

# THE SPOTLIGHT

**RUSS ADAMS MIGHT  
BE THE NEXT BIG THING FOR THE  
NORTH CAROLINA BASEBALL TEAM,  
IF HE ISN'T ALREADY.**

**H**e enters this season a first-team preseason All-American, is ranked the fourth-best college prospect in the country by Baseball America and has an excellent chance to be taken with one of the first 10 picks of June's Major League Baseball draft.

Not that he'd tell you any of that. If you didn't notice Adams in his sophomore season, you're absolved. The junior from Laurinburg was the first UNC second baseman to be named All-ACC since 1979 and was the team's most valuable player. But he did it quietly, far too focused to be flashy.

A breakout season in the Cape Cod Baseball League, America's best amateur summer circuit, makes him a little harder to ignore.

"The interesting thing about Russ to me was that nobody really knew about him," said Don Norris, Adams' coach last summer on the Orleans (Mass.) Cardinals. "A lot of times we have to compete for guys up there. It's almost like a whole recruiting process."

"No one seemed really interested in him, and I needed a second baseman, so I said, 'Sure, why not?' As soon as he showed up I was like, 'Well this kid's definitely better than I thought.'"

Despite its Hollywood first act, Adams' summer of coastal baseball was hardly one of chasing blondes and downing brews with Freddie Prince Jr. and the gangly guy from "Scream." On a typical day, Adams started the morning with work at a youth baseball clinic in Orleans. In the afternoon, Adams would either lift weights or take early batting practice. Then came more batting practice, typically followed

by a night game.

Tedious as it might have been, the batting practice was crucial, as hitters in the Cape League face the same top-notch competition they have faced all spring, with a kicker. Instead of aluminum bats, hitters use wooden ones, complete with smaller sweet spots.

"A lot of people struggle at first," said UNC center fielder Adam Greenberg, who played for the league's Chatham A's last summer.

"Everyone's trying to bunt, play small ball."

Adams managed to avoid the early struggles. Part of it was the experience he had using the hardwood in past competition, including the Coastal Plain League in the summer of 2000. The other part was pure skill.

"He's got good hand-eye coordination," Norris said. "A lot of it up there is putting the ball in play."

"And when you've got speed, like he does, you can take advantage. He would bunt, but I'm not going to say he was primarily a bunter. I mean, he can hit."

Adams finished the season second in the league in hits, second in runs scored, first in walks and tied for the league lead in steals. Those numbers earned him a trip to the Cape's All-Star game, where Adams smacked a three-run homer to lead the East to a 10-1 win against the West and took home MVP honors.

"Being a part of the All-Star game was just a great experience for me," Adams said. "There were three, four thousand people at the game. Just a great atmosphere, the top players in the country, top players in the league. Just an all-around fun experience and something I'll always remember."

After the season, Adams was honored with

the Robert A. McNeece Outstanding Prospect Award. The honor might be the most prestigious in the league, even more so than the Pat Sorenti Award for league MVP, won by Georgia Tech outfielder Matt Murton of the league-champion Wareham Gatemen.

"In a lot of areas, most outstanding prospect is a higher achievement than MVP," Norris said. "The MVP is usually going to go to one of the teams that earned first place. In his situation, if our team was in first place, (Adams) may have won the MVP."

The league higher-ups weren't the only ones struck by Adams' talent. Proof lies within the Aug. 6 edition of "Diamond Notes," the stream-of-consciousness reflections of ESPN analyst Peter Gammons, perhaps the nation's most respected baseball mind:

"Most athletic infielder in the league in years, 4.1 runner, disciplined at the plate, soft hands, speed and has shown power potential. There are a lot of scouts who think he's the best prospect, period."

While Adams has to settle for being the No. 4 college prospect and 11th-ranked talent overall (including high school players) in the current issue of Baseball America, he poetically summed up his off-season leap.

"That's how you want to spend your summers."

But the worst thing about summers? They end. And when Adams returned to UNC in the fall, one had to wonder: With his success, would Adams cram an inflated ego in his suitcase as a souvenir from the Bay State?

