

Alexandria Collegian Faces New York Yankees

John Pinkman

Blacksburg, VA - It is late in the afternoon on a hot summer day. All of your friends have gone home. To stay out of trouble, you too should be on your way home. But just a little more time. There is still light. There is still time to face the Mighty Yankees! There is still life in the tattered tennis ball that you have been banging off a brick wall with a chalk outline of the strike zone. You feel fire in your belly and lightning in your arm. You know you are ready!

The capacity crowd's roar echoes across the "Stadium that Ruth Built" as the cleanup batter for the Yankees approaches the plate with the bases loaded. "The Boss" looks down from his executive suite and glibly asks, "Who's the rookie?" The pounding of your heart joins the repeated pounding of the ball into your glove as you peek under the bill of your hat and with a last deep breath... you come set. With the wonder of fantasy you become the play-by-play announcer and at the same time the pitcher of record. In your most mature voice you say out loud, "Just up from the AA Club, he is one of the organization's best young prospects, but what a way to start his major league career. Welcome to the Show, young man! Here's the wind up and the pitch!" Just then, always then, Mom calls you in for supper. The Yankees will have to wait for another day.

That day came again and became real for senior Andrew Wells of Virginia Tech. Wells, a LHP and graduate of St. Stevens in Alexandria, was recently given the start and faced the top of the New York Yankee line up. The Yankees played an exhibition game at VA Tech in honor of the anniversary of 32 slain students. This time in real life, "The Boss" George Steinbrenner donated \$1,000,000 to the VT Survivor's Fund and the Yankees traveled from their Florida Spring Training headquarters in Tampa to Blacksburg to play the Hokies.

The Yankee greats made themselves so completely available to the fans and the Tech players during batting practice. It appeared that they would have writer's cramp from all the individual autographs. I have never seen pro ball players more gracious and needing, yes needing, to talk to and be with the baseball fans in the stands and the Tech team. Jason Giambi kept thanking the players and fans over and over. Talk about a Kodak moment - the *Yankee* players wanting to have their pictures taken with Tech students.



Photo:HokieSports.com

Alex Rodriguez at VT Press
Conference wearing custom
Yankee hat in Hokie Colors

The game was preceded by a warm and tearful ceremony which included the release of 32 giant orange balloons to the sky in memory of the fallen students and faculty. As much as the Yankees enjoyed being on campus, the reason they were there was inescapable. Choking back tears, Alex Rodriguez said, "This is the most important game I've played in my Yankee career." AROD then shared a meeting he had earlier that day when the Yankees visited the permanent 32 Hokie Stone monuments placed in front of Burrus Hall. "This girl comes up to me and asks me to sign her boy friend's picture. (As he is signing it) she says 'thank you; he died in the shooting last year.' I think it is very important for us to be here and unite with them for at least one day. Baseball can be a medicine... it can fix things for a short time. I wish we were here for something else."

GM Brian Cashman, a former Catholic University player, told me he thought that it would be a great experience for his pros to look into the eyes of the collegians and see the love of the game, how they took the field each inning and how they welcomed players back to the dugout, slapping high 5's for the smallest reason. "You start a process for an event like this and we were looking forward to coming. But as we get on the bus tonight each of us will leave with much more than we thought. This was very meaningful to us."



Starting Pitcher Andrew Wells with media

How do you prepare for a game like this? Or play a game like this? Do you prepare a game strategy or tactics? Not a chance. You manage nerves and anxiety; especially when you are mobbed by reporters for hours leading up to the game. You tell yourself to just keep breathing. Andrew Wells passed by me on his way to the mound as the starting pitcher. I reminded him -- it's just another guy with a stick.

Easy for me to say. Think about this for a moment. Andrew was about to face the top of the Yankee order in front of the largest crowd (by thousands) who ever attended a Hokie home game: Damon, Jeter, Abreu, AROD, Giambi, Posada. That's enough, don't you think?



Wells faces the Yankees in special “Pin Stripes” for the Yankee Day.

The game started and before you knew it, an error and a very small strike zone loaded the bases. Did you really think a college ump would ring up Derek Jeter and Bobby Abreu? He should have; Wells made quality pitches. Nonetheless there was one out, bases were loaded, and the next batter stepped to the plate. As Andrew turned to catch a breath he noticed the score board as it flashed in big - bright – red - letters.... Alex Rodriguez 3 Time MVP!

Wells went deep into the count with ARod. The next pitch produced a full powerful swing and the ball left the bat into the sky; so did the air in the Hokie fans lungs. Sweet surprise it was a sacrifice fly! Ok, now breathe – but not too long, for Jason Giambi walked to the plate. After a couple of awesome rips at the ball you soon understood how strong Giambi is; even off the juice (steroids). Still, Abreu was on second and Jeter on first. Wells came to the set position, looked carefully at the short stop working Bobby back to second, delivered a low fastball, and Giambi grounds into a double play to end the inning. Ok, breathe again.

Halfway to the dugout the entire Hokie team swarmed Andrew. After his one inning, Wells came off the field with the look on his face somewhere between joyous relief and the fatigued adrenaline rush of pitching a complete 9 inning game.

Wells told me after the game, “I just wanted to be present and in the moment. I wanted to take things as slow as I could so I could remember everything.” How did you feel when ARod came to the plate? “That’s what I always wanted, ARod up with the bases loaded. But that was also one of those times when I had to zone everything out and just concentrate on the glove.” Ever the optimist, Andrew was asked about the incredibly small strike zone. “Well, I have had him before, he is a college ump. I definitely threw pitches that in any other game would have been called strikes. But look at it this way; it gave me a chance to be in the game longer!”

One day many years from now, in Andrew Wells’ back yard, a little baseball pitcher will be late for dinner. Once again the mythical play-by-play announcer will call each vital moment of the game - his Dad’s game against the Mighty Yankees. But this time he and his Dad will have a really good excuse.

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