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Thursday, April 10, 2008

Former Pallotti pitcher preps for next step

Former Gazette Player of the Year makes Division I plans for '09
 by Ted Black | Staff Writer
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After graduating from St. Vincent Pallotti High School in 2006, where he earned Gazette-Star Baseball Player of the Year honors as a senior, Travis Stewart decided the first step toward his dream of playing professional baseball would take him to a junior college in Alabama.

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Though he had opportunities to play for Division I programs out of high school, Stewart headed to Northwest Shoals Community College. Recently, the right-handed pitcher made plans for his next step toward the pros as he committed to play starting next year for College of Charleston in South Carolina.

The 6-foot-6, 230-pound Stewart is 5-1 this season with Northwest Shoals after going 9-2 with 87 strikeouts and a 2.64 earned-run average in 81 2/3 innings as a freshman.

"I think going the [junior college] route was the best decision that I have ever made coming out of high school," said Stewart, who plans to major in business management at College of Charleston. "I probably could have gone straight to a Division I program, but I don't think I would have been the top guy. I don't think I would have had a chance to pitch a lot as a freshman. But here it's great. It's quiet and there's nothing to do outside of campus, so I can focus on pitching and working out. Overall, I've gotten 10 times better since I left high school."

Stewart has gotten taller and stronger in the 22 months since graduating from Pallotti, adding more than 20 pounds and two inches to his frame. He also has added a slider to his menu of pitches and fine-tuned his mechanics. He credits much of the improvement to Northwest Shoals' coach David Langston.

"My slider has been one of my most effective pitches this season," Stewart said. "It's really been helpful in getting hitters out. I've been working on my mechanics and getting stronger and I think it's added up to more wins and strikeouts. I won't have as many wins this year, but I've pitched well. I probably could have won four or five more games if we had scored a few



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more runs. But it's all working out."

Stewart said he received more than two dozen offers from Division I programs before starting his official visits. He visited Troy University and College of Charleston and his tour stopped there. After visiting the campus and meeting baseball coach John Pawlawski, Stewart was convinced that the South Carolina school was the perfect fit.

The Cougars are 22-9 this season and are four-time defending Southern Conference regular-season champions. They led the nation in batting average and runs scored last spring.

Stewart's father, Steve Stewart, said College of Charleston offered a 75 percent scholarship. NCAA Division I baseball programs have a total of just 12 full scholarship slots which often are divided into smaller percentages. Louisiana State University, Alabama and Auburn — all from the powerhouse Southeastern Conference — also contacted Stewart, but he bypassed visits to those schools.

"I had a lot of schools that were looking at me," Stewart said. "But College of Charleston is a good school, it was a good fit for me and they offered me a good scholarship. Now I'm looking to get drafted. It's great to see all of the scouts at my games. I know that I need to keep working hard and keep getting better. I know the draft is June 6 and if it doesn't happen this year, I'll move on to College of Charleston and play and hope that it happens eventually. I think if I stay dedicated, it will happen someday."

Smith among D-II leaders

Pallotti graduate Christina Smith is enjoying a superb junior season with the softball team at Columbia Union College in Takoma Park. Although CU is 5-17, Smith is among the Division II national leaders in several offensive categories. She is batting .518 with eight doubles, four triples and 10 home runs while driving in 29 runs. Smith is ranked first nationally in home runs per contest, second in RBI per game, fourth in batting average and sixth in triples per game. Smith was a four-time Gazette-Star first-team selection at Pallotti and previously played at Prince

George's Community College.

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