

Wednesday, Sept. 3 at 11 a.m. ET

Baseball: Jim Abbott

Jim Abbott

Former MLB Pitcher

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Jim Abbott won 87 games and pitched for five Major League Baseball teams during a 10-year career, despite being born with only one hand. Abbott will be online **Wednesday, Sept. 3 at 11 a.m. ET** to take your questions about his life, career and his work with the Labor Department to help raise awareness about the talents of people with disabilities.

Jim Abbott: I'd just like to say thanks for coming today, I'm in town working for the dept. of labor, trying to create awareness in the jobs community for people with disabilities, and to try and create awareness with employers about the talents of people with disabilities. It's similar to how coaches looked at me when I was growing up, to see what I could do and not what I couldn't. I'm thrilled to do it, and I'm glad for the washingtonpost.com to help us out.

New York, N.Y.: For those of us who rooted for you and can only imagine this, would you please tell us what it was like to first put on a New York Yankees uniform and to go out and pitch in Yankee Stadium? You are an important piece of history in what we locals feel is an historic building. Thank you for being here today and chatting what us fans.

Jim Abbott: It is a historic building, in that history hits you right in the face when you put that jersey on. As a visiting player it's a special feeling, but as a Yankee, when you put on the pinstripes, there's a moment of recognition that this is special and different. The stadium plays a big difference in that feeling that moment you walk on that beautiful field.

It was a thrill to play in New York, even though I wasn't the greatest of pitchers there. I have great memories and it's part of my career that I cherish the most.

Washington, D.C.: Jim - You were one of my favorite ball players growing up in LA and I saw you pitch for the Angels on more than one occasion (You are also my fave Golden Spikes awardee and baseball Olympian.) I wonder, did you face any discrimination on your way to the Show?

Jim Abbott: Thanks you very much for knowing so much of my bio. I'm proud of the Golden Spikes award.

I didn't face a lot of discrimination, at least outward discrimination. Of the most part growing up, I was surrounded by people who had an optimism, an ingrained optimism that if you had the talent you could accomplish what you wanted.

That's why I'm so excited about the Pitch Program. I was approached by the Dept. of Labor, and I found that many people faced the kinds of barriers you might think I faced in baseball. But the coaches I had saw me for my talent and my ability, and we're trying to promote the same kind of attitude in the workplace.

On the baseball field, if you had the talent, you could do it. I was lucky to have people who could look past my right hand and say "okay, what can you do to help us." I've spent my time since baseball trying to promote the same idea.

Santa Barbara, Calif.: Hello Jim:

It's really nice to hear from you.

Question: Did you have a plan for a career after baseball? It seems that many athletes struggle to build a life/career after a lifetime of sports. Thank you!

Jim Abbott: I didn't have a plan -- my baseball career came to an end quickly, as most do, and it's a very difficult transition. I can say I don't have any regrets. I miss my teammates, but I don't look back with any regrets. I cherish that time, but I'm ready to move forward. I've looked to continue some of the things I did off the field when I was playing -- talking to kids, encouraging people, trying to be a positive voice in a time when we're surrounded by people telling us what we can't do. Look, if a kid from Flint, Michigan, missing his right hand, can pitch in Yankee Stadium, the possibilities in life are endless.

Loudoun County, Va.: Jim: I am from Michigan, and I have a memory of seeing you on Detroit TV, when they first found out about you in high school, showing you hitting in high school, and hitting home runs! Is my memory correct?

Jim Abbott: You have a good memory, a long memory! I was a pretty good hitter in high school. I think I hit 7-8 home runs my senior year. Luckily one was captured on TV to be remembered. I took a lot of pride in my hitting, and had two hits in the major leagues as well. One came at Wrigley Field, another one of those historic buildings, and it's one of my career highlights.

Clayton, N.C.: What do you think of the state baseball these days, with all the steroid allegations taking place?

Jim Abbott: I follow the game quite a bit, particularly this time of year. I live out in Southern California, so I pay particularly close attention to the Los Angeles Angels. I think they have an incredibly good team this year, they're a strong organization, and I'm looking forward to see how they do in the playoffs. They're fun to watch, the fans are excited, and I'm going to be rooting for them and hoping they go a long way.

