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Prinstein achieves goal through hard work and perseverance

BY DAN O'MEARA • ECCENTRIC STAFF WRITER • JANUARY 4, 2009

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Justin Prinstein just wanted to continue playing baseball at the highest level possible every step of the way.

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And the 24-year-old from Farmington Hills has certainly played a lot of baseball, beating the odds and naysayers at every turn and seeing the world in the process.

After graduating from George Washington University in 2006, Prinstein went overseas to pursue his dream and has played for four professional teams in four countries.

"I think I was like any kid," he said. "In high school, I wanted to play college ball; I wanted to play pro ball.

"In college, I saw guys I played with going on to play in the states. I was upset when I didn't get drafted. If you'd asked me 'Would I rather have a week playing for the Nationals or three years playing pro ball all the over world?' I would have said, 'Give me a week in single A.'

"In retrospect now, I'd take this because it's opened so many doors for me; it's taught me so much about life. I'd never been outside the states before I left GW. It's definitely changed my life for the better, and I've been blessed with these opportunities."

Prinstein, who is attending law school at the University of Detroit-Mercy, recently signed with his fifth team - the Almere Magpies of the top division in the Dutch League, considered the best in Europe.

Previously, he played for the Hoboken Pioneers in Belgium, the Netanya Tigers in Israel, the Southern District Hawks in Australia and the Tex Town Tigers in the Netherlands.

Until Prinstein signed with Almere, a suburb of Amsterdam, his father, Jay, said his son was "the best Tiger Detroit doesn't know."

It's quite a resume for an under-sized pitcher in the North Farmington Class of 2002. Prinstein played the next two years for Albion College, but he thought he could play at the Division I level.

He took a chance and transferred to George Washington, earned a scholarship his senior year and helped the Colonials win an Atlantic 10 Conference Western Division crown.

"I had a good year and talked to a few scouts," Prinstein said, adding he had private tryouts with the Tigers and Reds. "I was undersized for a pitcher, but I had a pretty good arm and control. I thought I was going to get drafted based on my performance at the end of the season.

"I was sitting in the mid to high 80s. I was just a few miles away from being there. The common barometer is 89 or 90. If you can do that, someone will throw some money at you and take a risk. I was 87-88 tops and,

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literally, one or two miles per hour away."

The 5-foot-11, 175-pound Prinstein attributes his success overseas to the addition of another pitch to his repertoire.

"At that point in my career, I was more of a changeup and fastball guy," he said. "Over the next two years, I developed a slider that has become my best pitch, but it's not something I had when I was a senior in college. That pitch has allowed me to continue my career."

Prinstein has become an excellent hitter, too. Though he hadn't swung a bat in a game since high school, he got the chance in Israel and made the most of it.

Though he got dehydrated and lost 16 pounds playing in the desert, he was still voted to all-star team as a designated hitter.

"The coach respected my knowledge of the game and my pedigree, where I had been," Prinstein said. "He let me hit for myself; I hit two doubles and it snowballed from there.

"When I got healthy again, I ended up DHing more than I was pitching, because I had a tear in my pushoff leg. But I could stand in there and hit.

"I was lucky growing up because I got exposed to all those positions (where he had to hit). I worked my tail off as a hitter when I was younger, and it just kinda came back to me."

Playing for Tex Town last summer, the Aruban coach asked Prinstein what they could do to make a change after an 0-6 start.

"I told him, 'Last year I did pretty well when I pitched and hit at the same time,'" Prinstein said. "He was adamantly opposed to that. I said, 'Let's give it a try,' and we reeled off eight wins."

Prinstein started being the regular DH after that and batted .411, finishing among the top hitters in the league.

"I make my money pitching; that's what I'm best at," Prinstein said. "I can't explain the hitting thing other than I worked my tail off when I was a kid."

Making a European roster can be a cutthroat experience, according to Prinstein, because teams are allowed only one import player.

Three weeks after throwing a no-hitter for the Pioneers, he was released because they had signed someone who was bigger and, supposedly, better coming out of college in the U.S.

Prinstein had attended an Israel Baseball League workout when he wasn't drafted but went with the Pioneers as a free agent. He called the Netanya Tigers and found the offer was still on the table.

"They were looking for the top Jewish Division I baseball players, and I happened to fit that bill, Prinstein said. "It's a big misconception that only Jewish people play in the league. Seventy percent are not. There are a lot of Dominicans and Australians; we had a Japanese player on our team."

"We were pretty big celebrities in Israel. We had 120 guys from around the world, speaking different languages, playing against each other. It was real good baseball. It was an amazing experience."

A phone call from an Australian friend he met at the IBL workout led to Prinstein going Down Under.

"He said they were having trouble with their pitching. 'Can I come over and help out?'" Prinstein said. "Those boys play baseball pretty hard. They're old school about it. Cricket is the No. 1 sport, but there's a community of baseball players who are so into the game and so good."

After three months there, Prinstein was on the move again, headed back to Europe and the Professional Dutch Baseball League - this time for a better offer, with a bicycle thrown in.

"They said, 'You'll get transportation.' I thought I'd get a car, but what is this? It's a bike," he said. "I'm a professional baseball player, and I'm riding a bike to work with a bag on my shoulder."

Part of Prinstein's job in Holland is to coach teams at the younger levels, and he was well received by the locals in that capacity, too. At the end of the season, his players carried him off the field on their shoulders.

Prinstein also has an offer to be an associate scout with the Houston Astros, identifying Major League talent in Europe. That influenced his decision to turn down offers to play in the U.S. and sign with the Magpies, whom Prinstein describes as the Yankees of Dutch baseball.

"There's a lot of baseball being played all over the world," he said. "A lot of places are unexplored. I found a niche. There's a whole other part of the world you can do so much with and make a strong impact on."

Needless to say, Jay Prinstein is extremely proud of his son and what he has accomplished through perseverance.

"I call it the hard road he took," Jay Prinstein said. "He stuck with it. It's a great story for any young person who wants or loves something so much he won't hear the word 'no,' or he's 'not big enough' or 'not strong enough.'"

Prinstein returns to Holland for spring training in mid March, but he's also thinking of a career after baseball, which is why he's in law school.

"I had an epiphany," he said. "I had a shoulder injury from sliding head first into home plate), and I realized this career won't last forever. I want to keep going with it, but I have to start making other plans."

As for now, the plan is what it always has been for Prinstein - to continue playing the game of baseball.

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