The answer to this question has been unanimous — no.

"He still comes out here every day, the same way he always has, like nothing's changed, really," said UNC teammate Chad Prosser, who shares the infield with Adams.

But doesn't the hype intrude occasionally in the locker room or sneak into casual, off-the-diamond conversations?

"No. Not really."

Tar Heel pitcher Scott Autrey, who also played for the Cardinals over the summer and lived with the same host family as Adams, said his teammate is unfazed by the accolades.

"He has to know, and I know he knows," Autrey said. "But I don't think he dwells on it by any means. It's an honor, but after that it's left behind."

Said UNC coach Mike Fox: "He understands the pitfalls of getting caught up too much in the hype. He's as mentally prepared a player that I've probably ever coached. And I think that's why the scouts really like him."

Scouts may be enamored with Adams, but for the time being, they'll have to wait to see him play. Adams suffered a hairline fracture to his left thumb when he was hit by a pitch in last

Friday's season-opening win against Seton Hall.

The injury forced him to the designated hitter position Saturday, and he was kept out of the game Sunday for precautionary measures. But if what Adams said after Sunday's game was any indication, he won't be out of the lineup for very long.

There's too much work to be done.

"For the most part, every part of my game needs improvement, just like everybody else that plays this game needs improvement in every area," he said. "The game can't be perfected."

Maybe not, but the consensus is that Adams has a good start. Gammons called his athleticism "Alomaresque." That versatility will be highlighted more this season, as Fox said he plans to play Adams more frequently at shortstop as opposed to second base.

Norris agreed that Adams is one of the most athletic players he's ever seen. The only tool Adams doesn't have, Norris said, is power at the plate.

"Power is going to be the thing in his career that's going to lack, but that doesn't matter with this type of player," Norris said when asked to compare Adams to current all-star infielders. "He's got skills already that guys like Bret Boone and Jeff Kent don't have. He'll just have to use what he does more."

In a few months, Adams will almost certainly follow the path of Kent, Jeff Bagwell, Lance Berkman, Nomar Garciaparra, Todd Helton and hundreds of other ballplayers from the Cape League to the pros.

Almost equally as certain is that he will take the event in stride, a stepping stone to a greater goal of a spot in a Major League lineup.

Of course, this prompts a question: In the face of all the hype, how can someone be so businesslike? When posed the question, for once Adams couldn't keep a straight face.

"I try not to get too excited when things are going good, and I try not to get too down when things are going bad," he said, chuckling. "The game has its ups and downs."

Said Greenberg: "That's Russ. What you see is what you get. He's very straight to the point. He's very business-oriented as far as, 'I'm coming out here to do a job and have fun.'"

"There's nothing extravagant that you wouldn't know or you could dig up. If there is, I don't have it, and we spend a lot of time together."

In the politics-as-usual world of college sports, where a Heisman Trophy candidate can shrug off the importance of the award after a 10-story-tall, \$250,000 banner of his likeness was hung in Times Square, it has become increasingly hard to take anyone at face value.

But for Russ Adams, just this once, you make an exception.



DTH/BRIAN CASSELLA

UNC's baseball team struggled in 2001 but hopes to use the experience it gained to return to the top of the ACC this year.

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— he started Bakker on Sunday against Seton Hall.

Early on, the pitching, which faltered so often in 2001, has been solid. Autrey allowed two runs and struck out seven in 4 2/3 innings Friday against Seton Hall, and Bakker and Moore each allowed a run in a combined 10 1/3 innings of work.

"Coming into the season, our pitching was the question mark," Farrell said. "Our pitchers made a great statement last weekend."

Should that continue, the Tar Heels could find themselves back toward the top of a stacked ACC, a league that boasts national contenders like Florida State, Georgia Tech and Wake Forest.

If not, visions of the recent past could creep back into the team's near future.

"If you don't compete on a weekend in the league," Fox said, "you'll get hammered."