I think the state of the game is better and more healthy than it has been. I think there was a recognition that steroids became a problem. When testing became more stringent, you saw statistics and performance come back down to Earth. I think what you see on the field now is a better representation of what people are able to do.

I love baseball, I love seeing people get excited about it. The Rays are a great story, Joe Madden is a former coach of mine, so I'm rooting for them. It's a great time of year, and I think baseball is doing well, and better.

New York, N.Y.: Baseball is America's sport. You don't have to be tall to play it, as in basketball, you don't have to be big to play it, as in football. You can be any size and shape as long as you work at it and develop your skills. You can be short, fat, deaf, missing a body part, and you can play baseball. You can even be visually challenged and be an umpire. Thank you for showing that, if you put your mind and heart to it and work it, one can be a success.

Jim Abbott: You said that about the umpires, but I agree with the rest of your message completely. That's what's so great about baseball. If you have the talent, you can do it, and there's a spot for you.

It's sad that only one out of three people with disabilities are working, and these are people who can work, who want to work, and have a lot of abilities to bring to the workplace. We're hoping we can create some awareness so people will look at them for their talent.

I like to look at the example of a left-handed reliever. He might struggle against right-handers, but there's a spot for him in the game if he's good against left-handers. Baseball is all about identifying your strengths, and knowing there's a spot for you in the game. And I think that's a wonderful message to put out there.

Alexandria, Va.: Jim,

Big fan, even when you pitched for the Yankees. It was always a joy to watch you play, thanks for time today and the 10 years on the mound.

You've chosen a unique opportunity compared to some of your teammates and other athletes. Can you tell us a little bit about what your doing and how you became involved.

Thanks in advance.

Jim Abbott: I do some speaking, motivational speaking. But mostly right now I'm focused with working with the DoL, and specifically their office of Disabilities Employment Policy - ODEP - which is a really dynamic and cool office. It's filled with people who have faced many challenges, but have so many strenghts and so much to offer. And every day, they are out there looking to assist not only people with disabilities, but employers, and looking to create opportunities for people who want to work. They're trying to show people what talent is out there.

I was approached by the Asst. Secretary, Neil Romano, who has a past that relates to baseball, has done some work with MLB. When he opened my eyes ot some these statistics, and related it back to baseball, I was more than happy to jump on board. Since meeting with this office, I can't tell you the incredible effect that had on me. I had to sit through three briefiends -- I felt like a govt official -- but they showed me all these incredible things they're doing for kids and people and the opportunities they're creating.

If you're looking for more information, if you go to www.ability.dol.gov, you'll find an incredible amount of info about what odep does, and the work that's available.

Besides that, I'm raising my two girls, coaching some softball, and I retain a great relationship with the Angels.

Former Long Islander: Just wanted to say that it was great to see you pitch on old-Timers Day! What was it like?

Jim Abbott: That was great. I had so much fun being back at Yankee Stadium for the last time, taking a good look around, seeing old friends like Tino Martinez, Jimmy Key, Paul O'Neil. It is such a thrill. When I was introduced, I had to pinch msyelf a little bit. Looking at all those great players and thinking "What am I doing here." I made sure to take it all in and remember what it was like and how special it was.

Pittsburgh, Pa.: Jim: How do you help young people, disabled or not, to identify realistic sports goals?

Jim Abbott: Well, I don't think of it in terms of being realistic -- I think there are so many stories, that if someone would have sa back and said "is his realistic" their dreams would have died right there.

When I talk to kids, I try to encourage them to do what they love to do. I get letters from kids who dream of pitching or playing baseball, and you look at their physical abilities they might not be a great fit. But I believe that if they love it and they practice it, anything is possible.

When I was growing up, I'm sure there were teachers who thought that soccer might be a more realistic goal for me -- though they might not have seen my speed -- but I think, especially when you're young, move past what people think you can do or what's been done before or what people think is possible.

DC: Mr. Abbott,

I first want to commend you on a great career. I was a little leaguer while you were a ball player, and you were a great source of inspiration for all of us. I would also like to point out that you were an Olympian, right?

My question is this. Who inspired the ball-glove-to-hand transition that you mastered? Was it something that you developed naturally? I guess what I want to know is, did you have the drive to play baseball yourself, or did a parent or coach encourage you and teach you the technique?

