

## Injuries Can't Keep Oregon-Bound Star from All-State Game

by Scott Spruill

Yakima Herald-Republic



YAKIMA -- Every player in this weekend's All-State Baseball Series comes with all the trimmings of a high school all-star -- talent, smarts, leadership and a youthful but deep commitment that dates back to Little League.

Line 'em up and one after the other you would hear all variations of the heroes' tale. Clutch base hits, game-winning strikeouts, championship trophies.

Colby Sokol has one of those stories, but of the 72 players in town for the annual four-game series Saturday and Sunday he is the most appreciative. That's because the Emerald Ridge senior from Puyallup nearly crawled to get this far.

After shoulder and elbow injuries wiped out a promising pitching future and the majority of his sophomore and junior seasons, Sokol had nearly had enough of pain and heartache.

"I almost threw in the towel," he said. "I was telling myself, 'Face facts, you're done.'"

A torn labrum and the subsequent surgery in the spring of 2006 ended Sokol's sophomore season. But a determined rehab effort got the 6-foot-2 lefty ready for his junior campaign, which he opened with a three-hitter against Kentridge.

Then came a league game with rival Puyallup and on the seventh pitch of his start Sokol unleashed an 88-mph fastball that dislocated his elbow.

"I hadn't felt anything like it before, but I knew it wasn't good," he recalled. "I tried another pitch to see how it was and it probably went 35 (mph) and hit the backstop. It was bad."

What Sokol suffered is known as Little League elbow, a growth plate injury on the inner part of the elbow where muscles from the wrist attach. He was told if he wanted to pitch again surgery would be necessary and he would likely miss his final high school season.

"I was real down on myself and feeling a lot of self pity," he said. "I dreamed of playing in college and the pros and as a left-handed pitcher I thought I had something to offer. To come back from one major injury was hard, and then this. I thought I was done."

But that thinking didn't last long. Sokol remained realistic about his pitching future, so he simply changed the game.

"I was a pitcher but I've always thought of myself as a baseball player first," he said. "I just couldn't sit out another season. It was killing me."

Sokol decided to move full-time to centerfield. He did not have surgery, opting for rest and rehab and was ready to play last summer with his club team, the Northwest Timberjacks.

"When he went down with the elbow, we all thought it was over," said Colby's father, Bob. "But he took a deep breath and decided he wanted to play regardless of where. Luckily he's athletic enough to make a move like that, and it's amazing how fast it came together for him."

Amazing is the word for it.

In less than a year, Sokol overcame his second major injury, converted himself from pitcher to outfielder, rose to No. 5 on the state's ranking for top prospects by Baseball Northwest and landed a scholarship from the University of Oregon. He got noticed early in his position change with stellar summer performances in the Mariner Cup and Area Code Games.

"The transition was tough at first, but it got easier and pretty soon everything just started to click for me," he said. "After the Mariner Cup I really started to believe I had a chance to keep playing in college and maybe beyond."

Sokol enjoyed an uninterrupted senior season at Emerald Ridge, batting .436 while showing off his defensive skills in centerfield. With restored confidence in his arm, he won't hesitate trying to throw a guy out at the plate.

"I don't think about it when I'm trying to make a play," he said. "But when I was coming back the second time I prayed I wouldn't fall and do some crazy thing. When you miss as much time as I have, it's hard to get those thoughts out of your head."

Sokol does believe some good came out of his injuries.

"It gave me a different perspective, sort of a coaches' perspective," he said. "For two years I watched the game from our dugout and I learned a lot seeing the whole game. It helped that way, but believe me I don't want any part of that again.

"I've had enough."