

Letter to the Editor: Chase Utley will be missed by Phillies fans, and animal lovers, too

By Rich Westcott, Times Guest Columnist

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Some time ago, my wife and I adopted a dog that was badly in need of a new home. The previous owners, having purchased the pedigreed dog for a large chunk of money, had for some unfathomable reason turned to abusing the lovely creature. After they were finally persuaded to let her go, we became the lucky owners.

This was by no means the first dog we'd ever rescued. Nor was it the last. But there was one thing about this youngster that we'd never experienced before. It had a computer chip, which identified its owner, imbedded in its neck.

Perhaps as dog people we should've been more knowledgeable about such things. But we'd never had a dog with a computer chip, and we had no idea how to access the information.

Then, along came Chase Utley.

Utley and I had had a variety of conversations over the years, mostly when I was seeking information or his opinion for whatever book I was writing at the time. Although a quiet person who was never too talkative, Chase was always very cooperative and for me, it was always a valuable interview.

But sometimes, we also talked about one of our favorite subjects — dogs.

A pet owner himself, Utley and his wife, Jennifer, were heavily involved in raising funds for the Pennsylvania SPCA, and over the years had raised more than \$1 million for that and other pet-rescue organizations.

I figured, if anybody would know how to extract information from the chip, Utley surely would. And so I asked him one day before a game if he could tell me how to do it.

“Sure,” he said. From there, he told me exactly what I needed to know, mixing his verbal instructions with hand motions that told me everything I needed to know. Shortly thereafter, I followed his directions, gleaned from the chip the information I wanted, and changed it accordingly.

Perhaps this may seem like an insignificant story. But to me, it is one of my favorite Chase Utley stories. It wasn't about baseball. Yet, Utley went out of his way to provide information relating to a subject about which he cares deeply, and his willingness to help was greatly appreciated.

Now, Chase has chased his last run home for the Phillies. The greatest second baseman in the team's history has gone to the Los Angeles Dodgers where he will join the greatest shortstop in Phillies history, Jimmy Rollins.

With the Phillies trade of Utley, they took another step toward imitating the 76ers and their questionable status of tanking. The departures of Utley, Rollins, Cole Hamels, Jonathan Papelbon, and others means that the Phillies, like the 76ers, who disposed of their veteran players, are pinning their hopes for the future on prospects and draft choices. In most cases right now, nobody can safely say if they will make good major leaguers. Maybe they will be and maybe they won't.

Like some of his other traded teammates, Utley's departure has not been easily digested by the fans who put him at the top of the pedestal. After all, over a period of 13 years, he played the game with huge talent, and was a key figure in the Phillies' 2008 World Series victory and their team record of five straight trips to the playoffs.

Chase hit more than 30 home runs in three seasons. He hit better than .280 six times, and drove in more than 100 runs on four occasions. He is a six-time All-Star selection, a four-time Silver Slugger winner, and a deluxe defensive player who entered this season with an outstanding .982 career fielding percentage.

No player in the Phillies dugout was ever more focused than Utley. Here's a guy who would get to the ballpark many hours before a game. Instead of texting or playing with his iPad, Utley went to the video room and studied game films. He analyzed the starting pitcher that night and the other hurlers on the opposing team. He critiqued his own batting swing and what he did with it the night before. And when batting practice on the field was over, he'd travel to the team's underground batting cage and hit some more.

Utley was the consummate pro. A five-tool player, he had the ability, he was intense, and he had an unlimited love of the game. He played more games than any second baseman in Phillies history, and when the time comes, he will surely be awarded a place on the club's Wall of Fame.

Meanwhile, to dog lovers and to Phillies followers, he will be sorely missed.

Rich Westcott is a baseball writer and historian, and the author of 25 books, including one coming out in January on Philly's championship pro teams. He once covered sports for the Daily Times.

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