9-8 in parts of three seasons with the Giants' Class A teams, striking out 113 and walking only 36 in 140 innings with an ERA of 4.05. But he failed to dominate hitters, something a major league prospect usually does in Class A.

Odom knows he's five years past the age most prospects are reaching their prime. But with all the setbacks, Odom can't shake the feeling he hasn't made his best effort yet.

The Giants invited him to spring training this year, but his first batting practice pitch nearly hit the batter and the second ended up beyond the outfield wall.

"I watched it go over the fence and I was like, 'Dude, I just got released,'" Odom said.

So he signed with Calgary of the Golden Baseball League and set out by car from Atlanta, only to be stopped at the Canadian border. He had a minor but unspecified charge on his juvenile record he hadn't revealed to immigration officials before they scanned his passport.

So he hunkered down in Great Falls, Mont., and asked Calgary to trade him. A few days later, the deal was struck, sending Odom to the Broncos for 10 Prairie Sticks maple bats, worth about \$650. Calgary has a history of unusual deals, once trying to acquire a pitcher for 1,500 blue seats when they were renovating their stadium.

It's not the first time a player has been traded for something strange. The difference this time, said Laredo interim manager Jon Hinkel said, is that his trade became public.

"You hear of players traded for bats, that's not unusual," Hinkel said. "Baseballs, uniforms, oysters, side of beef. It happens all the time. Nine out of 10 times when someone's traded and it's not for a particular player, they usually put in there, 'For future considerations.'"

Calgary Vipers president Peter Young said he never intended to embarrass Odom.

"We're a little crazy," Young said. "Our motto is, 'Minor league baseball is supposed to be fun.' So if there's anything else you can do to make it more fun, you go ahead and do it."

The bats were to be auctioned for charity, but Ripley Entertainment bought them for \$10,000 and will be using them in a "Believe It or Not" exhibit that will likely include a lifelike wax reproduction of Odom.

"This may not be the most bizarre trade ever done, but it certainly ranks up there, said Tim O'Brien, a Ripley's spokesman." And Ripley's is all about true things. Truth is stranger than fiction, and when we see something like this we go for it."

It's been 18 months since Odom has pitched competitively, so Hinkel will have him take it easy, throwing only about 80 pitches.

Hinkel said if Odom can pull the pieces of his career back together, the scouts will notice.

"If he comes out here and does his job, takes command of the strike zone and puts up good numbers, his name's already out there enough, he shouldn't be here very long then," Hinkel said.

Odom said he worried about becoming "a walking parody," but the buzz created by his story has had the opposite effect. An Internet search of his name gets more than 51,000 entries.

"You know, honestly, it can only get better careerwise. Oh, yeah," Odom said. "I mean people are going to come see me pitch now just to see if I can even throw the ball straight. 'Wow, he hit the mitt once. He's good. The trade's a success!'"

He's aware of some of the comments being made about him.

"People are like 'I'd kill myself' and stuff," Odom said. "I'm like, 'God, dude, that's all you think life is about, sports?' You get to know me, I'm a lot deeper. There's a lot more to me than baseball.

"I don't want people to think this is what defines me as a person," he said. "I look through my whole life for things that define me, things that are important to me. Not just baseball. I want to have a family and land and be a good man's man in society. That means a lot to me."

And he wouldn't trade that for anything - certainly not for a few baseball bats.