

## ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

# Rising phoenix

Elon walk-on goes from catcher to MLB pitching prospect

JACK VITA, Editorial Intern

When Chris Hall heard his name called on the final day of the Major League Baseball Amateur Draft, it meant more than just a culmination of childhood dreams: It meant history for a small town.

At pick No. 432 overall, the Toronto Blue Jays selected the first Kenilworth-born professional baseball player.

"I know my mom called me yesterday and was talking about how she had

heard that I was the first KWBA (Kenilworth-Winnetka Baseball Association) person to get drafted," Hall said. "[Getting drafted] was pretty surreal. Looking back at it, I don't think I fully appreciated it. I understand how cool it is, but it still hasn't really sunk in that I'm playing professional baseball."

Hall grew up playing primarily as a catcher in the KWBA house league. In the summers, Hall played for the league's travel team, the KWBA Bulldogs, until he started playing New Trier feeder in seventh grade, which led him in to playing for the Trevians in high school.

Now a pitcher in the Blue Jays' farm system,



**Chris Hall, a 2012 New Trier grad and 2016 graduate of Elon University, was selected by the Toronto Blue Jays in the 14th round of the Major League Baseball Amateur Draft in June. ELON UNIVERSITY**

Hall logged only one inning on the mound in high school.

"I always asked [coach Mike] Napoleon if I could, but he just wanted me behind the plate," Hall said. "I don't think he wanted me hurting myself doing something I had never done."

Hall was given the ball on senior day, where he

clocked 91 mph on the radar gun, the fastest speed any Trevians pitcher would hit in the 2012 season. Hall and his fastball would help power the Trevians to regional championships in his junior and senior seasons. Still, his future as a baseball player was in jeopardy.

"After high school, I didn't have any college scholarship offers or anything," Hall said. "I walked on at Elon. To be honest, I didn't think I would [make the team] freshman year. That was a really good team. There were a lot of Cape Cod All-Stars on that team.

"It was a little nerve-racking, but it worked out."

Hall quickly made an impression on his coaches and was granted a roster spot as a redshirt freshman. The next season, Hall found himself in a crowded catching situation while having some difficulties in the batter's box — until some of his teammates had an idea.

"During my freshman year when I redshirted, some of the guys on the team thought that I had a pretty good arm from behind home plate," Hall said. "Sophomore year, we had three catchers and we didn't have that many pitchers. We were down



**Formerly a catcher, Hall switched to pitching as an Elon sophomore, and is now plying his trade for the Bluefield Blue Jays in the Appalachian Rookie League. BLUEFIELD BLUE JAYS**

because of injuries. Some of the guys asked if I could throw a bullpen (session). I finally got to throw a bullpen, hit 92 or 93 on the radar gun, and never caught again."

Taught to pitch and thrown into the fire as a sophomore, Hall initially struggled. But, recognizing his upside, Elon didn't give up on him.

"The hardest part was changing your mentality from a hitter to a pitcher," Hall said. "The mechanics and everything wasn't too bad because my coaches kept helping me and my teammates kept helping me with stuff, teaching me how to throw different pitches. The mechanical stuff wasn't too bad, it was just more the mental aspect."

Though inexperienced working from the rubber, pitching wasn't foreign to him. Hall believes that his time as a collegiate hitter and catcher has given him an edge.

"I had to know what a pitcher was thinking when I was catching," Hall said. "I had to know what pitches he needed to throw in what situations, so that's kind of helped me now. Now I know what pitches I need to throw and where to throw it, and what hitters are thinking like. The biggest thing is I know as a

hitter what was hard to hit and what was easy to hit and so now as a pitcher, I can kind of take advantage of knowing that."

Over time, Hall rapidly improved as a pitcher, bringing it all together in 2016, when he picked up 10 saves as the Phoenix's primary closer. Hall's quick ascension in the Colonial Athletic Association put him on the radar of professional scouts.

"It really all didn't start picking up until we played College of Charleston," Hall said. "And there were probably all 32 [MLB] teams there watching the other kid pitch. During that game, I came in for the 9th inning to close it out and I hit 97. That jump-started everything."

Three months later, Hall is currently playing on the Bluefield Blue Jays of the Appalachian Rookie League, still looking to add another pitch or two to his arsenal.

"I throw a fastball and a slider right now," Hall said. "I'm trying to learn how to throw a changeup and a curveball, but I don't think [the curveball] will happen."

The former pitching project is thriving with a 2.70 ERA (as of July 27) and is another step closer to meeting a childhood dream.

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