

Pettitte agrees to 3-year contract with Astros

Pitcher gives up \$7.5 million to play in front of hometown fans and family

By Michael A. Lutz
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HOUSTON — Andy Pettitte followed his heart back home to Houston, making a "gut-wrenching" decision Thursday to leave the New York Yankees and accept a \$31.5 million, three-year contract with the Astros.

After winning four World Series championships and six AL pennants in New York, Pettitte hopes his winning ways will help lead Houston to its first-ever title. And he'd like an old friend to join him — Pettitte is trying to get Roger Clemens to push back retirement and pitch for the Astros next season.

"I left him this morning. He's still working out with me. We'll see what happens," Pettitte said. "I know the media's already hit him up on that, and if I feel there's a chance, I'll hit him up on it, too."

To fill Pettitte's void, the Yankees turned their attention to Kevin Brown.

The Yankees and Dodgers agreed to the outline of a trade that would send Brown to the Yankees for right-hander Jeff Weaver, two minor leaguers and \$3 million, two baseball officials said on condition of anonymity.

Brown, who turns 39 in March, has the right to block a trade and has not yet been asked about it, agent Scott Boras said. All players must pass physicals, and the Yankees want to review Brown's contract before signing off on the swap, the officials said.

"We hate to lose Andy Pettitte," Yankees owner George Steinbrenner said in a statement. "We know the fans may be disappointed, but if you're counting us out next year, don't bet the house."

With the Astros, Pettitte forms a powerful front end of a rotation that already included Roy Oswalt and Wade Miller. If the Astros make it to the postseason, Houston's pitching would be tough to handle.

Still, the Astros are counting on Octavio Dotel to replace closer Billy Wagner, traded to Philadelphia to save money.

"All I've known in New York was winning," Pettitte said. "I wouldn't have come here if I wouldn't have felt I had a chance to win."

Sounding wistful at times, the 31-year-old left-hander said the Yankees' failure to pursue him aggressively allowed him to turn his attention to Houston, which wound up signing him for \$7.5 million less than New York offered.

"When I left there after (World Series) Game 6, I never really envisioned myself in a different uniform," Pettitte said. "I thought that they would try to make a serious push to sign me then."

New York's initial proposal, made just before Pettitte could start negotiations for all teams last month, was for \$30 million over three years, including some deferrals. The Yankees didn't make another offer until late Wednesday night.

Randy Hendricks, Pettitte's agent, told the Yankees during the day that Pettitte was on the verge of going to Houston and suggested that if New York wanted to catch his attention, the Yankees should offer a \$52 million, four-year contract. Even with that, Hendricks couldn't guarantee Pettitte would accept.

"At that level, we weren't comfortable," Yankees general manager Brian Cashman said.

New York countered with a \$26 million, two-year offer with a third season at \$13 million that would become guaranteed if Pettitte wasn't on the disabled list for much of 2005.

By then, it was too late.

"Over the last two weeks I felt my heart was really tugging me to come back here," Pettitte said.

Pettitte, who helped the Yankees win four World Series titles and six AL pennants, was 21-8 last season with a 4.8 ERA, improving his career record to 149-78.

Pettitte will get \$5.5 million next season, \$8.5 million in 2005 and \$17.5 million in 2006 — with \$7.5 million in the final season deferred until July 1, 2008, according to contract details obtained by The Associated Press.

In addition, the lack of a state income tax in Texas and not having a residence in New York will add to an annual savings of about \$1 million.

