



News

DUNSTON, JOHNSON OUT OF CHICAGO

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Shawon Dunston's 11-season stay with the Cubs ended Thursday after the team decided its Budget-O-Meter couldn't afford the luxury of a \$4-million shortstop who wouldn't switch to third base.

Meanwhile, in negotiations that went right up until the 11 p.m. (Chicago time) deadline, the White Sox and free agent Lance Johnson were unable to strike a deal after the club asked its center-fielder to take a pay cut from his 1995 salary of \$2.66 million. The Sox also chose not to offer Johnson salary arbitration.

"It's a very sad evening," said agent Phil Tannenbaum, who added that the two sides "weren't even close" on the money issue. Sox General Manager Ron Schueler indicated the club's final offer was equal to what Johnson made in 1995.

Earlier in the day, the Cubs offered arbitration to pitcher Jaime Navarro after the two sides were unable to reach a contract agreement. Navarro has until Dec. 19 to accept or reject the offer to arbitrate.

Dunston wasn't as fortunate. In a move predicted for weeks, the Cubs declined to offer him a multiyear contract or arbitration. By doing so, the Cubs forfeited their rights to negotiate with Dunston until May 1, all but guaranteeing the 32-year-old former All-Star will be in a different uniform next season. The same holds true for the Sox and Johnson, also 32.

"I never thought I would be with another team," said Dunston from his Fremont, Calif., home. "Now it's reality."

Dunston wasn't the only Cub to be given what amounts to a pink slip. As a formality, the Cubs also decided to part ways with outfielder/third baseman Howard Johnson and weren't able to come to terms on a one-year deal with reserve catcher Mark Parent.

Dunston leaves the organization after playing 1,120 games at shortstop, the fourth-highest total at the position in team history and only six games short of passing Ernie Banks. The former No. 1 pick in the 1982 draft, Dunston recorded 1,100 hits and a .265 career batting average. He had bounced back after injuries to hit .296 with 30 doubles last season.

"With the return of (second baseman) Ryne Sandberg and the fact Rey Sanchez is moving over to the shortstop position and the fact Shawon was not high on the idea of switching positions without a multiyear contract, we just felt it was in the best interests of all the parties concerned not to offer arbitration and we'll go in a different direction," Cubs General Manager Ed Lynch said.

But Dunston said he knew at season's beginning this was probably his final year with the Cubs. He also said the option of moving to third never was presented to him officially, nor did he think the Cubs actually expected him to accept the position switch without the security of a multiyear contract.

"I think they asked me to play third because they didn't want me anymore," Dunston said.

Had the Cubs formally asked him to move and given him at least a two-year deal, Dunston said he would have seriously considered accepting an offer. But it never happened.

"It would have been 50-50 on a switch--if it would have been for the best," Dunston said. "But don't be switching me because Ryno's back, because you have to take care of Ryno. If you want me to switch because you think it will be the best for me to play third base for my back, for the Chicago Cubs . . . I have no problem with that. But when Ryno re-signed with the Cubs, I knew I was definitely gone then."

There are other possible reasons for his departure. Dunston is 32, has a recent history of back injuries and was a high-ticket item at \$3.78 million in 1995, compared to the \$675,000 Sanchez earned last season. No Dunston also means the Cubs have more money for free agents Mark Grace and Randy Myers. And by not offering arbitration--which Dunston might have accepted--the Cubs don't risk a third party awarding him what likely would have been in excess of a \$4-million salary. The Cubs weren't willing to gamble.

The St. Louis Cardinals, one of three teams known to be wooing Dunston's close friend Grace (along with the Padres and Cubs), would be Dunston's first choice for a new connection.

"I want to stay in the National League and I want to play against the Cubs," he said. "I want to be on the other side. I just want to show them, not so much to prove them wrong, but just that I have a lot of good baseball left."

As for Johnson, he was coming off perhaps his best all-around year, having hit .306 with 40 steals (in 46 tries), a league-leading 186 hits and a career-high 10 homers. In one of Larry Himes' best deals, he came to the Sox from St. Louis with lefty Ricky Horton in February 1988 for pitcher Jose DeLeon. He is the only player in baseball history to lead his league in triples four straight years ('91-'94).

