

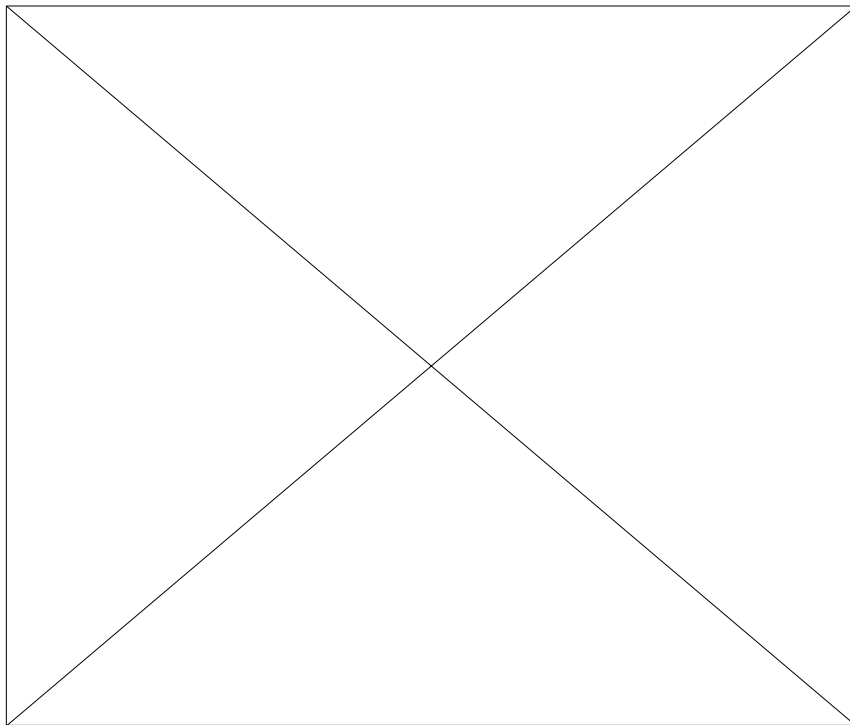
The fog slowly lifts for former Twins and Brewers third baseman Corey Koskie as he attempts a comeback

As Corey Koskie tries to return to baseball, he can't help but feel bitterness toward a team whose doctors took a hazy view of his post-concussion symptoms

By Kelsie Smith

ksmith@pioneerpress.com

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FORT MYERS, Fla. — Here, steps from the crowds and the autograph seekers, beside fields gleaming with prospects and ballplayers prepping for a brand-new season, Corey Koskie plods across a deserted infield. Two mismatched bats (one stamped with Justin Morneau's name) are slung over his shoulder, evidence of how far he is from the major league camp going on just steps away.

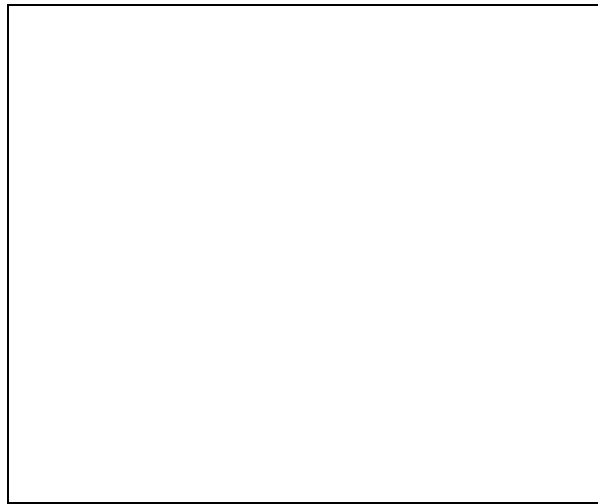
A few fans ask for autographs, a couple wish him well, but the only person concerned where Koskie is headed is his 8-year-old son, Bradley, who trudges along behind his father's broad frame and familiar loping footsteps.

There is a deliberateness about Koskie, a kind of symbolic solitude on a Friday morning in late February, two years and eight months removed from his last major league game, when a fall in foul territory caused a concussion, whiplash and years of debilitating post-concussion symptoms.

Since, Koskie, 35, has been on a trying odyssey, a solo hunt for answers about his lingering issues and then his future, waiting for the symptoms to subside while dealing with a disturbing feeling that the sport to which he had given so much of his life had deserted him when he needed it most. In the next two weeks, Koskie would make Canada's World Baseball Classic roster and sign a minor league deal with the Chicago Cubs, narrowing his pursuit of answers to a search for just one more — whether his baseball career has passed him by.

On this day, he stands outside a fence,

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hoping to find out when his batting practice pitcher is coming to throw. For a week, he has been at this, the batting practice, the ground balls. He ambles from one field to another, across the neatly trimmed grass, finally stopping near third base.

