

It's More Than A Game

By: Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Chase A. Corbin

Sitting in the driver's seat of a tractor in the hangar bay, with sweat beading down his forehead down to a whistle pressed tightly in his lips, sits an airman with more on his mind than the aircraft sitting in front of him. With every pause in the action he reflects on a time that feels like yesterday. He can still smell the freshly cut grass and hear the loud cheers from the crowd. It's a time that for most is long ago, but for him is not so distant.

Just a month ago, he was sitting in the dugouts of stadiums that most only dream of ever being inside. The sweat still beaded off his forehead, but it didn't come from a cranial, it came from a camouflage cap with the initials U.S.A. embroidered on it. It's a dream that came to fruition because of two things: his love for the game of baseball and the Navy.

Right before reporting to Class A School, initial training for Sailors to learn the basic skills and technical knowledge within their rating, in Pensacola, Fl., Aviation Boatswain's Mate (Handling) Airman Christopher Nollinger suffered a knee injury that kept him from attending classes and instead forced him into rehabilitation therapy. "I was really down in the dumps when I got hurt," said Nollinger. But it was an injury that may have made his dream become a reality.

During a break from school, the 29-year-old Nollinger, thinking that his baseball days were behind him, heard that his high school was hosting an alumni game. Nollinger decided he would take leave and attend the game. "I had always heard about the alumni game that they did but I had never been," he said. While working on his swing in the batting cages at his high school, someone he went to school with spotted him and couldn't help but notice his swing.

"I see you can still hit a little," the man jokingly told Nollinger. As a former member of the U.S. Military All-Stars baseball team he was able to put Nollinger in contact with Karl Seiter, one of the teams coaches, who invited him to an upcoming tryout being held in Pensacola.

"I just happened to be in the right place at the right time," said Nollinger. "Call it fate."

Most moments in life pass people by without much thought, but there are certain things that, as days go by, you can't help but think about and long for those moments once more. For Nollinger, that longing has always been baseball.

"I don't think I ended playing the way I really wanted to, and this was a way I could go out and finish the way I wanted it to end," he said.

To accomplish that feat he would have to make it through tryouts with a slight handicap; age. "I did some research on the previous roster and these were some big boys, a lot of them 19 and 20 years old," said Nollinger. "I didn't really think I would come in at 29 and even have a shot." Nollinger spent the next few days proving that age is, in fact, just a number.

"When they told me I made the team...I couldn't believe it," Nollinger said. "Not that I thought I did bad, I just didn't think I did that good."

Unfortunately for Nollinger, his knee was still not 100% healthy and he was forced to decline the invitation to play on the team.

"I thought that was it, baseball was over for me," said Nollinger, "I thought I was only going to be able to play softball from that point on."

As the next year passed Nollinger's knee got better as he began spending more time playing softball. He graduated A-school and received orders to the USS John C. Stennis (CVN-74), an aircraft carrier homeported in Bremerton, Wa., that was finishing a planned incremental availability and preparing to deploy to the U.S. 5th Fleet.

It was a normal, very hot, busy day in the Arabian Gulf. The only thing out of the ordinary was that Nollinger had a short break allowing him to check his e-mail. It was then he noticed a message that informed him he had been selected to play on the team for a second time, without trying out.

"I got the initial e-mail and my jaw literally hit the desk," said Nollinger. "I didn't think there was any way that this e-mail was sent correctly to me."

The e-mail explained everything that needed to be given to the command before the season began in early March. With the ship running at a very high operational tempo in the gulf, completing it all would prove to be much more difficult than he anticipated.

“I got the e-mail in early November and still wasn’t sure if I was going to play until early February,” Nollinger said. “They told me that because I was fully qualified (being an Aviation Boatswains’ Mate aboard an aircraft carrier requires qualifications to operate tractors that move aircraft, operate aircraft elevators and stand watches in conflagration stations and primary flight control) that I might not be able to go. I thought, ‘I guess this is what I get for doing my job,’ but the whole chain-of-command was flexible. I can’t begin to thank them enough.”

With all the paperwork complete, Nollinger’s dream of playing baseball one last time was finally ready to begin.

“As soon as we pulled into San Diego at the end of deployment, that was it, I was gone,” said Nollinger. “It was baseball, baseball, baseball now. My daily life was completely different.”

