

THE CLOSER GETS CLOSE



Records and honors await Kenley Jansen, but his relationship with Don Newcombe is truly something to cherish BY JON WEISMAN

Kenley Jansen has never been to an All-Star Game, but no one is less concerned with that than Kenley Jansen.

At age 28, not even six years after his big-league debut and only seven after the light-hitting catcher began reinventing himself as a cutthroat reliever, Jansen was on pace to break the Dodgers' all-time saves record in June. That's something, he concedes.

But as far as individual rewards go, there is a Holy Grail for Jansen, one that he already has in hand, one that transcends anything in the record book.

Don Newcombe is his friend.

The legendary, pioneering Dodger starting pitcher, seven decades older than Jansen, winner of the National League Most Valuable Player and Cy Young Awards 60 years ago, is everything in Jansen's eyes. And the time they have spent together is a precious prize.

Newcombe comes to Dodger Stadium a few hours before nearly every home game. Alongside his wife, Karen, Newcombe will usually take a seat in the stands, a few rows back behind the on-deck circle.

Several members of the Dodger family will stop by to chat. But perhaps no current Dodger has more of a bond with Newcombe, the native of New Jersey who turns 90 this month, than the young man from Willemstad, Curacao.

"He's my father in the United States," Jansen said. "That's what it feels like."

Underneath his fedora in the Field Level seats, Newcombe brightens at Jansen's name.

"I think he's a fine human being, a fine human being," Newcombe emphasized. "He's like a son to me, and he wants me to just be a part of his life. That's all. No big deal, no instructions or anything, just a part of him."



HERO TIME

Somewhat miraculously, Jansen seemed to arrive in the Major Leagues fully formed.

Signed as a 17-year-old amateur in 2005, Jansen spent more than four seasons behind the plate — he even managed nine home runs for Single-A Great Lakes in 2008 — and didn't throw his first professional pitch until July 30, 2009, when he was playing for Inland Empire in the California League.

Less than a year later, Jansen was a Dodger. He made his MLB debut July 24, 2010 at Dodger Stadium against the Mets, striking out Angel Pagan and David Wright with his first eight pitches, then getting Carlos Beltran to ground weakly to short.

The very next afternoon, Jansen came in to protect a 1-0 lead in the ninth inning for Clayton Kershaw, and again struck out two in a perfect inning, for his first save as a Dodger.

Jansen would pitch 27 innings in his rookie half-season and allow a grand total of two runs (giving him a 0.67 ERA) with 41 strikeouts. It would be hard to argue that the 6-foot-5 Jansen had much growing to do. But Newcombe did.

"There's a difference in throwing and pitching," Newcombe said. "Kenley is a pitcher now. When he first started, he was a thrower."

Jansen has never had a bad season in the Majors. His highest ERA was 2.85 in 2010; his lowest K/9 rate was 13.0 in 2013. His career K/9 rate of 13.8 (through May 18) is more than two strikeouts better than the runner-up in Dodger history, Takashi Saito.

But there have been disappointments. Occasionally, the home-run ball would get him, such as on May 18, 2013, when he allowed home runs on consecutive pitches to Evan Gattis and Andrelton Simmons to surrender a 1-0 lead over Atlanta.

And there have been challenges, even



Kenley Jansen escorts Don Newcombe during Opening Day ceremonies at Dodger Stadium on April 12.

scars. On separate occasions in 2011 and 2012, he was sidelined with an irregular heartbeat, and had ablation heart surgery in October 2012. Last year, he missed the first 34 games of the season to recover from surgery to remove a growth from a bone in his foot.

Throughout those years, Newcombe wasn't his pitching coach. Rick Honeycutt has served that role for Jansen's entire career. But Newcombe has been a unique mentor.

"Mentally, he talked to me so much," Jansen said. "He helped me so much, (to) become a stronger man, a better man. I feel like he taught me a lot about just how to be strong out there and be competitive, on the field and off the field."

And Newcombe, the first African-American pitcher to be named Rookie of the Year, to appear in an All-Star Game,

The Big Story

to lead the league in strikeouts, to win the Cy Young Award, has also been an inspiration, and a reason to be thankful. They met back in Vero Beach, the Dodgers' longtime Spring Training home until 2009, but the connection deepened in Los Angeles.

