

A few years ago I wrote an article for CB entitled “Where have all the catchers gone?” Well, recently I found one. I was in Omaha covering this year’s College World Series. Reading the Texas media guide I noticed a catcher on the roster who lived near my home in Virginia. Now that’s strange because Texas primarily recruits players from Texas. I did not recognize the name.

Coincidentally we were staying at the same hotel as the Texas team. Later that day my son Jeff was in the lobby wearing one of our logo shirts. A player walked up to Jeff and asked if him if his father teaches in Virginia. He proceeds to tells Jeff that he took lessons from me many years ago.



West Springfield High School graduate Pack Landfair is a catcher at the University of Texas and an important part of the Longhorn baseball program. This weekend, he was in his usual place - the dugout - when Texas placed 2nd in the College World Series. Even though he was in practice clothes, Pack was overjoyed to be there. Pack has never played an inning for the Longhorns and perhaps never will.

Pack’s athletic story is one of persistence and overcoming years of injuries.

I first met when Pack at 13, when he voluntarily came into our baseball school to catch his friend Dan, who was taking pitching lessons from me. Ever loyal, Pack would be there each week with Dan. That is rare. Most catchers do not do that unless they are coerced. Pack tried to learn as much as he could, but wrestling was his main sport.

Pack played JV baseball as a freshman at West Springfield High School in Northern Virginia, but was a varsity starter in wrestling. In his sophomore year his hip was injured badly during the wrestling season and was forced him to miss much of the baseball season.

In Pack’s junior year his wrestling talent led him to the state tournament. Mysteriously, he dislocated his left shoulder several times during the post season matches and underwent extensive physical therapy.

Spring came and Pack showed up in a sling for baseball tryouts. His coach, Ron Tugwell, said he was automatically on the team without even having to tryout. You see, Pack had established himself as more than a tough luck player – he was class president with an “A” average. He didn’t play much that season because he couldn’t catch the ball due to his shoulder injury, he just occasionally pinch hit.

During the end of his junior spring season, his shoulder began “popping out all the time”. Pack was then diagnosed with Bankcards Syndrome, requiring major surgery that summer and 6-8 months of rehab.

Pack began receiving recruiting letters and official visits for wrestling from the Naval Academy and the University of Virginia that fall. Christmas saw Pack renew his

wrestling action, only to receive another severe injury on the same left shoulder in his first match of the season. Another surgery was performed by orthopedic surgeon Dr. Grossman of Washington, DC. This ended his wrestling career and scholarship hopes.

In the spring of his senior year, Pack showed up for high school baseball tryouts, again with arm in sling. “Coach, I can’t catch a ball”, he said to 1st year coach Ken Munoz. “Well, we need you on this team”, Munoz replied. He knew Pack and the depth of his character.

Depressed over his vanishing athletic career, Pack graduated but was ambivalent about going to college in spite of a 3.6 GPA and 1340 SAT score. “But Mom made me apply to a number of schools anyway.” Texas was one of those schools. “My step dad went to Texas and is a huge fan, so I applied and was accepted.”

Many of Pack’s family members on both sides were in the Navy. His uncle is a captain and in line to become an Admiral. After 3 years as class president, Pack was understandably led to continue leadership studies, so he applied for a scholarship in the Naval ROTC program. During his physical his large shoulder scar was noticed. “I left my sling at home and was on all kinds of pain medication. They asked about my surgery and how was I doing. Now, my uncle had advised me to answer any military question with ‘everything is great, sir’, so I did and got the scholarship!”

By the end of his freshman year at Texas, Pack’s shoulder had totally healed. “I could do pushups and felt strong.” He was then sent, as are all ROTC midshipmen, to his summer assignment. Watching Texas win the College World Series (CWS) on TV and at the ribbing of his friends, he decided to try out for the Texas baseball team next fall season.