The next six weeks would be spent getting a group of ball players to learn how to play together and prepare for a baseball season. Now at the age of 30 and having been away from the game for most of the last eight years, it is a task that sounds much easier than it would prove to be.

“There were moments where I felt old, but my teammates were there to say things would be alright and it would all work out,” he said. “I didn’t think we would win a game. Don’t get me wrong, we were all good ball players, but we had our work cut out for us.”

The days were long, filled with drill after drill, simulated game situations and 35-mile bike rides; each designed to build each player’s skill level and team unity. Former major league superstars were brought in to assist the coaches and players in becoming a team.

“We got hitting lessons from Tony Gwynn, one of the greatest hitters of all time,” Nollinger said. “Not many people get to say that. It wasn’t just Tony either, Jim Leyritz, Dave Stewart and Brett Boone, all these guys I watched growing up were out there working with us. You just can’t replace that.”

One saying stood out to Nollinger through it all. Something that would help the entire team focus and come together.

“Ed Herman who played catcher for the Chicago White Sox and who was an all-star for years said something I will never forget,” said Nollinger. “He kept telling us over and over, ‘the game hasn’t changed boys, it’s still the same game.’ That just stuck with us.”

With spring training coming to an end, the team enjoyed their last day in Southern California, by playing in a celebrity/all-star softball game, with celebrities such as Tyler Hochin and Carly Craig as well as the U.S. All-Star softball team.

“The end of spring ball was a great time,” Nollinger said, “We got to just go out and have some fun, but at the same time get we got a good understanding of what we were really doing out there.”

The team came together one last time before heading out to start their season. They gathered to talk about expectations and set a team goal.

“We wanted to set a team goal of how we wanted to be portrayed,” said Nollinger. “I told them that I didn’t like to lose, in anything. Then I asked them if anyone had an issue with losing and they all agreed they didn’t want to lose either. That was great to see us go from a team that didn’t think we would make it out of spring ball to a team that didn’t want to lose.”

With a goal set, the U.S. Military All-Stars team traveled across the country playing in everything from big league stadiums to small ball parks against all different teams, always getting their opponents’ best effort.

“I’ll never forget the first game,” he said. “I stepped up into the box and this guy throws me a 94 mph fastball. All I could do was laugh because we didn’t see anything that fast in batting practice.”

Between games, Nollinger and the team spent their time on a bus, traveling, and doing community relations projects. Everything from hosting baseball clinics to visiting V.A. Hospitals.

“We would go to schools and read books to kids and it blows your mind how many 4th and 5th graders know what’s going on in the world,” Nollinger said. “What was funny was that it was always a guarantee that after we

finished the book we would never get asked questions about baseball or the book we had just read. It was always about the military and what kind of guns we had.”

For most, just the ability to be a positive role model, enjoy the thrill of walking some of the same halls that baseball’s greatest players have walked and just playing baseball would be the experience of a lifetime, but for Nollinger it was just the beginning of the experience.

“The pre- and post-game ceremonies were the greatest experience for me,” said Nollinger. “Every game they would have a Wounded Warrior or the family members of a lost service member come out onto the field and throw out the first pitch and we would present them with a flag. At the end we would get the chance to meet with them. It was just a great feeling knowing we made a difference.”

There is one night that Nollinger recalls vividly, an evening that would solidify why he loved the game and this opportunity so much.

“I remember in San Diego, talking to the parents of a son who was a standout college baseball player, and who loved baseball, and he had just been killed three months prior (during combat operations in Afghanistan),” Nollinger said. “It was myself and a friend of mine who was on the USS Kidd, and we were talking to them after the game and telling them where we had just come from, and they had seen us on the news from when we (Stennis and Kidd) captured the pirates on deployment. Their son would have been out here with us, and at that point I realized it was no longer just about getting off the ship and having fun. It was about the connections we made with these people who we didn’t know from a stones’ throw. It was about being a part of something that was showing a positive light on the military, and that was huge for me.”

Just 20 games into the season, and after compiling an 18-2 record , Nollinger received a phone call from his chain-of-command saying he had to return to the ship.

“I knew it could happen,” he said, “I saw guys all the time get the call and the next day they were gone.”

It was over as quick as it began. Just three days after returning, the Stennis and her crew, including Nollinger, got underway four months early for another deployment to the U.S. 5th Fleet. Now, a month after

returning from his run with the U.S. Military All-Stars, he sits in the hangar bay with sweat running down his brow, and thinks about baseball and all the lives he touched.