

## OUR MAN NICK GETS A HIT OFF ROCKER

By **NICK PARISH**

It is high, it is far . . . well, it's a bloop over the third baseman's glove. Still, it was a hit off a former major leaguer, and I'll take it.

It's not every day an average Joe gets a hit off a pitcher who has played in the World Series. But yesterday this writer did just that.

My victim? None other than John Rocker, the former Atlanta reliever, nemesis of New Yorkers, now trading on his declining stuff for reality TV and the amusement of out-of-shape scribes.

The 31-year-old lefty was in town promoting Spike TV's "Pros vs. Joes," which made its debut last night, pitching to schlubs like me in a batting cage in Bryant Park.

Sure, it was a publicity stunt, but of the 11 batters he faced - myself, a blogger and nine fans who won an ESPN-Radio contest by writing a 50-word essay on how much they loathe Rocker - I was the only one to get a hold of one of his pitches.

He didn't scare me, though the M.C. was shouting out my newspaper affiliation while Rocker was hitting the high 80s on the radar gun. I wouldn't have put it past the pony-tailed reliever to plunk me and settle the score for the long history of venom directed at him from these pages.

Rocker's first pitch was past me before I got the bat off my shoulder. My feeble swing was still moving as the catcher returned the ball.

I got back down into my David Eckstein stance, choked up with hands apart, gripping the bat like Ty Cobb used to do. This time, I thought, get the timing right. Don't get humiliated.

I planned on starting my second swing when Rocker put down his Gatorade. I imagined 7 train riders, maligned in Rocker's infamous vile quote, chanting for justice. Then by some bit of luck, I connected and heard the most satisfying bat crack of my career - I pulled the pitch to imaginary left field.

"You put a little stick on it right there," Rocker told me later. "Most of the guys were having a hard time. But honestly the background stinks; you can't be hitting with a white background and people standing 10 feet behind the pitcher. But it was nice they got to get in there and see at least what a pseudo-professional fastball looks like."

Rocker called it quits after a few games with the Atlantic League's Long Island Ducks, but says he'd consider a comeback if an opportunity arose.

"If I can throw up 35 innings and have a 2.00 ERA," he said, "maybe somebody'd pick me up."

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