

SPORTS



SIDELINES

MARK BLUMENTHAL

Kendrick's persistence awakens D.C.

The biggest moment ever involving a former St. Johns River College baseball player took place Wednesday night.

Actually, it happened around 12:20 a.m. Thursday, when most of those living on the east coast were asleep. Even Sam Rick admitted he was asleep.

But at the famed Dodger Stadium, one swing turned the National League Division Series in favor of the wild card Washington Nationals.

That swing came from a former Dodgers player.

A former St. Johns River Viking as well. With one swing of the bat, Howie Kendrick became a part of baseball folklore as his 10th-inning drive to center field off Dodgers reliever Joe Kelly cleared the fence for a grand slam, giving the Nationals a 7-3 lead and, ultimately, the division series, three games to two.

"The morning after, my wife (Sherry) pulls up her phone and says, 'Howie did something in the game,'" said Rick, the Vikings' head coach from 1994-2007. "Then she reads on and says, 'He won the game with a grand slam.' Then I had to pull my phone out and I got to watch

(the highlight) and it was exciting."

From the highlight alone, Rick recognized that once skinny 18-year-old from Callahan and West Nassau High School, now 36 and finishing up his 14th year in the majors, even oft-injured as it has been.

"He's 40 pounds heavier than when he played for me," Rick said. "And he's a whole lot stronger. When he played for us, he was a dead line-drive hitter. He didn't hit line drives that went over the fence ... not the towering bombs he hits now, but that comes with age and weights."

The story of how Kendrick came to the Vikings has been told many times over the years, especially in these pages. Kendrick was not even looked at by any college despite a successful career as a shortstop at West Nassau. He and Rick met up and Rick got him signed.

Originally, the plan was for Kendrick to play shortstop and Palatka High graduate Chad Williams (the son of current Interlachen High baseball coach Barry Williams) to play second. But Rick saw something immediately when he had Kendrick fielding balls at both second and shortstop.

"Watching him field at second base, the thing that I saw as to why I thought he'd be our second baseman was he had great hands to turn the double play," Rick said. "Not that my shortstop's arm was stronger than Howie's or Howie was stronger than Chad at fielding balls. Howie gave us a better chance at turning the double play with the exchange and arm strength he had."

So Rick said Williams, who was back for his sophomore season at what was then St. Johns River Community College, agreed with his coach to move out to center field because he had played summer ball chasing softballs down.

All Kendrick did for the Vikings that season was hit over .500 and be named the Mid-Florida Conference Player of the Year, being named to the NJCAA All-American second team.

On June 4, 2002, Kendrick was drafted by the Anaheim Angels after baseball lifer and scout Tom Kotchman kept a watchful eye on him – even if he was the only Major League scout at the game. It was a proud day for Rick, who also saw his son, Alan, a senior catcher with Palatka High's team, drafted in the fourth round by the Chicago Cubs.

Rick said he has not talked to Kendrick in years, last talking to him after he became a professional player.

But he's proud of what has happened.

"A lot of his (college) teammates get on him and talk to him on occasion, but I've pretty much left him alone," Rick said. "Howie doesn't owe me or (SJR State) anything. But when he's been interviewed by others, he's given me and the college credit in that we gave him a chance."

See **BLUMENTHAL**, Page 8A

ANDY HALL

Sports Editor 312-5239

AHall@Palatkadailynews.com

Blumenthal

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6A

Never hurt before turning pro, Kendrick found himself on the disabled list a number of times once he became a professional, but his persistence and perseverance have been a standard setter for those who want to walk away. His most recent injury came in May 2018 when he ruptured his Achilles, ending his season. He came back this season and all he did was hit .344 in 330 at-bats along with 17 home runs and 62 RBI.

Because of the at-bats, Kendrick could not qualify for the batting title, won by Christian Yelich of the Milwaukee Brewers at .329, so what Kendrick did flew under the radar unless you were a Nationals fan or diehard baseball fan.

Then came Wednesday night ... or Thursday morning on the East Coast.

The game changer for the Washington Nationals, a reverse Rick Monday from 1981 when Monday hit the series-deciding home run in the ninth inning of Game 5 as the Dodgers won the National League Championship Series over the Nationals' former identity, the Montreal Expos.

"Howie came here in (the fall of) 2001 and he put St. Johns on the map," Rick said.

And everyone is wide awake in noticing.

Mark Blumenthal is a writer for the Palatka Daily News. You can reach him at mblumenthal@palatkadailynews.com or on Twitter @diabolicalmarky.