

From farm teams to Farm's football team

[Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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-- There are only so many John Grisham novels and other page-turners to ease the monotony of endless bus trips in baseball's minor leagues. Imagine eight years of it.

When it turned out last summer that he was never going to realize his dream of pitching at Dodger Stadium, Jordan Pratt was ready for the next chapter in his life.

He proposed to his girlfriend, Amy, at dusk on the beach at the Spanish resort of Playa de Aro, and they were married in February. Now he and his wife are ready for still another chapter. At age 26, he's going to play football at Stanford.

An excellent student and a hard-throwing right-hander from Monmouth, Ore., he was drafted in the fifth round by the Dodgers in 2003. He told Harvard and a host of other universities who wanted him to play football that he was going to pursue baseball.

"It was a very tough call," he said. "When they drafted me, I went through a lot of soul searching with my family. At the time I wasn't sure what I wanted to study in college."

He received a relatively modest \$175,000 signing bonus and would be able to take advantage of a \$120,000 college scholarship program when his baseball days were done. Moreover, he decided, he would have a better idea of what he wanted to do when he grew up.

"I decided to delay my education," he said. "I knew I'd go back whether I was 25 or 35."

When Stanford's training camp starts Aug. 8, the 6-foot-3, 212-pound walk-on wide receiver will be competing with much younger players in a sport he hasn't played since 2002. On the other hand, he is more physically mature than they are and

has the mental toughness of a pro athlete who is used to having a game rest on his shoulders.

He was "a phenomenal athlete" in high school, according to Shane Hedrick, his football coach at Central High School. An all-state selection in football, basketball and baseball, Pratt attracted the attention of almost every football coach in the Pac-10, including then-Stanford coach Buddy Teevens and Cal's Jeff Tedford, Hedrick said. He was in demand even though he missed most of his senior season because of a high ankle sprain.

"He made it known baseball was his first love, but I always knew football was something he could have gone on and played," Hedrick said. "He has good speed and great hands. We'd throw the ball up, and he'd outjump everybody. He has great body control."

Hedrick compared him to former Boise State receiver Austin Pettis, who was drafted in the third round this year by the Rams.

Pro football isn't on Pratt's mind at all. He has four years of eligibility and he'll be at least 30 when he graduates from Stanford. He knows college football is going to be difficult enough. He's trying to get in football shape and is looking forward to training camp.

"I'm very excited. It's going to be a lot of fun," he said. "I've stayed in shape over the year" since being released. "It's a challenge I'm up for."

96-mph fastball

Minor-league baseball was quite a challenge too. His fastball occasionally hit 96 mph, and he regularly threw in the low 90s. His "out" pitch, he said, was his slider. His command and control, though, ebbed and flowed. He never established the consistency it took to get a shot at the big leagues.

Before a rookie-league game with the Ogden (Utah) Raptors, he said, former Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda told the pitchers to keep the hitters off balance. "You can't let anybody take big hacks," Lasorda said.

Pratt immediately gave up a shot to a Billings (Mont.) Mustang that "was so far over the fence, I couldn't believe it."

He reached Triple-A Albuquerque in 2010 - for one game. He gave up a two-run homer in Nashville and was quickly sent back to Chattanooga. His best year was 2006 with the

Columbus (Ga.) Catfish in the Class A South Atlantic League: 8-4, 4.85 ERA. He had other stops in San Bernardino (the Inland Empire 66ers) and Midland, Mich. (the Great Lakes Loons).

His mentor with the 66ers was Charlie Hough, the great Dodgers knuckleballer, who didn't try to teach him a knuckler because, he told Pratt, "You've got too good of stuff."

Pratt said the friendships he developed were the best part of minor-league life. On the other hand, "being in the back seat of a Greyhound is a tough ride. I'm not sure how much glamour there was. One bus ride with Columbus went 16 or 17 hours. It always seemed like the last game of a series went extra innings, and then you'd have dinner at a truck stop."

In spring training of 2010, he had tendinitis for the first time and struggled with his command. When the Dodgers finally let him go in July, it was a blow but not a big surprise.

"I was thinking for eight years I was going to be a major-league pitcher," he said. "To be honest, it was a little bit of a relief. I was ready to go back to school. I have no regrets. I worked as hard as I could."

Back to school

He called Stanford recruiting coordinator Lance Anderson, who didn't know what to think immediately after hearing Pratt's unusual story. When Pratt sent him some video clips from high school, "it became really intriguing," Anderson said. "It was pretty good stuff. When he told me what kind of a student he was, it got even more intriguing."

Hedrick, the high school coach, heaped praise on Pratt in a conversation with Stanford defensive line coach Randy Hart, an old friend. That led to Pratt's visit to the campus in December, when he watched the Cardinal prepare for the Orange Bowl.

Aside from a few notable examples, "not a lot of guys do this," Anderson said. Chris Weinke played quarterback at Florida State (and later for the Panthers and [49ers](#)) after six years in the minors. Josh Booty played five years in the Florida Marlins' organization - he got five at-bats for the 1997 World Series championship team - before quarterbacking LSU for two years. He played a few years in the NFL, including a brief stop with the [Raiders](#).

Back in Oregon, Pratt was selling and installing ductless heat pumps for his father's firm while applying to colleges. He was accepted by Cal and Harvard, but Stanford was his first choice because of its courses in environmental sciences. He wouldn't have been able to play football at Harvard because the Ivy League prohibits ex-pros from playing any sport.

His wife, Amy, was relieved that his baseball career was over too, he said.

"The life of a minor-leaguer doesn't suit married life," he said.

"She said, 'Oh great, just when I figured out how baseball works, now I've got to figure out football.' "

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