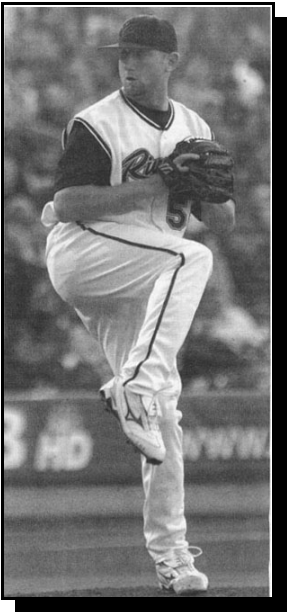


PROSPECT PULSE

Braden Makes Good on His Promise

COMPILED BY CHRIS KLINE

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MIKE MARTIN

OAKLAND—When Dallas Braden stepped off the plane from his senior trip to Mexico, he found that his life had changed, in so many ways.

First, he saw his grandmother wearing a Braves shirt and learned he had been drafted by Atlanta. Then came the bad news: His mother's cancer had taken a sudden turn.

Dallas Braden had spent much of his young life messing up. "I was out partying in high school, hanging around people who weren't doing the right things, people making really bad decisions. I was pretty deep into that," he said.

But the world changed around him while Braden and his classmates were in Mexico. For the first time, he realized he needed to get serious if he was to have a future in baseball. For the last time, he was to have a mother.

Jodie Atwood, Braden's mother, had been battling skin cancer for some time, receiving regular chemotherapy treatments. When he left, the cancer appeared in remission. When he returned, his 40-year-old mother had grown far worse. "When I came back, she didn't recognize me," he said. "There was no moment of clarity, nothing."

For Braden, this began the journey from screwup to screwballer; when a messed-up kid decided to change his life and begin a course that would take him to the major leagues.

At Amos Alonzo Stagg High in Stockton, Calif., he was named the Tri-County Athletic League pitcher of the year and MVP in 2001, both pitching and playing outfield. He drew the attention of the Braves, who selected him in the 46th round as a draft-and-follow.

However, Braden had no place to be followed. During his junior year of high school, he had moved in with his grandmother, Peggy Lindsey, while his mother focused on battling cancer. Lindsey runs the Quality Inn in Stockton, and Braden lived at the motel, with too much freedom and not enough focus, until Lindsey intervened.

"I came real close to taking it away from myself, then my grandmother stepped in and kind of slapped me back into shape and got me going," he said. "I told my grandma that someday she would watch me pitch in the majors."

Braden spent two years at American River Community College in Sacramento, going 7-2, 2.55 in 2002 and 5-4, 2.45 in '03 before moving on to Texas Tech for a season. He went 6-4, 4.56 there and drew the attention of Athletics scout Blake Davis, who persuaded Oakland to call his name in the 24th round.

He quickly showed promise. In his first full professional season, 2005, he was the A's organizational pitcher of the year, going 15-5, 3.52 at two levels. The key tool was a screwball that devoured minor league hitters.

In the midst of success, difficulties arose. His left shoulder began barking, and doctors diagnosed it as an impingement with scar tissue around the tendon. Dr. Lewis Yocum opened the shoulder and he missed most of 2006 recovering from the surgery.

A's pitching coordinator Ron Romanick had been after Braden to limit his use of the screwball, instead relying more on his changeup. Braden has developed the changeup into almost a hybrid pitch, sort of a slow screwball that he can throw from the same arm slot as his fastball and breaking ball. The pitch is really sort of a screw-up, perhaps the perfect pitch for the kid who abandoned the life of a screwup to become an achiever.

With his arm healthy and his velocity reaching 90 mph on his fastball, Braden got back on the fast track this spring. He made two starts at Double-A Midland, then moved up to Triple-A Sacramento to pitch six shutout innings. When the A's ran short of starters in late April, he got the call to come to Baltimore.

And it was time to fulfill that promise to his grandmother. "She said we couldn't afford it, for her to go," Braden said. "I told her she was going, even if we had to sell body parts."

Braden limited the Orioles to one run and three hits over six innings for the win on April 24. His next start came against the Devil Rays and did not go as well, as he gave up five runs in 4 $\frac{1}{3}$ and took the loss. He returned to the minors after the game, but he was back in the big leagues in less than two weeks.

Braden gave his grandmother the game ball and a framed lineup card from the first start in Baltimore, treasures for a family that has endured its share of difficult times. He enjoyed the attention and excitement of the big leagues, and he liked knowing something else: That his story may let a few kids know that even screwups can get a second chance when they decide they want to change the course of their lives.

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