

SPORTS > MLB > LOS ANGELES DODGERS

Dodgers pitching coach Rick Honeycutt takes his longest season one step at a time

Honeycutt, 65, has slowed but not stopped after undergoing spinal fusion surgery in February.



Longtime Dodgers pitching coach Rick Honeycutt, front, has slowed but not stopped after undergoing spinal fusion surgery in February, the 65-year-old saying he wants to "finish what we started here." (AP Photo/David Zalubowski)

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LOS ANGELES — The staircase leading from the third base dugout to the Dodgers' clubhouse is, for some, a getaway. It's a runway for athletes to bounce energetically onto a baseball field. It's also a place for emotionally defeated men to hide their emotional defeat.

For Rick Honeycutt, the staircase is an obstacle.

The Dodgers' 65-year-old pitching coach trudged up the steps Friday afternoon for a pregame interview. For 10 minutes Honeycutt stood, as he usually does at work, answering questions about the rods and screws and fake disk holding his back together.

"I can sit if something's the right height," Honeycutt said. "The lower I sit it's just easier to stand."

In February, Honeycutt had surgery in Marina del Rey to fuse two vertebrae in his lower back – the L5 and S1, the two segments that comprise the lumbosacral joint. Anyone who has experienced symptoms of sciatica is at least physically familiar with their lumbosacral joint. Within two weeks, Honeycutt was back at work at the Dodgers' Camelback Ranch facility in Arizona.

The work itself seems easy enough. Honeycutt now has a standing desk in his office adjoining the Dodger Stadium clubhouse. Watching pitchers pitch, pregame strategizing, walking to the mound from the dugout – Honeycutt can do all the things a pitching coach would list on his resumé.

The travel is more difficult. The nadir was a late-April series at Wrigley Field in Chicago, with its low ceilings, sparse elevators, and meandering inner pathways laden with stairs. On team flights, Honeycutt must remind himself to get his legs moving every 15 or 20 minutes. The longest season in professional sports waits for no one.

"He's a pretty tough man," pitcher Kenley Jansen said of Honeycutt. "That can take a beat out of you, especially the long plane rides that we take. I can see that he can't sit most of the time, but he's working hard recovering, getting on his feet, get that little jog out there."

The father-son surgical team of Dr. Robert Watkins III and Dr. Robert Watkins IV check in once a homestand to monitor their handiwork. About a month ago, Honeycutt said he underwent an MRI exam. The scan revealed bone growth in

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“I want to finish what we started here,” Honeycutt said. “I love what I do, so it’s just a bump in the road, is the way I look at it. It probably would have been easier to take a few months away from it, but I didn’t really know. (Dr. Watkins) said in six weeks it’ll be better than it was the previous six weeks. It kind of goes in phases a little bit.”

Honeycutt has a contract for next season, which would be his 15th in his current role. Among active pitching coaches, only the Padres’ Darren Balsley and the White Sox’s Don Cooper have held the job longer. Honeycutt’s contract does not require he serve as the Dodgers’ everyday pitching coach, however. The opportunity to transition into a less hands-on role is there if he wants it.

“The last few years that I’ve been doing this, I almost take it a year at a time and try to throw my energy and effort into what I do, and try to do it the best I can, and hopefully help our guys the best I can,” Honeycutt said. “I don’t really worry about the future that much. I just worry about the present and all those things will be assessed after the season.”

ALSO

Dodgers shortstop Corey Seager was named National League Player of the Week on Monday. In five games last week, Seager went 10 for 20 with five runs scored, two doubles, a triple, two home runs and seven RBIs.

UP NEXT

Dodgers (LHP Rich Hill, 4-1, 2.68 ERA) at Padres (RHP Ronald Bolaños, 0-1, 5.79 ERA), Tuesday, 7 p.m., SportsNet LA (where available), 570 AM

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J.P. Hoornstra covers Major League Baseball and is the author of 'The 50 Greatest Dodger Games Of All Time.' He once recorded a keyboard solo on the same album as two of the original Doors.

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