

Lured to UNL, then right field, Oakley hitting hard

By Sara Martens

Coming to Nebraska and playing outfield were two of the farthest things from Steve Oakley's mind a couple of years ago, but today he finds himself in both situations and perfectly happy with his position.

Oakley, a junior from Los Angeles, Calif., had played infield most of his life until he met UNL baseball coach John Sanders.

Sanders recruited Oakley to attend Arizona Western where Sanders was the assistant coach. Sanders was then offered the position at Nebraska and asked Oakley to come with him.

"I said there was no way I'd go to Nebraska, so I stayed in Arizona," Oakley said.

After an injury sidelined him for half a season, Oakley was contacted by Sanders. Because of the added persuasion from Nebraska recruiting materials, the lure of a large university far from home, and the fact that friends Ray Tromba, Val Primante, Tim Pettit and Pete O'Brien also would be playing for the Huskers, Oakley decided to make the move.

Right field

The move from California to Nebraska before last season was longer than the move from second base to right field that Oakley made before this season. However, it was met with the same amount of hesitation, Oakley said.

Oakley began his baseball career as a pitcher and remained at that position until his senior year in high school.

"My senior year Benny Lefebvre became our coach. He taught me how to hit and really helped me as a ball player," he said.

Lefebvre would bring in his son Jim, the 1965 rookie of the year for the Los

Angeles Dodgers, Sparky Anderson and other baseball notables to work with Oakley and his teammates, he said.

"Being around those guys made you feel like a ball player and play like one too," Oakley said.

After graduation, a partial season at Arizona Western and the move to Nebraska, Oakley spent a season as the Huskers' second baseman, batting .303.

New record

"I liked it there. John Russo (the Husker first baseman) and I turned 41 double plays, which was a new school record. We worked well together," he said.

Before this season Sanders asked Oakley to move again, this time to right field. "I didn't think he was serious when he'd ask, so I just said 'Well, whatever, coach,' and tried to ignore him whenever he said anything about it.

"In the infield you're always handling the ball," Oakley said. "I liked that, but second didn't give me a chance to use my arm. Now I get the chance to throw farther and harder."

Oakley's ability to throw long was one of the reasons he made the switch, Sanders said.

"I'm glad I made the change, but it gets boring," Oakley said. "I hum a lot of songs out there."

Happy with move

Oakley is as happy with his move to Nebraska as he is with the switch to right field.

"A lot of my friends teased me at first, and I didn't really blame them. They didn't know what was in Nebraska and I didn't know what to expect, but I knew the journalism school was one of the finest and graduating from here would be a big plus if baseball doesn't work out," the advertising major said.

But school work tends to take a back

seat when baseball season rolls around.

"I work real hard the first couple of weeks then when March comes around I close my books and just hope for the best," he said. "It's hard to concentrate when you wake up in the morning thinking about the game," he said.

The Southern California road trip gave Oakley the opportunity to play college baseball in front of his parents for the first time.

"To play good baseball teams, Southern California is the place to go," he said. "There are so many good teams so close together. Hawaii is a good recruiting tool but there are too many distractions, like beaches and grass skirts, to really concentrate on playing ball."

Friendly atmosphere

"It's fun going to other places to play but it's always great to play at Buck Beltzer. The support from fans, students and the people in Lincoln is really great. It makes a real friendly atmosphere to play in," Oakley said.

Some of the Huskers' best fans this season have been little kids, who huddle around the players between and after games in search of autographs.

"They really look up to you," Oakley said. "I think it's important for them to model ball players, and it's important for us to be friendly and talk to them about baseball. It seems like the little kids and the old men enjoy it the most."

The only disadvantage Oakley has found in Nebraska is the weather.

"I hate playing in cold weather and wind. When I go up to bat I feel like I've already got two strikes against me. Warm weather is a lot more fun," he said.

Fun is a key part of the game for Oakley and the rest of the Huskers.

Different breed

"Baseball players are a different breed.

They're always goofing around. Last year the California guys had a hard time mixing, but by now we know everyone else's moods. There is a good rapport among teammates. We stay loose until the first pitch, then everyone knows what their job is. As soon as the last out is recorded all hell breaks loose," he said.

Oakley does his part for team harmony by conducting the Husker Baseball Post Game Show on the way home from away games.

He and designated hitter Bob Gebler use the bus P.A. system to interview the outstanding players of the game and Sanders.

"Oakley has a double shot at a career, either in baseball or radio," Sanders said.

Oakley continues his part on the field with a .317 batting average, fifth on the team.

Hitting well

"I don't try to power the ball. You won't see the high towering home runs out of me," he said.

In fact, Oakley had yet to hit a pitch out of the ball park until last weekend's series with Missouri. That fact, he admits, is a little distressing.

"I really can't complain because I'm hitting good," he said. "They always say hit the line drives and the home runs will come. Well, I'm still waiting."

However, Oakley said he has attained one of his major goals; to consistently hit the ball hard.

This personal goal remains though team goals constantly shift.

"In the beginning of the season our goal was to make it to the Big Eight play-offs," Oakley said. "Now with every game we win that changes. With the team we have now we can go to regionals, and if the big Husker in the sky is on our side we should go all the way."

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