

Barnstable pitcher Kevin Moran is creating a buzz with his strong-armed potential

By ROB DUCA
STAFF WRITER

The whispers began circulating shortly after Kevin Moran delivered two or three pitches. Travel-hardened college recruiters who assumed they'd seen every prospect from every remote corner of the United States were puzzled and dazzled.

"They were seeing 89, 90, 91 on their radar guns and I could hear them asking each other, 'Who's this kid?'" remembers Kevin's father, Tom.

The setting was the Perfect Game USA Northeast Regional top prospect showcase in August at Wareham's Clem Spillane Field, where high school baseball players were provided the opportunity to open eyes. (Perfect Game USA is a national scouting report service). Their hope was to get noticed, and their goal was a college scholarship.

The right-handed Moran, who had recently capped a nondescript junior season at Barnstable High, had participated only once before in what amounted to a human meat market. At an early August event at Campanelli Stadium - home of the Brockton Rox - he was one of two players out of nearly 200 selected to play this January on a national team of the country's top high school players. He had gotten into the Perfect Game showcase at the last instant, thanks to the intervention of Dan Proto, his Team Cape Cod Senior Babe Ruth coach.

"I knew I could do it," the 17-year-old Moran said. "I just never had the chance before. I was pumped up. I hoped it would make a difference."

He pitched two innings, striking out seven of eight batters (two batters reached on dropped third strikes). Nearly 20 college coaches stood behind home plate pointing radar guns, their eyes widening as Moran registered pitches in the low 90s.

"You do that and people will start calling," Proto said.

It was over quickly. But the impact of his performance was immediate.

"You could have gotten a hot dog and come back and he'd have been off the field," said Barnstable High coach Sean Donovan, who was in attendance. "But that's all it took for these (college coaches) to say he's got something."

With those two innings, Moran's life changed. He was given a 9 rating on a scale of 10, which under Perfect Game guidelines translates into a potential Top 10-round pro draft pick and a Division I college prospect.

Before the showcase, he was mulling over limited options, hoping to walk onto a collegiate baseball team. Within 30 minutes after he left the mound, his cellphone was loaded with text messages and his home phone was ringing. Coaches from Michigan, Boston College, Georgetown, Connecticut, Ohio State and Dartmouth were among those calling. Within days,

the recruiting letters began arriving. Moran now has a scrapbook of letters that number nearly 75, including encouraging words from the New York Yankees, the Chicago White Sox and the Colorado Rockies.

"It was all so fast," Kevin said. "I was blown away by some of the things they said. The Michigan coach told me I was their top recruit. My parents and I were just laughing."

Moran's Barnstable High guidance counselor was stunned when Kevin walked into her office this fall and asked that his SAT scores and transcripts be forwarded to BC, Michigan, Villanova, Penn, Dartmouth and Ohio State. "She said, 'Have you applied? You can't just send them.' I'm like, 'But they really want them,'" he said.

On Monday, Moran, an honor student, is scheduled to sign a letter of intent to play baseball at Boston College, where he'll receive a scholarship covering about 75 percent of his tuition. What he admits felt "surreal" has become reality.

"Last spring I was stressing out, wondering where I was going to college," he said. "Now, last (month) all my friends were retaking the SATs and I was upstairs sleeping."

Yes, there are perks to being recruited. Moran visited Michigan on a football weekend, where he watched the Wolverines beat Vanderbilt from a seat at the 50-yard line. He also saw BC play Clemson and Virginia Tech.

He decided on the Eagles shortly after that, largely because it's close to home, he'd play in the Atlantic Coast Conference and coach Mikio Aoki promised he would be competing for a spot in his freshman season rather than being red-shirted. Moran was also lured by the prospect of facing the Boston Red Sox in BC's annual spring training game in Fort Myers, Fla., next March.

"I already know how I'll pitch Manny (Ramirez) - high and tight," he joked.

How does this happen to a pitcher who was not even in the regular rotation on his high school or Senior Babe Ruth teams last spring and summer? One reason is that tantalizing word: Potential.

At 6-4, 195 pounds, Moran has the build of a power pitcher. College coaches call his allure "projectability." They envision a 220-pound Moran throwing 95 before the end of his freshman season.

"They're getting a kid with no mileage because he really hasn't pitched that much," Proto said. "They figure they can mold him."

Moran maintains that his success is due to finally receiving the opportunity. "It was one of those things where I never got exposed to anybody," he said.

His parents blame themselves for their son remaining a secret. Tom and Paulette Moran of Yarmouthport refused to parade him to showcases, believing in the theory that cream would rise to the top.

Said Tom, "I kind of felt like we'd be selling our child. But I was totally wrong. It got to the point (before the Perfect Game showcase) when Proto said, 'Are you crazy? You have to get him to this.'"

But it took more than just showing up.

Moran has improved dramatically since finishing his junior season. He wasn't top gun on his high school team due to his inability to consistently find the strike zone. His starts were often roller-coaster rides. He pitched a complete-game 3-1 win over Falmouth last spring, but he also walked seven against Marshfield and eight against Taunton, even while registering double-digit strikeouts.

"He always threw hard, but he wasn't able to throw enough strikes," Donovan said. "He was able to fine-tune it this summer. Instead of throwing 85-86 up high, he was throwing 89-90 at the knees."

That's the kind of pitching that could someday land him in the major leagues. Although Moran could be drafted next June, his commitment to BC makes that unlikely. He would then have to wait until after his junior year before becoming draft eligible. But one local scout believes that Moran could blossom into a pro.

"His biggest plus is his tremendous upside. He's only going to keep getting better," said Bob Stead, a scout for the New York Mets. "He's got another 5 or 6 miles per hour in (his fastball). Without question he has pro potential."

Moran credits Noel Kinski for his development. The former Providence College and Cape League Hall of Fame pitcher provides instruction at The Dugout in Hyannis, a baseball school owned by his son, Ryan.

Noel Kinski began working on Moran's mechanics, focusing on his release point. In June, Moran pitched the final inning for Team Cape Cod in an exhibition game against the Baseball Factory, a collection of top college prospects, retiring the side in order.

He then beat Maine at the New England Senior Babe Ruth Regionals, allowing four hits and three walks, while fanning 12 in 6^a innings.

"I have more command of my pitches. If I throw a ball high now, I know why. Noel has helped me so much," Moran said.

"He's kind of been in the shadows because of the control thing," Kinski said, "but all he needs is to keep on improving. He's got the velocity and the potential. It's all up to him."

For now, Moran is looking forward to his senior season with the Red Raiders. So is his coach.

"He's probably going to be at the top of the rotation, based on what he did over the summer," Donovan said.

Kevin Moran is no longer a secret.

"For years I just wanted a chance," he said. "It makes me wonder how many other kids have slipped through the cracks."

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