"Because of Jackie Robinson, Roy Campanella, Don Newcombe — those three — I feel like, because of them, we're here now," Jansen said. "The fact is, they changed the world. Me being here, Doc (Dave Roberts) being manager and all that stuff.

"Don Newcombe, he's just huge, man."

Newcombe counseled Jansen about the importance of keeping not only his arm in shape, but his entire body. ("I make him run," Newcombe said.) But as you'd expect, the conversations they've had about life resonate the most.

"However you want to say it, he's a Hall of Famer in my heart," Jansen said passionately. "I know his whole life. Just think about all the stuff he went through — (there's) nobody stronger mentally right there. So he definitely helped me a lot. I feel like he just made me better."

Told how much Jansen looks up to him, Newcombe reacted.

"I don't look down to him," Newcombe said. "I look level at him and see how good he's doing, and I cheer him. My wife



sends him messages all the time, and if I'm watching on television and he gets on the mound, I tap him on the hill on the screen: 'Come on big fella, let's go — get that first lady. Throw that first fastball, get a strike.' He does all those things. He can't hear me, but he knows how I feel."

STATUS SYMBOLS

In the first quarter of the 2016 season, Jansen allowed one run. He stranded all eight runners he had inherited. He led National League relievers in wins above replacement.



CURACAO WOW

Kenley Jansen's place in the Dodger record book

CATEGORY	TOTAL/AVG.	RANK	LEADER
Strikeouts per nine innings	13.8	1	
Strikeout/walk ratio	5.01	1	
Strikeout percentage	39.2	1	
Fielding-independent ERA	1.98	1	
Saves	155	2	Eric Gagne, 161
WHIP	0.92	2	Takashi Saito, 0.91
ERA	2.20	3	Takashi Saito, 1.95
Adjusted ERA (ERA+)	168	3	Takashi Saito, 227
Games finished	230	4	Jim Brewer, 302

Source: Baseball-Reference.com. Statistics through May 20. Minimum 100 innings.



Jansen, being congratulated May 17 by Dave Roberts, began the 2016 season with 13 consecutive saves, after going 36 for 38 in save opportunities in 2015.

He has been considered an elite reliever for years now, but somehow, baseball's Midsummer Classic has never called. That's very likely to change this year, and Newcombe, for one, will be pleased.

"It would be great for him if he made the All-Star Game," Newcombe said. "He's one of the best, if not the best closer in baseball. I heard an announcer say that one night, and I told him so — and I said, 'That makes a lot of sense, and you ought to pay attention to it.'"

But the All-Star Game hasn't been Jansen's measuring stick, and that's not likely to change. When future Hall of Fame slugger Albert Pujols told Jansen that he had good stuff, that was an All-Star moment as far as Jansen was concerned.

"To me, I feel better if a hitter tells me that 'Hey, this guy is an All-Star because this guy is tough to hit,'" Jansen said.

With the Padres in 2010, Adrian Gonzalez finished fourth in the NL MVP vote, with 31 home runs, a .393 on-base percentage and .511 slugging percentage, all while playing home games in one of baseball's toughest hitting environments, San Diego's Petco Park. But when Gonzalez batted against Jansen for the first time in the pitcher's rookie year, he struck out on four pitches.

It made such an impression that the next time he faced Jansen, a month later, Gonzalez bunted to get on base.

"He (later) told me how tough I was and how my fastball was coming out," said Jansen, who then struck out the next three Padres.

In contrast to the All-Star Game, the Dodger career save record, held by Eric Gagne at 161, offers more meaning to Jansen, because of his feeling for the history of the franchise. That feeling is very much tied in his desire to win and his respect for his Dodger ancestors.

"Yeah, it's a big reward, being the Dodger all-time closer," Jansen said. "There's a huge history behind the Dodgers, starting from Jackie Robinson.

"Even if you're not playing for that, you're playing for winning games, (but) just to become a Dodger all-timer at this time, it definitely feels awesome because of the history of the Dodgers and who you're playing for."

Listening to Jansen, you could already imagine the moment after the record is broken, when Jansen sits down next to Newcombe, and they have a nice talk about it.