

## MISSOURI STATE

# Former Missouri State pitcher Pierce Johnson took the long way to big league success

*The former first-round draft pick used his time in Japan as a bridge back to Major League Baseball*



by Mary Ellen Chiles

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After spending time with the Hanshin Tigers in Japan, Pierce Johnson is finding success this season with the Atlanta Braves.

High school and college ballplayers are eagerly awaiting the Major League Baseball draft next week, which will launch them into professional baseball.

Some will make it quickly, like former Missouri State catcher Drake Baldwin. Drafted by Atlanta in the third round in 2022, he spent just over two years in the minors and is an NL Rookie of the Year candidate this season.

For some, it takes more time.

Former MSU pitcher Pierce Johnson is part of that group as he now settles into his role as a relief pitcher with the Braves (alongside another former MSU star in Baldwin). Johnson has a 2.84 ERA in 34 appearances this season.

A Chicago first-round pick in 2012, Johnson made his big league debut with the Cubs in 2017. He joined the Giants off waivers, bouncing between Triple-A Sacramento and San Francisco in 2018. Then, he was released and became a minor league free agent.

## **From big leagues to Japan**

After drawing interest from Japanese scouts, Johnson decided to play overseas in 2019.

“They want the home run hitters and the harder throwers, just because they don’t have a ton of that over in Japan,” Johnson said.

So, Johnson signed with the Hanshin Tigers and — along with wife Kristina — moved to Nishinomiya, in central Japan.

“We had been married literally just one year, so when we went over there, we had nobody else to rely on besides each other,” Johnson said. “So, I think it was great for us in our early marriage.”

Johnson received a \$1.1 million signing bonus when he was drafted in 2012, but after taxes, agent fees, and mainly minor league stipends for seven seasons, he was open to change.

(No pun intended.)

“You get offered a lot of money to go pitch (in Japan),” Johnson said. “It’s nothing like the States, but when you’re in your late 20s and you’ve only been in the big leagues for less than a year, it’s kind of a grind.”

Along the way, he got input from countless coaches with good intentions and eventually, he couldn’t hear himself think.

“Everybody had their own idea of what would make me the best version of myself, and I kind of lost who I was,” he said.

Turns out Japan was the right move.

“I liked how clean the country was; how safe it was,” Johnson said. “The transportation was incredible. The food was super fresh and healthy, and the portion sizes were smaller.”

Johnson had one American teammate, but he wanted to communicate with everyone else, too.

“Being in baseball, you pick up on enough Spanish to be dangerous,” Johnson said. “When I first was over there, my mind went straight to Spanish because that’s what I knew.”

Thanks to immersion, he picked up a lot of Japanese.

“By the end, I could pretty much get myself in a cab or on the train; go to dinner and order food; you know, the basic conversation with people,” he said.



Missouri State pitching coach Deck McGuire fields questions during MSU baseball media day on Wednesday, February 5, 2025, at Hammons Field. (Photo by Mary Ellen Chiles)

He did have another American pal just across the sea. Missouri State pitching coach Deck McGuire pitched for the Samsung Lions in Daegu, South Korea, in 2018. McGuire was drafted in the first round in 2010. The two spent several off-seasons training together in Colorado – and bonded over their shared experiences.

It was nice to have a friend nearby.

“He’s one of the best people I’ve ever met,” McGuire said.

## Try, try again



Pierce Johnson pitched for Missouri State in 2010-2012 before he was drafted by the Chicago Cubs. (Kevin Liles/Atlanta Braves)

Johnson planned to spend at least one season in Japan, but he didn't assume it was a bridge back to the MLB.

"I was like, 'You know what? I'm gonna go over here, give it my best, and if I end up finishing my career here, I finished my career here,'" Johnson said.

He wasn't going to quit.

"The Lord blessed me with this talent," Johnson said, "And I was going to see it through, good or bad."

He owed that to the people who made sacrifices to help him become a professional baseball player. People like his parents, he said.

"I feel like I'd be doing them wrong to give up on something that they've worked incredibly hard for, too."