So, Pack walks on at Texas. Now, 1 in 100 players make the team ‘walking on’ or trying out at reasonably competitive schools. This is Texas - 31 appearances at the CWS and 2002 National Champions! The odds are not in Pack’s favor. “It’s a huge school; if I failed who would know?”

He decided to report for tryouts. “But they changed the date and time. I knew the date had changed but I didn’t know the time changed, so I showed up as everyone was walking off the field.”

Dejected, Pack walks off the field. Coach Augie Garrido sees him and sees his huge bag holding catcher’s equipment. (Catchers are hard to find.) “Coach called me back, asked for my name and number, and said he’d call me the next day. He didn’t. So I went to his office, met him, and again he said he’d call me tomorrow. He didn’t. So I went back again to his office and he told me to come to practice in 2 days. I did, but Coach wasn’t there. He had gone out of town. Now, nobody knew why I was there. There I was in my sweats and everyone else was in their official Texas team practice uniforms. I felt like a total moron. But they let me practice with them.”

After practice was over, everyone left. No one said anything to Pack. “I didn’t know what to do. Should I come back? Is this all there is?” So he decided to chance it and come back the next day. This same scenario played out all week. No one said anything to Pack, so he just kept coming back. By the way, Coach Garrido was out of town all week!

One of Pack’s most memorable lifetime moments happened at the end of that week. All American, CWS MVP, Huston Street came up to him and invited him for pizza with some of the other players. At dinner, Huston started talking about the good times ahead and all the special ball gear that Texas players get (intoxicating to collegiate athletes). Pack says, “I’m not gonna be there for all that stuff.” Huston goes, ‘Yes you will, yes you will. I know you will!’ “Well, the team keeps 36 and I make 37”, Pack said.

Coach Garrido returned and called Pack into his office and said that he has heard good things about Pack while he was gone and he wanted him on the team. “He called up his secretary and said, ‘We are going to add a new player to the roster.’ Coach Garrido turned to Pack and said, “By the way, what’s your name?!” It turns out that the player he cut to make room for Pack transferred to Arizona and was on the team here in Omaha this year.

Pack joins the team, not because of his talent. “Texas had all the talent they needed. They didn’t need another star. I think Coach kept me because I just kept coming back,” Pack explains.

So Pack made the Longhorn team as bull pen catcher. When he was asked by someone if he got jealous because he doesn’t get to play, Pack responds, “I do play. I play in practice....that’s fine with me. That’s my role. This is great; I get to play with the greatest ball players in college. Because I’m here the two starting catchers get a chance to rest during scrimmages. They can take the day off! I’m glad to be here. We have so many players that can do a great job. They are much better than me and can help us win. My role is tucked away under the seams and I do that the



best I can and it all comes together when we win.”

Just before the series Coach Garrido called Pack into the office with a few other players. He told them that “during the post season the media will highlight a few players and they’ll make it look like those guys are the team. Your accomplishments may go unnoticed. But what is more important is that you know your accomplishments. You have earned the respect of all your teammates and that’s the biggest reward you can get.”

Pack feels his greatest moments come with his teammates off the field and the time he spends with Coach Garrido. “I can take so much of what Coach says and apply it to my life after baseball. The best thing I will remember, probably for the rest of my life, is what I learned from Coach Garrido. I think he knows so much about life. I can take so much of his advice about baseball and carry it over to anything I will do in life.”

Garrido feels that Pack has become an important asset to the team and its character. He brought Pack to Omaha. NCAA limits the number of uniformed players in the CWS to 25. Pack made 26. Pack was at practice, as usual. He could only see action in Rosenblatt Stadium in practice clothes, protecting the catchers in the bull pen from stray foul balls. I couldn’t think of a better man than Pack to, as Navy men say, “cover your 6.”

Augie Garrido is the winningest coach in college baseball, with over 1400 wins. Garrido built that record by developing young men. He trained elite players like Huston Street but he discovered the hidden talents of players like Pack Landfair.