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James Marvel - a major leaguer in every way

By Jon Kingdon



James Marvel on the mound Photos Dave Arrigo

What little leaguer has not considered the possibility of playing professional baseball? With 576 of the 800 major league players born in the United States, the Wall Street Journal estimated that only one out of every 3,376 little leaguers will become a major league player.

On Sept. 8, 26-year-old James Marvel, a Campolindo and Duke University graduate, became one of those 3,376 aspirants to make it to the major leagues. After starting the season in the minors in Double A and then moving up to Triple A, Marvel was called up to the majors by the Pittsburgh Pirates, the team that drafted him in 2015, and named him the starting pitcher against the St. Louis Cardinals.

Even though he came up short in a 2-0 game, Marvel did not forget what brought him to this moment: "When I got the call from the Pirates to join the team, it was a very special feeling, a dream come true. I called both my parents and shared it with my girlfriend in person. I then called my high school pitching coach, Jeff Pick, and my high school head coach at Campolindo, Max Luckhurst. Those are the moments that are going to stick out to me in getting the call up."

There were over 40 people in the stands in Pittsburgh that flew in from all over the country to support Marvel in his initial outing. His parents, cousins, aunts, grandmother, teammates from Duke, best friends from his five years in the minor leagues, his girlfriend, her family and assorted other supporters.

Marvel has always made it a point to be all business on the mound, but at this game it wasn't easy for him: "When I take the field, I'm just supremely focused on each individual pitch and I try to be very intentional with that pitch and execute it. All I really see, hear and focus on is my catcher other than being aware of my fielders and situational stuff that is happening. But when I went up against the Cardinals, it was hard not to hear my large section of friends and family when I was on the field warming up and on some big outs. I wouldn't have been there without them and it was a physical manifestation of the work they put in for me to feel like they were out there on the field with me."

Marvel's father, John, works for the NFL Network and was able to attend the game, missing the first week of the NFL season because "my boss is very understanding and I have great colleagues. I had tears of joy in my eyes. I'm an incredibly proud father and whatever happens, happens, but to watch your son live his dream is just a great experience as a parent. I'm still walking around in a fog and just so happy for him that all his work has paid off."

Luckhurst was another one of those people in the stands after catching a red eye flight the night before. The call he got from Marvel was one he'll never forget: "It was an amazing phone call, knowing the joy and excitement on the other end of the call. To hear him say those words was priceless."

Being named the East Bay Player of the Year as a junior and senior bespoke to Marvel's physical talents but it was the intangibles that Luckhurst felt put Marvel over the top: "He always had the mindset to play professionally. James has an A-plus character. He was an outstanding student and had a work ethic second to none. He had a focus well beyond his years."

Growing up, it was not just baseball for Marvel. Prior to the NFL Network, Marvel's father worked as an executive for ESPN and as a result, Marvel spent a lot of his childhood in Connecticut, Washington and California playing hockey and tennis. After moving to Moraga at the age of 12 and attending Campolindo High School, he played football for coach Kevin Macy and baseball for Luckhurst. It was no contest for Marvel in deciding which sport was his favorite: "Baseball just became my love and passion and something that I was good at. Jeff Pick has been my pitching coach since I was 12. I still talk to him every couple of days and every day before I'm due to pitch, and I talk with Max all the time. Those guys are still very influential and impactful in my life and career."

Marvel was drafted by the Minnesota Twins in 2012 after his senior year at Campolindo, but opted to attend Duke on a baseball scholarship. After being drafted following his junior year, Marvel needed only one more semester to finish his degree and two years ago, he graduated with a history major and an English minor.

The German philosopher Frederich Nietzsche said: "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Marvel took those words to heart: "Things did not go as I had originally planned when I went to Duke. I had a number of injuries that prevented me from playing a lot. I only pitched four weeks my sophomore year and then had the Tommy John (elbow) surgery and never pitched again until I was drafted. My experiences were different than I had wanted them to be, but I wouldn't trade any of that adversity because going through some of those things, such as the long rehab processes, made me both mentally and physically stronger, both as a player and a person and I am where I am today because of them."

After riding the buses for four years in the minor leagues, staying at less than five-star hotels and dressing in run-of-the-mill locker rooms, Marvel found the promotion to the majors all that he hoped it would be, citing Kevin Costner's quote from the movie Bull Durham about his short stay in the major leagues: "It was the best 21 days of my life."

There was almost too much going on with meetings and workouts for Marvel to enjoy how special being with the Pirates has been: "The first 24 hours were a blur. It really hit me the first time I got in the shower after the game and the water pressure was incredible and it was immediately hot. It made me take a step back and realize that all this stuff is very nice."

While doing this interview, Marvel continued to appreciate where he was: "I'm on the field right now at Oracle Park talking to you. I've been here countless times watching the Giants from the stands, envisioning one day playing here and now I'm calling you standing on the center field grass."

Marvel understands what got him to the big leagues and what it is going to take to keep him there: "I pride myself on my preparation and on my learning, whether it's high school, college, early pro ball and even to this day, I'm always trying to get better. Obviously, the coaching gets to be really strong as you go up and it's interesting in that it's a bit of an inverse relationship with how much you can learn at one time. The better that the players become, the better the game gets at each level. You're not making huge exponential strides on a day-to-day basis. It's a lot of very little, marginal type things that I'm trying to learn every day. If I can pick up one little thing at the ballpark every day, over the course of a season, the percentages on that all adding up, adds up to a lot."

Despite losing his first game, Marvel still has not come down from the high yet: "It was hard not to be emotional when I went on the field after the game and shared hugs with my parents and my girlfriend and my extended family and everybody who was there. With each individual hug that I gave and the words they expressed to me, I think it was then that it hit me what a special experience it was. I'm not sure when I'm pitching next or what the plan is, but hopefully I can have an impact in any way that I can."



James Marvel Photos Dave Arrigo

Reach the reporter at: sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com

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