

Baseball SPORTS

Cubs draft pick Stephen Ridings started his journey on LI

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Stephen Ridings, pitching on April 16 for Haverford College, was picked by the Cubs in the MLB Draft. Photo Credit: Haverford Athletics / David Sinclair

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It was June 10, the second day of the Major League Baseball Draft, and the Chicago Cubs had just made Haverford College pitcher Stephen Ridings their eighth-round pick.

The broadcasters on MLB Network looked at each other, a little confused. Ridings? Haverford College? What?

Less than two weeks later, the righthander from Commack was standing on the mound at the Cubs' training complex in Mesa, Arizona. The field temperature was 118 degrees, but Ridings couldn't have been happier.

"This is not the Northeast," Ridings told himself. "But this is

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what I've always dreamed of, playing professional baseball. And this is awesome, even if it's brutally hot."

Ridings' road to Mesa is one that will inspire any dreamer. When very few gave the 20-year-old a chance of putting on a big-league uniform — he wasn't even ranked among baseball's top 1,000 prospects — the 6-8, 215-pound St. Anthony's High School graduate never wavered.

"Stephen is a guy that persevered over a long period of time," said Rob Steinert, the Northeast scout for the Cubs, who took Ridings with the 254th pick. "He was never the star, not in Little League or high school. But he worked tirelessly and ignored the doubters."

Ridings said he agreed to a \$120,000 signing bonus and for the organization to pay for the last two semesters of his schooling. He plans to finish his degree in chemistry and then attend graduate school.

"It was a tough journey for me and there were times when I wondered if I should give up," Ridings said. "I knew I wasn't as bad as I might have played on a particular day. And getting through some of those tough times made this all the more sweeter because I never packed it in."

Ridings is wearing No. 45 at the Cubs' training site. (Be careful if you look him up on the Internet; there's a Steven Ridings who pitches for the Mariners' Arizona League team).

The trials and tribulations for Long Island's Ridings started in Commack North Little League, where he was moved back and forth between the A and B travel teams. He was cut from the eighth-grade team at Commack Middle School. He moved on and enrolled at St. Anthony's High School in South Huntington.

"He's worked very hard and nothing has come easy for him," said his father, Thomas Ridings Jr.

Ridings saw a bump in velocity and embraced the closer's role at St. Anthony's as a senior, garnering himself a roster spot at Haverford College.

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Ridings was a spot reliever as a freshman and sophomore at Haverford. But as a junior, he struck out 95 batters and walked eight in 75 innings. Complete Game Institute trainer Tim Francis helped him gain 30 pounds and turn his height into a weapon. He gained strength and flexibility and increased his core strength as his fastball jumped from 84 mph into the 90s.

“He perfected his mechanics and grew into that big body,” Steinert said. “He created full extension, his legs got strong and the ball was exploding out of his hand. I’ve done more than 40,000 lessons and he’s the best kid I’ve worked with.”

Ridings said Steinert has been a major influence in his life.

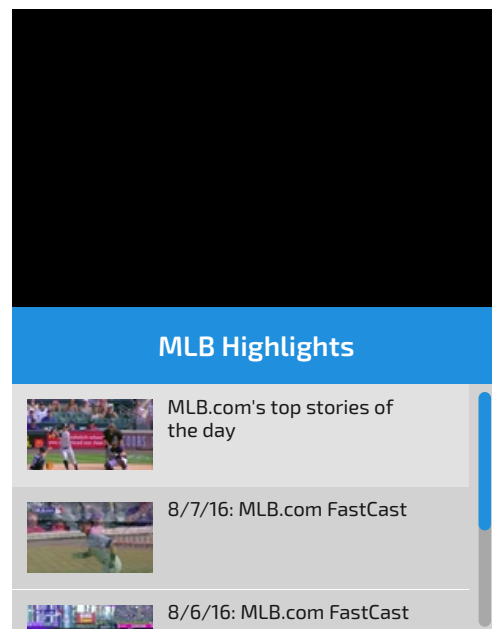
“Rob Steinert is the reason I’m a pro,” Ridings said. “I wouldn’t be the pitcher I am without him. He’s taught me everything I know and always believed in my potential.”

Ridings pitched for CGI in a summer league all-star game at Citi Field when he was 16 years old in 2012. Was it a precursor of what was to come? “I ran in from the bullpen and it was exciting,” Ridings said. “I imagined being the guy coming in for the final out in front of a big crowd.”

A lot has changed in four years. Ridings’ plan is to be a major-league starter someday soon.

No one should doubt him.

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