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BRAVES PITCHER JOHN SMOLTZ

On moving back into the rotation after three seasons as closer



Braves pitching coach Leo Mazzone (left) and John Smoltz find a lot to feel good about on Feb. 8 during workouts for pitchers at Turner Field. Smoltz, whose closer role goes to Dan Kolb, says he has no doubts about starting again. Photos by BRANT SAN DERLIN / Staff

Pitching he's fit

Eager Smoltz to return to his prime condition, slot

By DAVID O'BRIEN
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The bald spot and booming voice are familiar, but there's something different about Braves pitcher John Smoltz.

A week before another spring training, the 17-year veteran is brimming with a rookie's enthusiasm. His buzz isn't from the hyperbaric chamber Smoltz sometimes naps in.

He's been on a crest of anticipation since Dec. 11, when the Braves traded for Milwaukee closer Dan Kolb

"It's like being 25 again," Smoltz said Tuesday during Leo Mazzone's pitching camp at Turner Field. "I'm going to spring training with a lot to be excited about."

He's 37 and a four-time elbow surgery patient, including two procedures



John Smoltz trained harder this offseason and reports **no problems with an elbow that has had four surgeries.**

since he was last a regular starter in 1999.

But Smoltz said he doesn't have the questions and concerns that fans and others do regarding his elbow and the rigors of pitching 200-plus

innings.

"I don't have any doubts," he said. "Zero doubts."

He'll report to spring training in his best condition in years after a winter of increased training uninterrupted by illness, injury or surgery rehabilitation.

Smoltz increased his throwing, running and core-strengthening regimens to prepare for the move back to starting. He looks leaner and more muscular.

"He's loaded for bear," Braves general manager John Schuerholz said. "John's on a very rigorous training program, always looking for ways to make

himself stronger and better. That's his nature.

"This guy wants to have every edge he can."

Please see **SMOLTZ, D2**

Smoltz: Ace optimistic about new pitching mix

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and has a 159-115 record and 3.37 BItak-iri48Veititer Starts, along with his .12-4 Mark and 2:60 BRA in 26 rotation. On a budget, *Cf., -P051360120 Marti

But now Smoltz., who both turns 38 in May, is enter an ace, uncharted waters. No such accomplished pitcher has

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