

TheTimes

He's still the King of the Hill

Baseball: The persistent Sherwood grad earns his spot with the Clackamas Cougars

BY DAN BROOD

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FINE FORM — Sherwood's Taylor Hill, after transferring from Grand Canyon College, earned pitching and fielding honors in his first year at Clackamas.

DAN BROOD / THE TIMES

OREGON CITY — Taylor Hill's college baseball career didn't really start out the way he wanted.

He didn't exactly fit the mold of what the coaches at Grand Canyon University were looking for — but he wasn't discouraged.

He saw his first college baseball season conclude early, thanks to a season-ending injury — but he wasn't discouraged.

After he transferred to **Clackamas Community College**, Hill, who had always been a starting pitcher, was told he had to now become a reliever — but he still wasn't discouraged.

In fact, it seems like nothing would discourage Hill from working hard or from enjoying a whole lot of success.

The determined Hill, a 2007 Sherwood High School graduate, wasn't about to let any obstacle get in his way — and the Clackamas Community College Cougars certainly seemed to benefit from that.

"Things have been going great," Hill said with a smile earlier this week as he waited to work out with some of his Clackamas teammates at the school's baseball field.

But that might not have been the case earlier in Hill's college baseball career.

Hill, a 5-foot-10, 180-pound right-hander, was a standout pitcher when he played at Sherwood High School. As a junior, he helped lead the Bowmen to the 2006 Class 3A state championship game. He then pitched eight-and-a-third strong innings in the title tilt — a 9-2, nine-inning loss to Astoria.

As a Sherwood senior, Hill was named the Northwest Oregon Conference Pitcher of the Year. But, at the end of his senior season, the colleges weren't exactly knocking his door down.

"No one really recruited me except George Fox," Hill said. "And I wasn't offered any scholarship money."

So, instead, Hill and his Sherwood teammate, Ryan Codling, decided to head to Grand Canyon University, a Division II school located in Phoenix, Ariz.

"We saw it as a place where they were losing a lot of guys to graduation, and it was a chance to play four years of college baseball in Arizona," Hill said.

Hill did get some playing time at Grand Canyon, but not a lot.

"I wasn't the type of pitcher they were looking for, but that's OK," he said. "They wanted the typical tall pitcher who would throw in the high 80s, and that wasn't me."

He did make one start for Grand Canyon.

"I got lit up," Hill said with a laugh. "I replayed that game over and over in my head. It was still a good experience. I got to pitch against some Division II schools. I showed I could play. I found out about my strengths and my faults."

Late in the 2008 season, Hill, while pitching, was hit in the shin by a line drive. He didn't play the rest of the season.

That turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

Because he suffered a season-ending injury and because he played in less than 20 percent of the team's games, Hill was granted a medical hardship, meaning he didn't lose a year of eligibility.

"That was good," Hill said.

But, at the same time, he realized Grand Canyon wasn't the best place for him.

"I needed to come home," Hill said. "I had hoped to fight for some scholarship money, but I wasn't going to get any — and I didn't want to pay 24 grand for school."

The one and only school in the local area that Hill called was Clackamas Community College.

“It was close to home, but I didn’t really know anything about them,” Hill said. “Coach (Robin) Robinson was real friendly and made me feel welcome.”

Still, Hill had to go through a walk-on tryout. And, with his former Sherwood teammate Alex Wert catching for him, Hill turned some heads during his tryout and earned a spot on the team.

“They said they were interested,” Hill said. “I told them I’d come here and work hard.”

Hill made the team — but all of the pieces still weren’t in place.

“My role at the beginning was up in the air,” he said. “I wanted to be a starter — that’s what I like. But they saw me as a reliever. I fought it for a while. I wasn’t sure what I thought about it.

“I talked to the coaches and they explained why they wanted me to be a reliever. They knew I could throw every game.”

Hill, be it as a starter or reliever, was joining a Cougar team that hadn’t enjoyed much success in recent years. He also was joining a team where he knew hardly anyone.

“I tried to step back and see where I fit in,” he said. “I sort of took over a leadership role. I enjoy that. I enjoy the responsibilities. I know I owe a lot of success to the guys behind me.”

With Hill thriving in his new reliever role, the Clackamas team, which also had Sherwood grad Johnny Wade playing at second base and Tigard grad Isaiah Ferrer playing at shortstop, got off to a good start to the 2009 season.

“It started pretty good, but we were a streaky team,” Hill said. “We’d win five games in a row and then lose four in a row. The whole season went like that.”

A seven-game losing streak late in the season put Clackamas two games behind Lane Community College in the race for the last Northwest Athletic Association of Community Colleges playoff spot with eight games to play.

The Cougars responded with six straight wins — with Hill picking up two pitching victories and two saves during the streak — to wrap up the team’s first playoff spot in 13 years.

“It was crazy,” Hill said. “Because of injuries and guys quitting, we were down to 18 players at the end of the season, but it was 18 players who all wanted to work hard. Getting to the playoffs was huge.”

Clackamas lost its first NWAACC tournament game, played at Lower Columbia Community College in Longview, Wash., 4-0 to Columbia Basin. But the Cougars came back to score a 7-5 win over Lower Columbia — marking the team’s first-ever NWAACC playoff victory.

Hill played a part in the win, putting Lower Columbia down in order in the bottom of the ninth to get the save.

“That was awesome,” Hill said. “No one thought we’d beat them.”

Clackamas lost its final tourney game 9-1 to Mount Hood Community College, but the Cougars (25-22-1) ended up placing fifth among the 27 NWAACC teams.

“It was a great year,” Hill said. “It couldn’t be a better year to come back on.”

Hill played a major part in the Cougars’ big year. He finished the season with a 5-2 won-loss record and seven saves. He had a 1.55 earned-run average, giving up 50 hits while striking out 51 and walking 17 in 63-and-two-thirds innings of work.

The honors soon followed as Hill was named to the Southern Region all-league first-team as a relief pitcher. He earned second-team All-NWAACC honors as a relief pitcher. He earned Southern Region, All-NWAACC and an ABCA Rawlings Pacific Association Division Gold Gloves accolades as a pitcher.

“Those were all really nice,” Hill said. “The awards are flattering.”

Hill is already looking forward to the future — at Clackamas Community College and beyond.

For one thing, he says coaching might be in his future. He’s already found success giving pitching/baseball lessons to young players (kingofthehillbaseball.com).

But, before he thinks of a coaching career, Hill is focusing on his upcoming sophomore season at Clackamas Community College.

“We have almost everybody coming back and everyone is working hard,” Hill said. “Everyone is committed. That’s awesome to hear.”

Hill, who has earned some scholarship money at Clackamas, is also looking to get to a four-year college after his sophomore year.

“I’ve been sending out emails to everyone,” he said. “I definitely would like to stay close to home, but it all depends on my opportunity. Even if I don’t get recruited, I’ll go somewhere. I just want to play.”

Hill will get a chance to impress four-year college scouts when he pitches in the NWAACC Sophomore Showcase, which will be held this fall at Lower Columbia Community College.

“It’s like an all-star game,” said Hill. “It’s going to be cool to be part of that.”

It’s no secret what the scouts who watch Hill will see.

“I’m a consistent guy,” Hill said. “The last thing I want to do is walk a guy. I’m going to throw strikes and make them hit the ball.”

Oh, one last thing, he's not going to get discouraged.

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