



Schilling says Arizona delivered him to a higher level.



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PHOENIX - Curt Schilling is coming home - again.

Phoenix has always seemed to serve as a checkpost in Schilling's life. And while the street signs leading to his old home on Willow Avenue might never change, the same can't be said for the pitcher following them.

"My first night back after I was traded (from Philadelphia to Arizona on July 26, 2000), I was driving to the hotel down 32nd Street," Schilling said, "and I remember saying to myself that 17 years ago I was driving down this exact same street, and if you have had somebody driving down the exact same street 17 years later, you would say that they would never get out of this town. And to think of where I went."

The 16-year-old in that black Chevy LUV pickup truck could have never imagined that his journey out of Arizona and back again would take the route that it has.

Schilling admits that, as much as he evolved during the 14 major league seasons leading up to his initial return to his hometown in 2000, it was the three-plus seasons back in Arizona which truly defined him. And then, with the addition of his three years in Boston, you end up with the No. 38 you find today.

"What I was when I went there and what I was when I left there is two drastically different pitchers," said Schilling of his time with the Diamondbacks from 2000-03. "When I went there I had a place in the game from a reputation standpoint, and I think being part of those teams and pitching the way I pitched kind of elevated it."

When Schilling arrived in Arizona from Philadelphia - for Omar Daal, Nelson Figueroa, Travis Lee, and Vicente Padilla - he had made his mark. He hadn't had an ERA of 4.00 or higher since 1994.

But while his childhood landmarks hadn't gone anywhere upon his return, Schilling was greeted with a different kind of alteration.

He discovered that the physical challenges of a major league season demanded more of him than he had previously given. He discovered such disciplines as yoga, pilates and even martial arts, all of which certainly hadn't been on his baseball radar while attending Shadow Mountain High in Phoenix or nearby Yavapai Junior College.

"It was a point where I realized that to be in the upper half of the upper half, there's almost nothing that they do that conforms to what society does," Schilling said. "You do things dramatically different because the standard, the norm, is what everybody else does."

The change in philosophy paid dividends.

"He changed a lot," said Red Sox strength and conditioning coach Dave Page, who was with the Diamondbacks during Schilling's tenure in Arizona. "When he got to us he was 253 pounds and he pitched for us at 233 to 236. We went back in the weight room in Philadelphia and their guys were like, 'What are you doing? You didn't even know where this place was.'

"He was one guy who I looked forward to seeing every day, for a lot of reasons. He worked hard for me and he is so passionate for this craft and the industry. I love to hear him talk to young guys and just watch games with him. He taught me a lot about how to watch games. We didn't have that before he came. He kind of set our compass."

Another huge element of Schilling's metamorphosis in Arizona was the other ace on the Diamondbacks staff, Randy Johnson. The big lefty wasn't a local, having grown up in California and attended USC, and had only been with the Diamondbacks since '99, but he had clearly made his mark.

It was a presence that wasn't lost on Schilling.

"It dawned on me the second day I was in Arizona, the Sunday after I pitched and saw (Johnson) pitch, that I had never been on a staff with somebody else where when they took the ball it was a win," he remembered. "In Philadelphia I had pretty much been that guy, and when you're there by yourself it's hard. All of a sudden you have someone who totally alleviates that stress. It was unbelievable to watch. It was so special.

"It was a fun period of time because I grew up there. It wasn't a problem, whereas you can go home and have problems with people and time. It was a nice time. I was a very different person coming out of there than I was when I went there."

But as time went by during his stint in Arizona, it became clear that the next road in his baseball life was ready to be ridden. Boston would become another jumping-off point. **For the kid who charted every pitch during the 1975 World Series as a 9-year-old and ate and slept the baseball simulation game APBA, the potential for a new kind of passion was perfect.**

"There is nothing even close to what Sox Nation is. I am so overwhelmingly thankful that I have had the chance to experience this before my career is over," said Schilling, who has secured 30 tickets for a group that includes his former teammates from Yavapai, along with Little League coach Mike McQuaid and martial arts instructor Dr. Mike Foley, who also delivered the Schillings' first child.

"You cannot explain this and give it the due it deserves to other players," he said. "If you are a free agent, there are four or five other teams you are talking to, the dollars are somewhat comparable and Boston is one of those teams, it's a no-brainer. It's been unbelievable."

GRAPHIC: COAST-TO-COAST

Here's a look at some of the Red Sox personnel who are experiencing a homecoming of sorts this weekend during interleague play against the Diamondbacks, as well as some transplanted New Englanders who are now working in Arizona.

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