

Despite major injuries, MHCC athlete perseveres

Holding on to childhood dreams

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Billy Clontz knows about dreams and disappointments. He knows about making the most with what you have. And he knows that life will sometimes throw you a curve when you're expecting a fastball.

Clontz just last month wrapped up an unusually long career with the MHCC baseball team. The Corvallis native has been a part of the Saints program for the last four years but was forced to sit out the entire 2005 and 2007 seasons because of major injuries. He missed one season

due to a major back injury and missed another year after having "Tommy John" surgery on his elbow.

Many athletes might have hung up their cleats and moved on to some other activity. But Clontz kept coming back and kept working through the long periods of rehabilitation because, as he says, "Baseball is my life."

Clontz always wanted to be a ballplayer. He loves the game and set his sights high as far back as he can remember. "Just like any other kid, I had always envisioned myself growing up and making a career out of baseball and playing in the big leagues."

Growing up in Corvallis, he bled orange and black (Oregon State colors) and, along with the other townies, always had a passion for the game.

"I love the city of Corvallis and was blessed with such great family and friends. Plus, what a baseball town to be a part of," said Clontz. He was a three-sport athlete at Corvallis High School where he played baseball, basketball and football (three letters in baseball and football and one in basketball).

During his senior year in 2004, Clontz made first team all-state honors for baseball.

It was an easy decision to pick MHCC as his next step. "I signed late with MHCC but it was really a no-brainer decision," said Clontz. "I knew the history and tradition of MHCC baseball. Plus the coaching staff is what really turned me on to signing with the Saints. Hands down, Gabe Sandy (head baseball coach during 2005-07) is my favorite coach to play under during my long career of baseball. He will always be there for me and I can really count on him through out the rest of my lifetime."

Clontz was also influenced by his stepfather, Mike Burbee, who inspired him to be successful and taught him to always work hard no matter what he was doing.

"My stepfather raised me to go out and play the game hard and to never give up and to always give it my all," said Clontz. "He's the hardest worker I have ever seen. He has always worked long, hard hours and never slowed down for any breaks. His work ethic has been the biggest influence on me both on and off the field."

As it turned out, those lessons came none too soon for Clontz.

"I had a major back injury during my first year at MHCC," said Clontz. But he never gave up following the injury that sidelined him for a full season and required four months of physical therapy.

"I never was going to give up and I traveled with the team every game and kept the books," he recalled. "There were

times when I couldn't walk or sleep due to the pain in my back. This was a new role for me, not playing and having to watch, but there was nothing I could do about it. I really matured that year and got a chance to get a good feel for the program."

The following year, during his first full year of MHCC baseball in 2006, Clontz started in center field, batted .365 and won the Joe Gillis Mr. Hustle Award.

But after his banner year, he was sidelined for the 2007 season after undergoing Tommy John surgery. The surgical procedure, named after the major league pitcher who played for the White Sox, Yankees and Dodgers, replaces a ligament in the elbow with a tendon from elsewhere in the body. It's a popular procedure that many collegiate and professional baseball players go through.

"During the off season, I was throwing some long catch and my elbow just snapped. I knew it wasn't good," he said. "It was painful to sit out yet another year due to injury, especially after having such good season the year before."

Clontz went through a year of rehabbing and feared that he would never again be able to play the game that he loved so much. "It's one of the toughest rehab injuries in all of sports," said Clontz. "After doing the research, I found out that it could take up to 12 to 18 months to get back to normal. I feared that my elbow might never be the same."

He said it was the toughest year in his baseball career, especially as a leader and captain of the team. "I sat out for 12 months. I couldn't contribute like I wanted to and that was toughest part for me. I still continued to travel with the team and root on my guys. I also helped out a lot during practice. I wanted more than anything to be on the field and to be apart of the action."

Once again, Clontz fought his way back and during his final season that concluded this spring, he had high expectations for him and his team.

"I wanted to go out with a bang," said Clontz. "I have been a part of this program for four years and I wanted more than anything to win NWAACCs."

The team fell short after losing its two final games of the tournament to runner-up Lower Columbia CC and the eventual champion, Edmonds CC. MHCC finished fourth in the tournament after winning the Southern Region title for its fourth season in a row. Clontz ended the year batting .315 with five homeruns, 10 doubles and two triples. He was named to the second team Southern Region all-star team.

"Over the last four years I have learned a lot about MHCC baseball and life," said Clontz. "I've learned that you don't always get the hand you want dealt. You just have to play the cards you have as well as you can.

"I learned how to play the game the right way. From shaving your face and looking well mannered or always running hard 90's in practice, I learned all of the little things that make you a better well-rounded player.

Clontz was a part of the last team to reach an NWAACC championship game — in 2005 — when he was teammates with the current head coach, Bryan Donohue.

"It's weird looking back on it and knowing that I played with my head coach for a full season and a summer," said Clontz. He said the program had a tough stretch, "losing a couple of coaches in such a short period of time this year. But Donohue has done a great job stepping in and taking over this program. With all the coaching problems and other issues, we really had a great season this year."

Looking ahead, Clontz may sign with Western Oregon University in Monmouth as a scholarship athlete for the baseball team. He isn't 100 percent sure, saying, "I still want to keep my options open. But I'd really like to play alongside my best friend Justin Speer and be reunited as teammates," said Clontz.

Speer is a former all-star who attended MHCC during 2005-2007. "When Speer decided to transfer from Lewis-Clark State College (in Idaho) to go to Western, I knew I wanted to attend Western and be a part of that program," Clontz said. "Plus, I want to become a high school teacher at some point and there's no better place in the state of Oregon to receive a teaching degree than at Western.

"As much as I would love to play for Oregon State, I want to choose a school where I can start playing right away and be a major contributor right off the bat. It's no fun sitting on the bench and not being a part of the team on a daily basis."

Right now his main focus is to finish the school year strongly and work on his major, which is health education.

"I have always wanted to further my education and become a head baseball coach at some point in my life," he said. "I would love to run my own program some day and sculpt it as close to the legacy that MHCC has. I have learned a lot about the game from my coaches while attending MHCC."

The dream lives on and so does his passion for the sport of baseball. It's always been more than just a game for Clontz.

"The dream will always be a part of my life," said Clontz. "I will never give up on pursuing my goals and taking baseball into my future as long as I can. You can never give up on something that you are so passionate about no matter what it is.

"In my case, baseball is my life and something that pushes me each day to be a successful individual."



Billy Clontz
Captain
Saints baseball team

