

Arrival of Belle gives 'Sin City' another professional bad boy

■ **SIGNING:** Dennis Rodman, Bryan Cox and Bob Probert all are known for being trouble and being disliked

By Mike Nadel
The Associated Press

CHICAGO — Dennis Rodman, an infamous head-butter, says he'll strip to his birthday suit during his final game. Bryan Cox, a habitual spitter, raises his middle finger more often than most Americans raise the flag. Bob Probert, a recovering drug addict, brawls for fun.

And now, pro sports' Sin City

welcomes bat-corking, elbow-throwing, fan-abusing Albert Belle. He figures to be Chicago's baddest bad boy yet.

Rodman, Cox and Probert have had their run-ins with players, officials, management and fans. But they haven't tried to run down Halloween pranksters with their cars. They haven't been caught cheating. And they haven't gone out of their way to antagonize people at every turn.

"I'm not going to change my personality because someone wants me to," said Belle, who signed a five-year, \$55 million

contract Tuesday with the White Sox. "I found early on that you can't try to please everyone."

Belle, however, rarely tries to please anyone.

"It was always an adventure with Albert," Cleveland catcher Sandy Alomar said. "Sometimes you got a little bit scared when things were flying around the clubhouse, but what can you say? Albert's a great hitter."

Since 1991, the year after he spent 58 days getting treated for alcohol abuse, Belle has 234 homers and 711 RBIs. During the last two seasons, the numbers were even

more staggering: 98 home runs, 274 RBIs.

Production. That's what the White Sox hope they've bought.

They certainly didn't get Belle for his popularity. Like Rodman and Probert, he used to be despised in Chicago.

Not only did Belle lead Cleveland past the White Sox in the standings, but it was at Comiskey Park in 1994 that Belle was caught using a corked bat.

The tattooed, cross-dressing Rodman, he of the ever-changing hair colors, has become a local folk hero for helping the Bulls win a

record 72 games and the NBA title last season.

Probert, the former Detroit Red Wings enforcer who signed with the Blackhawks two years ago but missed his first season here because of drug problems, has been received warmly by Chicago hockey fans.

The city's football followers had no beef with Cox, but they might have if they had known him when he was with the Miami Dolphins. The linebacker was detested in many NFL towns, especially Buffalo, for repeated incidents of spitting, swearing and showboating.

MLB: Smoltz feels he is just entering his prime

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"We're absolutely delighted to have John Smoltz back as a member of our organization."

Smoltz worried that the Braves, knowing his desire to stay in Atlanta, would offer a deal at less-than-market value. But his agent, Lonnie Cooper, said Schuerholz made clear from the start of the negotiations that he was willing to spend to keep his pitching staff together.

Pitching has been the dominant factor in Atlanta's success this decade: five division titles, four NL pennants and one World Series title.

Atlanta now can turn its attention toward long-term deals for Greg Maddux, who won the Cy Young Award from 1992-95, and 1991 winner Tom Glavine; the other key members of the rotation are under contract through 1997. The Braves also have Denny Neagle, acquired in a midseason trade with Pittsburgh.

"I think we have needs before doing long-term contracts for anyone in particular," Braves president Stan Kasten said. "Whatever needs arise, we'll take care of, and along the way we'll also continue to make decisions. You can't pay 25 guys at these levels, but we'll do the best we can."

The previous high contract for a pitcher was \$6.5 million in David Cone's \$19.5 million, three-year deal with the Yankees. In total dollars, the previous high was the \$28 million, five-year contract signed by Maddux in 1993.

In addition to his base salary, Smoltz would get a \$250,000 bonus if he wins two Cy Young Awards during the deal.

Baltimore, Toronto and the New York Yankees also had serious discussions with Smoltz's agents, but Cleveland showed the most interest after losing Belle to the White Sox.

"It was very rewarding that they thought that highly of me," Smoltz said. "At the same, I think Atlanta showed the ultimate concern."

Although he is coming off the best year of his career, Smoltz said he believes he's just entering his prime.

"My career is ahead of me," he said. "I'm going to be a better pitcher than I've been so far here and keep progressing. I'm only 29."

Smoltz was accompanied to the news conference by his wife, Dyan, and their two children, 5-year-old Andrew and 3-year-old Rachel.



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