His big white sneakers tap the red dirt at the position he used to own, the place beyond his grasp since that benign-looking tumble almost three years ago. In the distant background, baseballs thump into catchers' mitts while pitchers throw in the bullpen, coaches bark orders at impressionable infielders. But here at a field in the farthest corner of the Twins' minor league complex, Koskie is alone.

The 35-year-old former Twin is used to that.

THE SICKENING FALL

The videotape has been watched too many times — hundreds, even. No matter how often it's rewind and restarted, the results are the same. Koskie, playing his usual third base for the Milwaukee Brewers in a nondescript game on July 5, 2006, tracks a foul ball, spins around and lands awkwardly. That's it.

The headaches, dizziness and nausea settled in immediately, and when they didn't subside, no one seemed to understand why. It has taken Koskie almost three years to strip away the effects of that fall and, an even more difficult task, to peel away all of the voices telling him he's fine, that the symptoms he tried so hard to labor through were make-believe.

"I was told by a Brewers official that my brain was pretty much 95 percent healed," Koskie said of Milwaukee's response in the months following his fall. "That what I was feeling was all mental."

For weeks after the concussion, Koskie said, the Brewers' doctors explained away his incessant lethargy and sudden nightly need for 12 hours of sleep — both common issues for concussion sufferers — as laziness. He said the team told him he should keep working out, and Koskie — who only later was told that physical activity not only inhibits recovery from post-concussion syndrome but also draws out its symptoms — listened.

He spent most of his days in a nauseated fog, describing it as "a glass separating me from the rest of the world. Like looking out a window, you know what's out there, but you're just not there."

Take a simple game of catch in September 2006. Home and trying, but failing terribly, to recover, Koskie pushed himself outside to his driveway. Bradley wanted to play catch, and Koskie wanted to feel better.

One of Bradley's throws veered toward his dad's shoulder, but by the time the major league infielder was able to react to the toss from his then-6-year-old son standing 60 feet away, the ball was long past Koskie, clanging into the garage door behind him.

"In my conversation with a Brewers doctor, I said, 'I'm feeling a lot better, but still . . .' and I kind of explained that story," Koskie recalled. "And he said, 'Well, Corey, you haven't played baseball for about three months now, and you're going to be a little bit (rusty).'"

"I looked at him and I said, 'No. I can catch a ball. I can catch a baseball from a 6-year-old kid at 60 feet. You can't tell me that just because he threw the ball off target I'm not going to be able to catch the ball. Major league baseball isn't that easy where all of a sudden in three months you're not going to be able to catch. I've listened to you all this time, but that's ridiculous. That is flat-out ridiculous.'" "

Koskie, in the midst of his postconcussion haze, said he finally woke up to at least one thing.

"That's when I really got frustrated with these doctors," he said. "That's when I knew these guys had absolutely zero idea."

Asked if the Brewers knew well enough how to handle post-concussion syndrome when Koskie was injured, assistant general manager Gord Ash declined to comment, citing medical privacy. He added that nobody else with the Brewers could comment, either. Asked if the Brewers told Koskie his symptoms weren't real, Ash again said he

couldn't comment. Asked finally if baseball's awareness of, and ability to deal with, concussions and their aftereffects were adequate, Ash offered an answer.

"It's certainly not a condition or a topic that was well addressed or occurred that often," he said. "But I think once it became apparent that it wasn't just isolated cases, baseball has done a credible job of putting a program in place."

Since Koskie's fall, Major League Baseball has experienced an increase in concussions, and the league has become more informed about brain injuries. But at the time of his concussion, Koskie claims, no one — not his agent, not the Brewers and not the players association — knew what to do with the third baseman's overwhelming symptoms.

Not until the 2008 season did Major League Baseball recommend that teams staff a neurological consultant and submit all players to baseline neurological testing. This offseason, MLB hired its own expert, Dr. Alex Valadka, vice chairman of neurosurgery at the University of Texas Medical School in Houston, to be available to all 30 teams for concussion-related inquiries.

Still, MLB vice president of public relations Pat Courtney said in an e-mail, these are only recommendations. Care for players who have suffered concussions is up to individual teams. Like Ash, MLBPA head Don Fehr said last week that baseball has done a better job of understanding and dealing with concussions in the past couple of years.

Less than a month after his fall, Koskie underwent the baseline test, called the ImPACT test, now employed by most major league teams. The Brewers hadn't started baseline testing their players, so Koskie's results were compared with those of the general population, a group of about 30,000 people, he said. Of that number, Koskie said, 99.5 percent fared better than he did.

"As a professional athlete, you pay people that are supposed to protect you in these certain situations, and nobody wanted to touch me with a 10-foot pole. I went to the players association, my agent. I'm trying to grasp at anything, and I'm just not getting anything from these guys," Koskie said. "I didn't really push the envelope with Milwaukee. I was like, it's my career, my life, I'm going to figure this out for myself."

