

SPORTS

COMMENTARY

Womack tries to steal The Show

Ex-Guilford infielder runs for record feat

By Butch Maler

Put me in, Coach. I'm ready to play—today.

—John Fogerty
CONWAY, SC

Ex-Guilford College shortstop Tony Womack watched his Augusta Pirate teammates warm-up for a game against the Myrtle Beach Hurricanes this summer.

"I love playin', I don't want to rest," he lamented.

Womack was instructed to take "a day or two rest" so he could heal from a slight groin strain.

He doesn't complain about the wait, though—Tony counts himself fortunate, emerging from his small private Greensboro school to professional baseball's minor leagues.

Womack, 22, was selected in the seventh round of the 1991 amateur baseball draft by Pittsburgh and signed with the Pirates for an undisclosed amount of money.

"I don't tell how much. It's nice to get paid—it's very nice—but money was not a factor when I signed. I'm just happy to be playing."

Womack was assigned to Welland of the New York-Penn League and hit .277 in over 200 plate appearances last year. But his hitting isn't gonna get Womack to The Show, as minor leaguers affectionately and respectfully dub the majors. Tony must steal his way there.

"I gotta earn it—keep

stealing bases. If I can just assert myself, concentrate, keep focus, then I could make it."

With 28 thefts in 32 attempts at Welland, Womack was well on his way. Through 67 games with Augusta this summer, he led the Pirate organization with 36 steals.

At Guilford, Womack hit near the .350 clip and set an all-time school season record for swipes with 23 in 1991.

The Augusta record before this season was 48.

"We're not allowed to look at the stats, but the guys remind me of how close I am [to the record]."

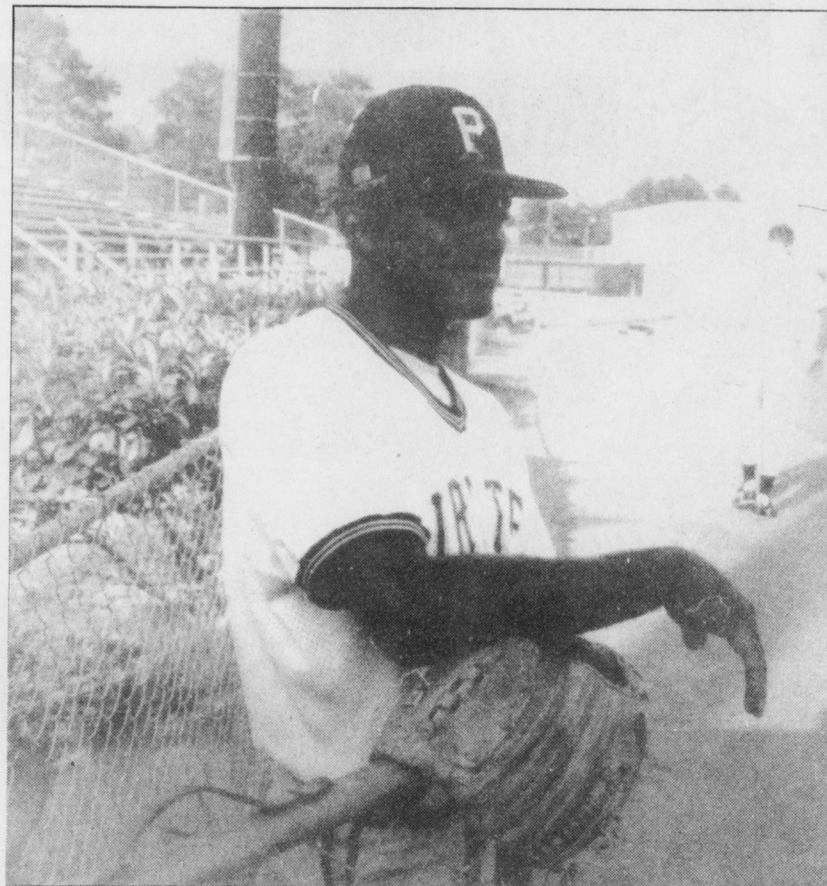
So far this year, Womack has struggled at the plate, hovering around the .240 mark. But Tony keeps this in perspective.

"In college, you get days off to practice, so you can come back great after a bad game. Here, you play every day and slumps are gonna happen, but you can't say you'll never get out of it."

Womack, a Chatham, VA native, should graduate from Guilford this fall with a sport management major and plans to live in Greensboro with ex-Guilford football stand-out Rodney Alexander, a NCAA Division III All-American defensive lineman in his own right.

"I'm gonna get my education—it's best for me," Womack said.

Tony will learn more about "what he needs to improve" concerning his baseball skills in the



Tony Womack ponders his future with the Pirates organization.

Photo by Butch Maler

instructional league next fall, as suggested by the Pirates.

As for the organization for whom he plays?

"I like it. If I didn't I wouldn't have signed. They tell you straight up what you have to do." "You're not gonna be

friends with everybody when you're tryin' to beat people out of a job, but you make friends along the way."

Womack had done just that with Augusta outfielder Tony Mitchell, but when Pittsburgh acquired Alex Cole from Cleveland, Mitchell was part of the Indians' reimbursement.

