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Yale quarterback refinds love for baseball

Vinny Pezzimenti - xxxxxxxx@centredaily.com

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The cruel memories come around far more often this time of year, with summer quickly coming to a close and the path to South Williamsport heating up with footprints.

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AP file photo/Bob Child

Former State College standout Brook Hart, who has made nine career starts as Yale's quarterback, was bitten by the baseball bug this spring and now has professional aspirations.

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baseball behind for good.

Only, he couldn't bear to give it up. And, now, it's Hart of all people who might soon be employed as a pro ballplayer with a major league organization, something Almonte never experienced.

Hart pitched for Yale this past spring as a junior after not having played the game competitively since his senior year in high school. Raw, yet possessing deep pools of potential, Hart was noticed by a Boston Red Sox scout, who recommended he play in the highly recognizable New England Collegiate Baseball League this summer.

Pitching against college standouts from around the country, and, at times, in front of numerous scouts, Hart went 3-0 with a 2.74 ERA for the Holyoke Blue Sox, who finished their season Saturday with a 16-26 record.

Not bad for a player who decided in December that he'd give baseball another shot.

It has been nearly nine years since Danny Almonte and Brook Hart waged a furious pitching duel, with a berth in the Little League World Series on the line serving as the back drop.

Almonte, of course, prevailed, striking out 16 State College American batters in Rolando Paulino's 2-0 victory. The hard-throwing lefty from the Bronx would become the face of Little League for his exploits in central Pennsylvania, a prodigy blooming before our very eyes.

A phenomenon he was, a future big leaguer for sure. Then it was discovered that Almonte was a little bit older than the rest of the boys.

Now, after failed goals of playing pro baseball and after a failed marriage, Almonte, 23, spent this past spring as an unpaid assistant coach for a high school team.

No, we never can assume where life will take any of us.

Which brings us back to Brook Hart, who would become a football star at State College High School and a starting quarterback at Yale, seemingly leaving

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“I believe if I keep developing as I have and keep getting better and keep working,” the 6-foot-5, 210-pound Hart said, “I definitely believe I will be given the opportunity to play baseball after college.”

And, still, football season looms behind the next door. Fall camp begins in two weeks at Yale and Hart will again be competing for the starting position with Nebraska transfer Patrick Witt.

In the meantime, Hart will hit the weight room, drill his left arm to prepare it for throwing passes instead of pitches and hopefully round up some able bodies in Centre County to run patterns for him.

All the while, Hart is pursuing a political science degree at the Ivy League school.

An exhale? Maybe at the dinner table on Thanksgiving.

It was during that holiday break last year that Hart first gave thought to adding baseball to his spring semester. A chat with Yale’s baseball coach and a quick tryout landed him a spot on the roster.

“He saw me throw a couple times and said he definitely had a spot for me on the team,” Hart said. “It went from there.”

Steady relief work landed Hart a starting role at Yale, which landed him in the NECBL, a wooden bat league that has helped produce numerous major league players (Stephen Strasburg, Andre Ethier and Joe Nathan, to name a few), as well as former Philipsburg-Osceola standout Matt Adams, who is the St. Louis Cardinals farm system.

Hart came out of the experience far more in tune with pitching than he was at Yale this past spring, when he went 3-3 with a 6.26 ERA in 12 appearances (8 starts) while possessing a fastball and little else.

“I was able to throw strikes pretty well, which I was a little bit surprised about how quickly that came back,” said Hart, who helped State College to the PIAA Class AAAA baseball finals as a senior in 2007. “Learning the ins and outs of pitching in the college game was pretty tough to pick up. I think that’s what I learned a lot about this summer.”

But summer is almost over, and ready or not, football season is approaching.

Having missed all of spring practice and his customary summer football routine, Hart will likely be at a disadvantage in winning the QB derby against Witt. The two split snaps last season, but Witt took over late in year while Hart didn’t attempt a pass in the Bulldogs’ final three games.

“I think it will be a challenge, at least initially, but I don’t think it’s a done deal about anybody’s playing time right now,” said Hart, who has made nine starts at quarterback the last two seasons. “I’m going to head into fall camp with that in mind.

“I’ve always found that fall camp holds a lot more weight with the coaching staff than spring practice. I think they’ll come into fall camp and see who’s more prepared to lead our team to win football games.”

Regrets? Hart has none. The decision to pursue baseball was difficult but altogether easy.

“I really just missed playing baseball,” he said.

Now, he holds aspirations of making a career out of the game. And if all else fails, Hart will own a diploma from one of the country’s most prestigious institutions.

“Coming out of Yale,” he said, “I’m going to have some pretty good connections.”

Sounds like an excellent plan. It’s no surprise that the devastating loss a 12-year-old Hart and State College American suffered against Almonte on national television has become easier to digest in time, even with Little League’s showcase looming again.

“Every once in a while I think about it,” Hart said. “It’s still something I wish we had the opportunity to do. It’s disappointing but it doesn’t affect me the way it used to.”

Vinny Pezzimenti is a sports writer for the Centre Daily Times. He can be reached at 231-4629 or vpezzime@centredaily.com.

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