A NEW SYMPTOM

Koskie spent the rest of the 2006 season and all of the 2007 season on the disabled list. Following the 2007 season, the Brewers declined his \$6.5 million option for 2008. Koskie is emphatic that he doesn't want to be a bitter ballplayer, but as issues with Milwaukee escalated — he and the team are still wrangling over payment of his medical bills — a new symptom emerged.

Concussions are known to affect a sufferer's psychological state, and eventually Koskie had trouble getting over things. He was irritable and had a hard time calming down.

"All that stuff with the Brewers was just consuming me," he said, "and that's just not me."

Speaking about the Brewers, Koskie's sentences were choppy and guarded. He searched for a way to explain how his relationship with the team evolved and eventually ended. He aimed for diplomacy, explaining that since his concussion the medical understanding of brain injuries — in baseball, at least — has improved. Ash said the team has no hard feelings toward Koskie, and though it's clear Koskie wants to feel the same, it's just as obvious he doesn't.

In his search for answers, the Canadian turned to hockey, a sport ahead of baseball in its knowledge and treatment of concussions. He talked to Minnesota native and Calgary Flames defenseman Jordan Leopold, whose career almost was cut short by concussions. He spoke to the father of former NHL most valuable player Eric Lindros, whose son's career was so hampered by concussions and injuries that he averaged only 58 games a year over his 13 NHL seasons.

"That's the thing that was really frustrating for me," Koskie said. "When I look back at it, I shouldn't have had to make those calls. Somebody should have protected me in there."

Lindros and Leopold assured Koskie that his symptoms — headaches, dizziness, nausea, acute pain at the base of his skull, and days when half of his face and the bottom of his right foot were numb — were real. Their words left Koskie hopeful that, maybe, another league's medical staff held his solution.

"I'd give this information to the team trainers and say, 'Hey, you know what? This is what I'm feeling. Why don't you give the hockey trainers a call and see what they tell you?' " Koskie said. "They never called any of them."

So Koskie continued on his own, learning more about post-concussion syndrome and his individual symptoms. In all, he consulted "five or six" neurologists, "three or four" general physicians, three physical therapists, an osteopath, a neurological chiropractor and his home computer.

But the computer screen bred headaches and nausea. He could read for only five minutes before his symptoms overwhelmed him. He slogged through his search alone mostly, he said, because his wife, Shannon, was busy with the couple's three young sons.

"For a year after my injury, I was in my own little personal prison," he said. "I couldn't go to the mall, I couldn't do anything. I couldn't watch TV."

This winter, Koskie met Twin Cities physical therapist and whiplash specialist Dr. John Groves. By then, many of Koskie's concussion-related symptoms had subsided, but the neck pain remained. Groves loosened the muscles at the base of Koskie's skull, and the third baseman credits this with erasing the last of his symptoms.

Dr. Paul Comper, a neuropsychologist at the Toronto Rehab Center and consultant for the NHL Players Association, said most concussion sufferers recover from their symptoms in a matter of days, weeks at the most, with just a small percentage

suffering indefinitely. For those with lasting post-concussion syndrome, time is the most essential healer.

Koskie came to Fort Myers hoping to force an end to this part of his life. Either he could still play, or the two-plus seasons he had been away had left his skills too deteriorated.

Whatever the result, this time, baseball had to give him the answer.

SKILLS RETURNING

His batting practice pitcher ready to throw, Koskie empties his pockets onto the grass at Bradley's feet and picks up a bat, the one with the Justin Morneau moniker.

At 8 and 6, respectively, Bradley and his brother Joshua remember when their dad was a ballplayer. At 3, Caleb doesn't. For the older two, the difference in their dad's life before July 5, 2006, and after is marked.

"Joshua will be looking through pictures and say, 'That's before Daddy had a concussion,' " Koskie said. "Bradley had a tough time with it. The year I got hurt, he went into kindergarten, and his first three weeks of school he had a lot of trouble with the adjustment. That's not his norm."

Bradley's dad had trouble adjusting, too. Never wanting to turn down his boys (who can be heard on Koskie's voicemail message in tiny voices squeaking, "This is Bradley, Joshua and Caleb. We're Corey Koskie's personal assistants. Leave a message, and he'll call you back right away"), Koskie got used to playing with them until he couldn't anymore.

In Fort Myers, Koskie steps into the batting cage, lays down five bunts and starts to swing. He is strong and surprisingly fit. His bat speed, he says, is good. His mechanics are coming back. He hits some line drives, a few deep fly balls, and on the last pitch of his first round, he lets loose with a home run swing. The ball caroms off the top of the batting cage, and Koskie mutters some frustrations.

Still, all of this is a staggering leap from seven months ago, when, sitting in the basement of his Medina home, Koskie said, "At one point, I'm going to start going for some walks and see how that goes."