"That's part of baseball. When you're in the minors, you have no control—it's the organization's say-so. You just can't play like if you have a bad game, you'll be traded or released. You gotta give it your all—it's not your worry."

"I tell myself to stay with the fundamentals—do what you can. It's not doin' more than you can takin' the extra base and being aggressive. It's doin' more when you're tryin' to be a hero. Stay within yourself and do it."

And Tony's doin' it. In mid-August, he stole his 49th base this season for Augusta—just another feat for his record-breaking feat.

A slice of life from the Butcher

What are you out to prove?

Butch Maler

It seemed harmless enough.

A friendly game of pick-up basketball between friends, played under the lights and in the shadows on the hoop by Guilford's tennis courts.

Owen Thompson, my honorary playing buddy—the guy with this mysterious song in his head ("Do-De-Dee-Do") that he shared from time to time—and Allen Hill, my roommate of two-plus years were already shooting around as I jogged up to the concrete surface after 11 p.m. Tuesday night.

Two friends of mine—Randy Wall, and Davey McCullough, a 6'8" Guilford basketball sophomore—soon followed. As we warmed up, Allen proposed that he and I would take on Davey, Randy and Owen in a half-court game. I chuckled, thinking the idea preposterous. But always up for a challenge, I conceded to give it a shot.

I, being 6'4", had the dubious distinction of defending Davey. Allen, a true guard, decided he could try to cover same-sized Randy and Owen, a little taller. With no real method to the madness, we would try to scrap with them as best we could.

The game began with teams trading

baskets until the score was eight-all. Davey and I were working fairly hard under the boards, with elbows meeting chests and hips jockeying for position. I knew this match-up should be no contest, with Davey in line to possibly start for the school team this year and me relegated to the distinction of virtual unknown in intramural play. Still, I thought I could hold my own and, at least, not let him dominate me.

I fronted Davey so he had to drive to the right—which might seem silly since that's his natural side to drive—but being left-handed, that was the only defensive chance I had.

When he tried to go baseline on me one time, I stayed right with him, knowing I was in trouble if he turned the corner. Well, he did. But as he went up for the rim, I swooped around with my left arm and pinned the ball on the backboard, pushing it on out of bounds. Everybody, including me, did a double-take in disbelief.

Randy would later say that it was the best he ever saw me play on defense.

Allen decided to go on a scoring binge and put us way out in front, frustrating the opposition to no ends, renewing my confidence in my ability.

Half-hook. Turn-around jump shot. Pull-up jumper. All over Davey. We led 17-8.

Push came to shove. The two six-footers under the boards scrapped for positioning. Davey stuck his backside into my hip. I crossed in front of him with my right foot. He spun, arm waving for the ball, as he tried to go back door. I wouldn't have it.

Memories of defeat haunted me as we played.

Two years ago, I was sitting in English lounge, watching "Come Fly with Me," a highlight video of Michael Jordan. I was preparing myself emotionally for my attempt at walking-on Guilford's basketball team, when this freshman strolled in the room and started reciting the narration as it played on the tape. I'm thinking, Who is *this* cocky guy?

It was Davey. And he ended up making the team, while I was left to write about him, and all the other "real" athletes. Couple that with another battle which he had won—off-the-court, in courting a certain six-foot blonde—and I intensified my desire to prove myself, throwing every physical, mental and emotional ounce into winning this pick-up game, but not just winning.

Randy lofted the ball towards Davey. It ascended before me. I leapt.

"No way—get that out!" I yelled, snatching the sphere.

Passing a ball over my head was not a viable option, I have always maintained.

Nevertheless, the gap was closing. Our lead shrank—until I hit the last shot.

Game. 21-18. I didn't want to look at Davey, because I wasn't sure how he'd respond to a "good game" handshake. I slapped Allen's hand and walked to the corner of the court, underneath a night lamp, to catch my breath.

I bent over. A convulsing gasp and I was in tears. I could not stop. I walked away to a corner outside Ragan-Brown, thoughts of failed attempts and hoop hopes halted racing through my mind. Cut at prep school. The last cut my senior year in high school. Unable to endure my pursuits as a walk-on. The six-foot blonde.

Allen walked over to me and said "Jesus died, Butch. He died for it all."

What? My defenses arose. Not me. Yes, me. For everything I did for me. I walked over to hug Davey.

"I'm sorry. I failed you as a friend."

"No you didn't. We just got a little competitive. That's why we're out here—everybody wants the same thing."

"No, you don't understand. I didn't want to win. I wanted to *beat* you."

There's a difference. I was out to prove I was better than him in some way, the only way I could. Praise God, Dave Getz' prayer of brokenness for me was answered.

Everybody, it seems, has something they are out to prove. Whether you are a freshman looking for popularity and acceptance—on or off the field, a senior looking to make it on your own, or somewhere in between, you are probably trying to establish yourself in some way.

What Allen told me back in our room put things into perspective.

"Jesus had every right to have an ego, but yet He gave it up. He had every right to His rights, yet He gave them up. As far as you are concerned, you've failed at your life—you have nothing else to prove. Concentrate on letting Jesus be your focus, not yourself."

I charge the same to you.

I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.

—Acts 26:20b, NIV Bible