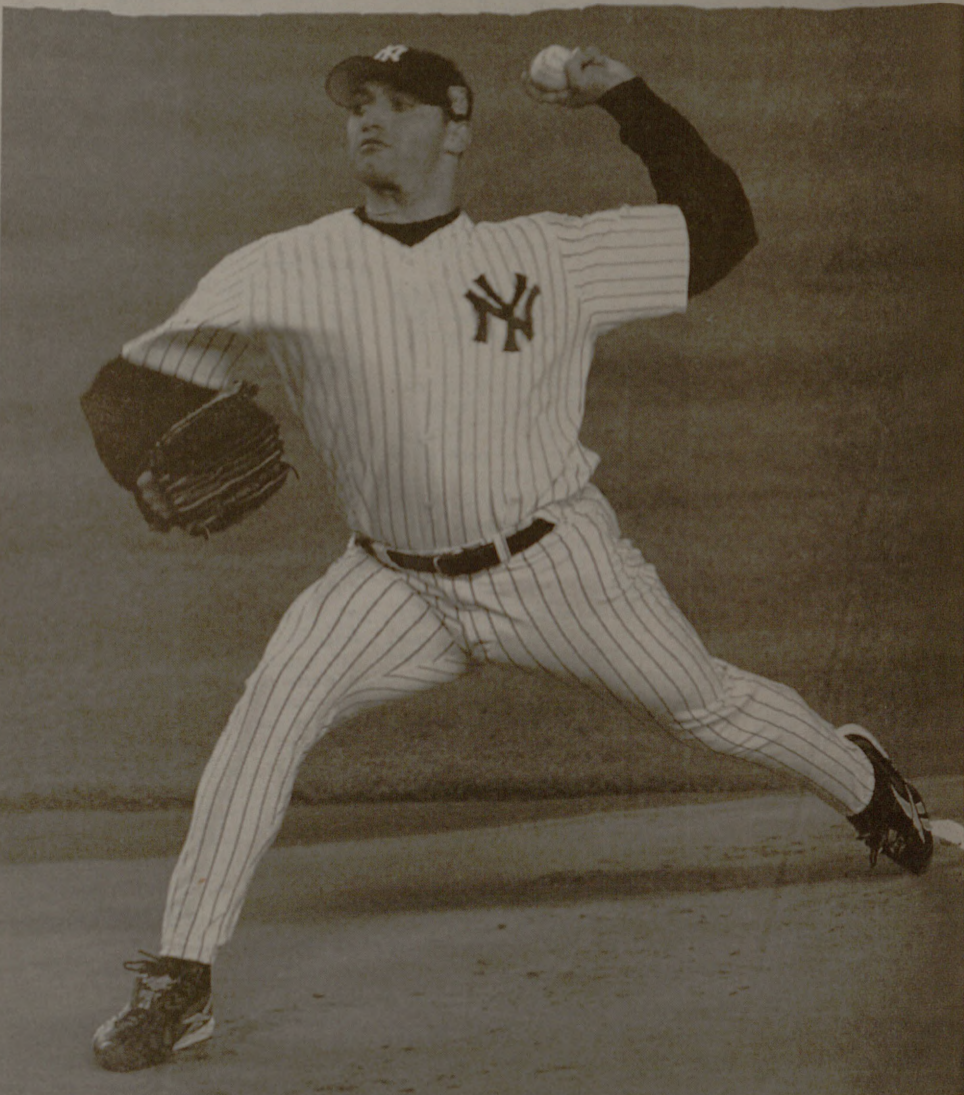
Pettitte lives in nearby Deer Park. His wife wanted him to sign with the Astros, but his father lobbied for the Yankees.

"I didn't think this would be a reality," Pettitte said. "But the fans of Houston in the past six weeks have just really embraced me. I'm a Houstonian and they've really let me know that."

He never considered the offer by the Red Sox. "I'm a Yankee. That's all I know is Yankees," he said. "I just couldn't do that, to tell you the truth. I couldn't do that to my teammates."

With his departure, only Derek Jeter, Mariano Rivera, Benji Williams and Jorge Posada remain from the group that led the Yankees to titles.

"It's going to be a little strange," Yankees



New Houston Astros pitcher Andy Pettitte, shown here as a New York Yankee in the 2003 World Series, signs a three-year, \$31.5 million contract Thursday to play for the Astros.

reliever Steve Karsay said. "It's going to be sad to see him go."

Clemens sounded surprised by the Yankees' bargaining.

"This is their guy," he told Sporting News Radio. "I think if they would have come and hit him hard early, no other team would have been able to sway him away."

Clemens, who has 310 wins, lives in Houston and also is represented by Randy and Alan Hendricks. The 41-year-old right-hander didn't say whether he'd consider joining the Astros.

"We've let his representatives know if Roger changes his mind about retiring, we'd be interested in talking to him," general manager Gene Hunsicker said.

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