Then, even walking symptom-free marked a good day.

For months after his concussion, the back of Koskie's hand throbbed with a constant bruise because, unsteady, with a warped depth perception and a wobbly stride, his hand would smack into door handles each time he walked into a room.

"I'd be at the dinner table," Koskie said, "and I'd knock over a bottle while I was grabbing for a fork."

Patients with long-term post-concussion syndrome continually labor through unyielding symptoms despite tests that show no problems. In those cases, Comper

said, the key is to monitor the patients and be especially careful not to alienate them by claiming their symptoms are all in their imaginations.

"When you try to talk people out of their symptoms or explain everything away, it's not doing that person a service. It's really just driving a wedge between them and the road to recovery," Comper said. "Manage the recovery as opposed to dictating it, because you can't dictate it. You can't just say, 'This is when you have to get better. You should be better by now.' You can't. It doesn't work that way."

FEELING UNWANTED

Koskie arrived in Fort Myers wary of his health, his ability and his future. His goal of coming back to baseball centered upon playing for his native land in the WBC, but when Canada released its provisional roster this winter, Koskie's name wasn't on it.

After 2 1/2 years of being unable to muster even a 15-minute bike ride without getting sick, Koskie had spent the fall playing 18 holes of golf and the winter on ponds, playing hockey with his boys. Then, just when he was ready to pick up a bat, he already had struck out.

He came to Florida, anyway, hoping to convince his country — and perhaps himself — that baseball hadn't evaded him. He worried the sun, which caused his symptoms to run so rampant in 2007 at Milwaukee's spring camp in Arizona that he couldn't drive himself to the ballpark, would feed a return of the headaches, nausea and fatigue.

Right away, Koskie's glove was untrustworthy, his swing unfamiliar. He wore his sunglasses constantly to block the bright rays from resurrecting his misery. Slowly, his bat started to connect, the ball found his glove, and his sunglasses came off.

Morneau — who never forgot that Koskie gave him "six bats, a box of batting gloves and a little advice" during his first batting practice after signing with Minnesota a decade earlier — began frequent communication with Team Canada general manager Greg Hamilton. The all-star first baseman and British Columbia native passed along how Koskie looked at the plate and in the field.

"Anybody who's been through what he's been through," Morneau said, "but especially somebody you know, makes it even more special when they're able to come back."

A week before WBC camps opened, Canada came through, putting Koskie, an Anola, Manitoba, native, on its final roster.

FEAR SEEPS IN

Nine innings into the biggest step of his comeback, in his first professional game since July 2006, Koskie doubled, walked and scored three runs as Team Canada's designated hitter Tuesday in an exhibition game against Toronto.

Months ago, this type of return to the field would have been a dream, but afterward Koskie was conflicted.

In Koskie's first at-bat, a Mike Maroth offering hit him in the shoulder, and fear seeped into Koskie's consciousness.

Late in the game, that fear grew when he charged toward home. A spot-on throw from the outfield could have produced a collision at the plate, but the ball veered up the third-base line and Koskie crossed home standing.

"I was going up there, and I was like, 'I hope I don't get hit in the head,' " Koskie said. "It's in the back of my mind. I can't play baseball like that. I didn't really even think about getting hit in the head, but I did all of these interviews the day before, and the reporters were asking me all of these questions about 'What if?' "

After the game, he was rattled and weary. The hit by pitch, the near play at home, the two consecutive days of hard work under the South Florida sun, had his mind spinning and some of his symptoms returning.

This — the WBC, the minor league deal, had all been the plan — and it was progressing better than Koskie could have hoped. But with his family back in Minnesota and his head a bit hazy, Koskie wasn't reveling in his quality at-bats and his hard-hit double. Instead he was thinking about going home, once and for all.

He got on the team bus feeling sick, but got off it minutes later feeling better. By Wednesday morning, his fear also had subsided. Koskie realized the symptoms he had thought were concussion-related probably were caused by mild dehydration, from not drinking enough water.

His optimism, though cautious, had returned, and he started Wednesday's game at third base, going 0 for 1 with a walk.

When Koskie is done with Team Canada, he'll report to the Chicago Cubs' camp in Mesa, Ariz. But after his first game back Tuesday, when he was scared and feeling sick, Koskie was asked if he would consider retiring after the WBC, and his wariness showed.

"As of today, yeah," he said. "There's the whole thing of running, sliding, all that stuff. I don't want to go back where I was the last two years."

After all those months of symptom-shortened floor hockey games with his boys, "watching" TV with his eyes closed and knocking over bottles and cans at the dinner table, Koskie would be happy, he said in Fort Myers last month, to go home and simply live again.

"I can look at myself in the mirror. I know where I stand," Koskie said. "If I'm overmatched, I'm overmatched. I'll turn around and pack it in."