Jim Abbott: Well, it was my dad and I -- my dad introduced me to the game. Once we figured out that I wanted to play, we tried to figure out how I could play. We started playing catch in the front yard, and started to look for a way to instinctively find a way to catch the ball and throw the ball with my same hand.

I remember being different growing up, and that sports called to me and it was my way of breaking through barriers. I looked forward to recess, because sports allowed me to say "I'm just like you." I spent a lot of time practicing. I loved it, it provided my inspiration. I spent a lot of time throwing a wall against a brick wall. I drove my parents crazy. It would bounce back to me quickly and I had to get the glove on -- I would pretend I was a Tiger or Nolan Ryan. I was practicing, but it wasn't work, it was fun. I think that's how I learned to switch the glove off faster and faster. It was something I wanted to do, and I really wanted to fit in.

Washington, DC: I want to thank you for all of the work that you do to educate the public about limb differences and the positive example that you set for those with limb

difference. Was there any one thing that your family did or did not do to inspire you to never give up and to chase your dreams?

Jim Abbott: I owe a lot to my parents. They are my heroes. Not because they did anything extraordinary, but because they raised me instinctually. They gave me this feeling that, yes, I had a challenge, but that I was up to it. Somehow they made me feel special because of the way I was born, that it was almost something to be lived up to. I would be thrilled to carry that kind of message forward, and that's what I try to say to kids with limb differences, to people considering hiring those with disabilities. A lot of people are returning from the service with missing limbs or other injuries, but there is still so much to be lived up to and talent left. And my parents were really, really good about not treating me special, but making me feel special.

Laurel, Md.: I just want to take time to thank Jim for his being such a great role model for kids, including my son who was born without a left hand. One of my prized possessions is a picture of Jim and my son in the Angels dugout, taken 12 years ago, at Camden Yards with Cal Ripken in the background. Jim was a great pitcher, being one of only a few to go straight from Michigan to the big leagues without a stop in the minors. Thanks again.

Jim Abbott: Thank you -- it's great to hear from you. I hope your son is doing well and that we converted him to an Angel fan that day, despite Cal's presence.

Rockville, MD: Hey Jim,

What do you miss most about the game? What really makes you wish you could still be playing? And who was the toughest hitter you ever faced?

Jim Abbott: I miss the competition the most. The build up of being a starting pitcher, that preparation of five days, looking forward to that next start, the challenge of it. Mentally and physically it just pushed you in ways that are very hard to duplicate.

I miss the teammates and the camaraderie in the club house. The laughs, the jokes, the silliness.

(I miss the paychecks a little bit.)

The toughest hitter I ever had to face was George Brett, when I first came to the majors. Even though he was a lefty, I could not get him out. I think I helped him to win a batting title one year.

Re- Going Blue: OK the important stuff....your Wolverines... How many wins for the new guy on the football field?

Jim Abbott: I'm scared, but trying to stay patient after one game. I'm predicting 8 wins, and as long as one is against OSU, the rest don't matter.

Washington, DC: How would you rate the nation's current ability to utilize the talents of its handicapped citizens and how would rate that capability compared to when you were starting your major league career? Thanks!

Jim Abbott: I think that people want to support people with disabilities. I think there's a great openness to that idea that I'm very thankful for. I had a chance to play in other countries as an amateur and I don't think the level acceptance came anywhere near where it is here.

That being said, I do think there are perceptions and barriers out there that people naturally perceive. And when you look at the statistics and see that only one in three people with disabilities are working, people who want to work and have the talent to go out there and do great things, then obviously there's still a lot of untapped potential. That's why the PITCH Program and the DoL are doing great things to continue to push what's available to people with disabilities and make that something the U.S. can be proud of, that in this land of opportunity, everyone has an opportunity.

Woodbridge, Va.: I'm a lifelong Detroit Tigers fan. I was always disappointed that you never wore a Tigers uniform, especially because you're a Michigan native and (I think) a fan of the team growing up. Did you ever hope to play for the Tigers? Is there a reason why you didn't?

Jim Abbott: I did dream of playing for the Tigers as a kid, I was a big Tigers fan, those great 1980s teams. But, honestly, the opportunity just never came about. I was drafted by the Angels, traded a few times, but I love and miss the old Tiger stadium.

Claremont, CA: How did you get into speaking?

