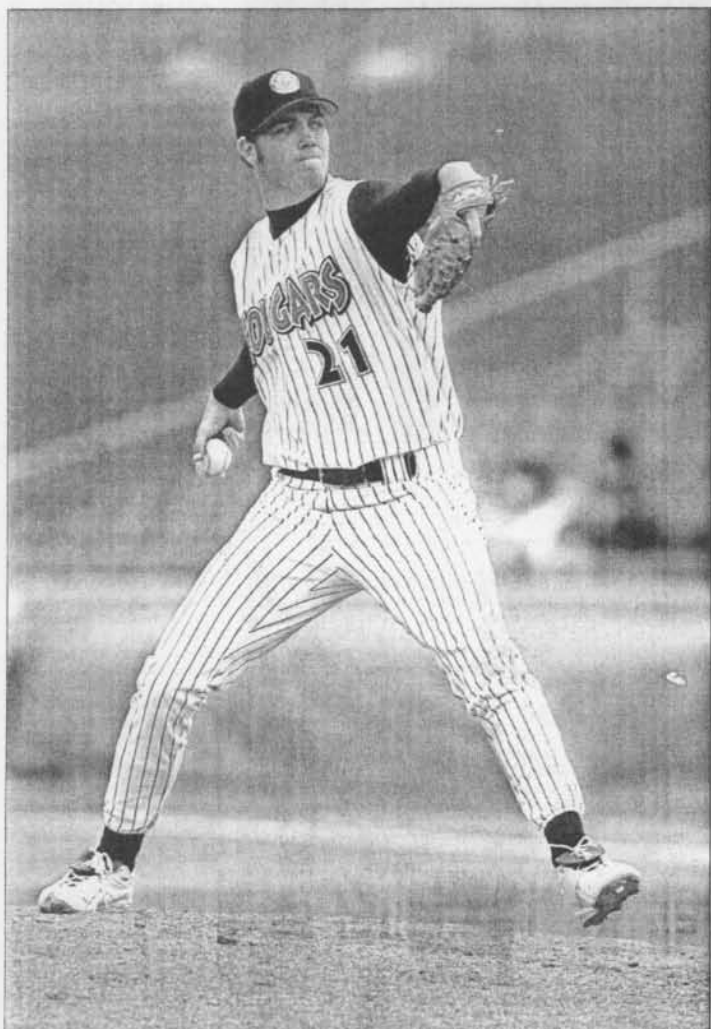


Webb continuing family's baseball tradition



Youngest Cougar Webb hoping to make it to majors like his father did

BY MATT BEARDMORE
Daily Herald Correspondent

Kane County Cougars manager Dave Joppie and his team affectionately call Ryan Webb "Bambi."

But just because he's the youngest player on the Cougars' 25-man roster this season, don't expect the 19-year-old to be caught staring at the bright lights of professional baseball.

He's ready to be a star.

Webb, a 6-foot-6 right-hander from Clearwater, Fla., already understands his role on the Cougars and the many lessons he still has to learn.

"I have a lot of respect for the older guys," said Webb, who is 3-5 with a 3.86 ERA in 11 games this year. He has 42 strikeouts and 18 walks in 60 1/3 innings.

"It's a privilege to be able to play with guys who have been around the game so long. Hopefully, they have the same respect for me."

"I don't go out there thinking I'm the youngest guy here so that makes it OK if I get hit around. I want to dominate. Every time I go out there I try to pitch like a big league pitcher, regardless of age."

While most young ballplayers can only imagine what it's like being a major leaguer, Webb had the benefit of his father's professional experiences.

Hank Webb pitched for six seasons in major league baseball during the 1970s — five as a member of the New York Mets and one with the Los Angeles Dodgers. Webb, a 10th-round pick in the 1968 amateur draft, compiled a 7-9 record with a 4.31 ERA and 1 shutout in 53 career appearances.

But Ryan Webb never felt the pressure of following in his father's footsteps.

"As far back as I can remember, it was always just like a normal dad going out and playing catch in the backyard," Webb said. "It was never forced upon me at all. It was always whatever I wanted to do."

"It just made it more fun."

During my high school years we would go out after the game, go get some dinner and talk about what happened."

The youngest of three boys, Webb competed as a goalie in soccer and as a shortstop and pitcher in baseball. He was a fan of Chipper Jones and the Atlanta Braves, and as an 11-year-old, Webb got a face-to-face meeting with his heroes.

Hank Webb's friend, major league umpire Richie Garcia, arranged for Ryan to meet the Braves during a spring training game at Legends Field in Tampa, Fla. The meeting had a profound impact on Ryan.

"That's when I really realized I wanted to be one of those guys out there," he said.

So Webb turned in his soccer cleats and turned his attention to the diamond. By the time Ryan arrived at Clearwater Central Catholic High School, Hank Webb knew his son possessed a talent that separated him from the rest of the players his age.

"I thought Ryan had something special and he had a great interest in the game," Webb said. "From the mental standpoint, he seemed to be ahead of the other kids."

The Marauders won the state championship during Webb's sophomore year and earned a second-place finish his junior year. As a senior, Webb was named first-team all-state.

Webb turned down a baseball scholarship to Wake Forest last June because of a coaching change.

George Greer, who accumulated a 608-382-4 record in a 17-year career with the Demon Deacons, announced he was leaving. This left Webb with one option.

"I was excited about going to Wake," Webb said. "With (Greer's departure) happening and not knowing who my coach was going to be, it made my decision a lot easier to go ahead and sign. It all kind of fell into place that week."

The 18-year-old pitcher was caught off guard when the Oakland Athletics selected him in the fourth round. Webb was the only high school player chosen by the Athletics in 2004, and the first prep player chosen by the organization in the first five rounds since Jeremy Bonderman was selected 26th overall in 2001.

Oakland's philosophy has been to draft college players in lieu of high school players, who traditionally take longer to make an impact within the organization.

"I was surprised that they took me at all," Webb said. "They hadn't even talked to me."

So instead of mowing down hitters in the Atlantic Coast Conference, Webb spent his first year out of high school playing rookie ball in Arizona. He started 7 games last season and recorded 23 strikeouts in 20 1/3 innings.

After compiling a 1-1 record and a 4.87 ERA, Webb made the jump to the Midwest League.

"You always want to see them move forward — going to the next level," said Hank Webb, who listened to Ryan's first victory on the radio on April 10 while driving from Florida to Kane County. "It's a good jump and a nice challenge."

So while some of the team watched a Cubs-Padres doubleheader on the flat screen in the Cougars' clubhouse, Webb recalled a matchup he saw last season between San Diego pitcher Jake Peavy and Barry Bonds.

"He's just fearless," Webb said of the San Diego right-hander. "He went right after (Bonds) and struck him out. I like the way he approaches what he's doing."

While he imagines himself being in Peavy's position one day, Webb knows he's got a lot of work to do for the Cougars this season.

"If I achieve everything I want to then I'll be one of the best pitchers in the league," Webb said. "I'm not going to worry about what Oakland has in store for me as far as moving me up, because I can't control that."

PHOTO COURTESY OF KANE COUNTY COUGARS

Kane County pitcher Ryan Webb's father Hank pitched in the major leagues in the 1970s with the Los Angeles Dodgers and New York Mets.