



Happy homecoming for Cougars' Tri-Cities-area pitcher

April 10, 2009 · Lisle, IL – Following former Dragons players is as easy as a click or two of a mouse. But one former Dragon returns home and offers fans a rare chance to see him play in person. Kenny Smalley, a pitcher for the 2006 and 2007 Dragons, will be playing in Batavia this summer for the Kane County Cougars. A St. Charles native, Smalley will have the opportunity to pitch in front of many friends and family this summer. The Daily Herald caught up with Smalley to ask his thoughts on returning home:

Kenny Smalley was all smiles during the Kane Country Cougars' media day on Tuesday afternoon at Elfstrom Stadium in Geneva.

The Cougars, the Oakland A's Class A Midwest League affiliate, were unveiling the first Tri-Cities native and athlete in their 18-year history. Smalley was a standout on the 2004 Class AA Batavia state quarterfinalist before transferring to St. Charles North for his senior campaign.

After turning down professional overtures from the Cincinnati Reds and Minnesota Twins during his amateur career, Smalley was drafted by the A's in the 24th round last year. Smalley appeared in 20 games during an abbreviated session with Vancouver last season and won five of his six decisions with a 3.07 ERA.

"I will be a back-of-the-bullpen kind of guy," Smalley said of his envisioned role as one of 13 pitchers to make the Cougars' opening-day roster.

"Wherever they want to put me is fine with me. It will be fun to play before my friends and family."

The vagaries minor-league ballplayers face have been well-documented, and the primary goal is as foreign to traditional business practices as the bus rides can be interminable. Turnover is the grand design.

"(Smalley) is going to get an opportunity to pitch," said first-year manager Steve Scarsons, who played with five different MLB teams during the 1990s. "Hopefully, he will excite his hometown and move on out of here. Experience is key in this situation."

It is a plan of attack Smalley will readily accept.

"Hopefully the next time you interview me it will be at a higher level," Smalley said.

Dusty Napoleon is the Cougars' other player with state roots; the former three-sport star for New Trier High School returns for a second season after starring at the University of Iowa for three years. The Wilmette native, who will play both catcher and first base as well as intermittent chores in the outfield, has fond memories of his earliest visits to Elfstrom Stadium.

"I came to a couple of games with my dad when (former Florida Marlins star) Charles Johnson was catching," Napoleon said.

Cougars officials also showcased the continuing renovation project at the stadium that is in its final stages of completion. Costing more than \$10 million and a year-plus in the making, the Forest Preserve District of Kane County, the stadium owners, added an upper deck to the main grandstand.

At the core of its new look is nearly 20 executive and personal suites as well as a pair of rooftop patios down the left- and right-field lines.

"It's only going to enhance an already great product," Cougars general manager Jeff Sedivy said. "We're hoping that our fan base likes what they see."

The Cougars are the exclusive tenant at the facility, but Sedivy intimated an underlying reason for the costly renovation was bringing back the IHSA state baseball tournament.

"(Geneva athletic director Jim Kafer and I) still to this day don't understand how we lost it," Sidevy said.

"We would love to get it back," Kafer said.

The Dragons home opener is slated for 7:05 pm on Tuesday, June 9th against the defending champion Springfield Sliders. Tickets are available by calling the Dragons' ticket office at 630-241-2255 or by purchasing online at www.dupagedragons.com.