Jim Abbott: I was introduced to public speaking by a great lady, who shared a similar trait as me, she suffered an accident and lost a hand when she was younger, and went on to do great things, including writing a manual teaching people how to type with one hand.

She told me about her work and then encouraged me, and her family was in the speaking business, and she told me that I could do it. I didn't believe her, but she kept encouraging

(or badgering) me, and little by little, it's taken off. I'm very thankful to her and gratified that we've been able to make so many great connections through speaking with so many great organizations throughout the U.S.

Pitching in front of 40,000 fans at Yankee Stadium and speaking in front of 40 people is almost the same amount of nervousness. Before you're start it's an all day, and before you speak, it might be three minutes before you go on, but it's the same. And it doesn't change. But my training in baseball has helped me to know that that anxiety can make you better, but you have to manage it. Speaking has been a great avenue to explore some of the same methods and practices as I did in baseball - preparation, focus, the ability to think on your feet.

And what's great about speaking, no matter what, the audience is always going to be nicer than they are in Fenway Park.

Reston, VA: Once you were in baseball, did you find other players to be role models for yourself?

Jim Abbott: Absolutely. Cal Ripken was a tremendous role model, with his perserverance, intelligence. Nolan Ryan was my hero when I first came into the league, watching his amazing work ethic and dedication to the game. I always seemed to gravitate toward the short stops - Cal, Alan Trammell was a great favorite of mine, Bert Blyleven was a teammate when I was rookie and another great role model in terms of dedication on he field but able to have fun off of it.

Philadelphia: Not a question so much as a comment: Jim, you are the classiest guy in baseball. Do you remember a Friday night game at Fenway (I believe it was in '91) where you faced Clemens? Terrific pitchers' duel, one of the best-pitched games I've ever seen.

Jim Abbott: I remember it seemed like, every time I went to Fenway, I matched up with Roger Clemens. Some were better than others, but I remember pitching well against him some times. And those nights, pitching against Roger Clemens in Fenway Park, are the kinds of nights you truly cherish.

Baltimore, MD: Do you have a career defining moment? Would it be the no-hitter?

Sad to see an old classic like Tiger Stadium being torn down.

Jim Abbott: I think the two moments that stand out to me, as being favorites, are winning a gold medal in the Olympics in 1988, and pitching a no-hitter in Yankee

Stadium as a Yankee. In a career you have a lot of ups and downs, great moments and tough moments, but those are two memories that will always be very special.

I'm truly disappointed that baseball was dropped as an Olympics sport. When I played it was just amateurs, and I thought it was an incredible way of playing the game. We were 100 percent focused on winning -- who would be on the roster, who would pitch the final game. We talked about that long into the night, and it brought that team incredibly close together. Some of the guys on that team, Robin Ventura, Ed Sprague, Tino, are some of my best friends, and we shared that bond.

I'm disappointed because I think the game has so many great lessons to teach, and that could be world wide. And I'm even more disappointed that softball was dropped. Being the dad of two girls who love softball and look up to those players -- it gave them something to look up to and aspire to and to take that away is really disappointing.

Reston, VA: What do you think of the two disabled athlete stories coming out of South Africa, where one wanted to try and compete to be a sprinter and the other was a open water swimmer?

Jim Abbott: I was rooting for them, and amazed by the perservance and creativity of the sprinter (I'm going to mangle his name...) It's so remarkable what people can do when they truly love something. And that's the type of spirit I want to be involved with, that I look to for inspiration, and what make the Olympic games so special. People come from so many different backgrounds and abilities and are able to represent their countries.

What's important is that, like the people at odep, every single one of them could use the excuse of being born different or having this disability or limitation. But what I take away from these athletes, or the kids that I've met all over the U.S., is that you can never use the circumstances of your life as an excuse. People will let you get away with that. But you know in your heart what you are capable of doing, and to give in to not taking advantage of that is the greatest disappointment. You need to look at things in terms of what you do have, and that you have a strong obligation to make the most of what you have been given.

That's where you see the drive and the desire to prove yourself. I imagine that's how those athletes see things -- not in terms of what they don't have, but what they do have.

Jim Abbott: Thanks so much, I had a ball. This is my first online chat, and the questions were great. I'm amazed that they came from all over the country. We appreciate your support, and hopefully you'll take a look at the PITCH Program -- ability.dol.gov -- and to continue to make the most of what you've been given.