He grew up with his future wife in Colorado, and he also kept going for her.

"My wife has traveled hotel to hotel, country to country, city to city," he said.

Kristina spent her pregnancy an ocean away from home, leaving Japan early to give birth in the U.S. Pierce joined her as soon as the season ended. They are expecting their third child this fall.

“It’s not just for me,” he said. “And now with kids, it makes it even more special that I get to play this game.”

## **A welcoming way**



Missouri State baseball coach Joey Hawkins hits ground balls to infielders during practice on Wednesday, February 5, 2025, at Hammons Field. (Photo by Mary Ellen Chiles)

Johnson was indeed able to parlay his success back to MLB play, signing with the San Diego Padres in 2019 and later playing for his hometown Rockies. He signed a two-year, \$14.25 million deal with Atlanta in 2023.

But he thinks about going back to Japan sometime. He wonders about coaching or scouting for his old team one day.

“I’m passionate about the country and the stuff that I learned, and I want more guys to have the opportunity that I got to go do that,” he said.

For now, he still likes to practice his “broken Japanese” with players and trainers in the MLB.

“I like to talk to those guys and maybe make them feel a little more welcome,” Johnson said. “I was in their shoes over there, just like they are over here.”

Johnson has always been hospitable, said Bears head coach Joey Hawkins. Johnson was a junior with high draft status when Hawkins moved from Ontario, Canada, to attend Missouri State as a freshman shortstop.

“When you’re young and walking into a college locker room, you got older guys and they can be a little intimidating,” Hawkins said. “He was always very welcoming to me as a young player, especially being really far away from home.”

Johnson even gave his teammate a place to crash when the Bears made the postseason.

“When we went to regionals, we had to move out of the dorms, and I lived in his apartment on the couch for a couple weeks,” Hawkins said. “So even though he’s a first-round pick, you would have never known it.”

More recently, in 2024, Johnson suggested a candidate for the Bears’ pitching coach search: McGuire.

The two still talk almost every day, and McGuire said Johnson remains a standup guy, whether he’s toiling in the minors or pitching his way to a multimillion-dollar contract.

“He’s never changed who he is based on where he’s at in his playing career,” McGuire said. “It’s never been at the forefront of who he is as a person.”

McGuire credits Johnson’s family, the people Johnson has played for all these years.

“I’m pretty fortunate to know his mom and dad and the family, and it’s a great collection of people,” McGuire said.

## Finding the Bears



Atlanta Braves pitcher Pierce Johnson pitched for Missouri State for three seasons before he was selected in the first round of the 2012 Major League Baseball Draft by the Chicago Cubs. (Photo by Missouri State University Creative Services, Photo)

Johnson grew up in California and Colorado, and the latter posed a challenge to recruiters.

“We got snowed out all the time in the spring, so nobody would really want to come watch us play, with the chance of not seeing us play at all,” Johnson said.

Luckily, former Missouri State pitching coach Paul Evans saw Johnson play travel ball in Topeka, Kansas, and Memphis, Tennessee. Johnson was hooked by the school, coaching and facilities.

“I ended up taking the scholarship and it was three of the greatest years of my life,” Johnson said.

Naturally, success took time.

“I was not very good my freshman year, and (Evans) sat me down,” Johnson said. “We hashed out some stuff that I needed to work on.”

Some 15 years later, Johnson is still pitching, and happy to be sharing the field with another former Missouri State Bear in Drake Baldwin (although they never overlapped at MSU).

“As soon as I got here, they told me there was another Missouri State guy here, so I connected with him immediately,” Johnson said.

Baldwin was named National League Rookie of the Month in May.

“It just makes me happy that a fellow Missouri State Bear — but also just a really genuine human — is having so much success at the big-league level,” Johnson said.



### **Mary Ellen Chiles**

Mary Ellen Chiles is a freelance photographer and writer based in the Ozarks. She graduated from Missouri State University with a bachelor’s in creative writing and a master’s in English, Creative Nonfiction Writing. **More by**

**Mary Ellen Chiles**

