



Photos courtesy of Nebraska Sports Information

As a Husker, Erstad was a two-sport athlete. He was part of the 1994 national championship football team as the punter/placekicker. He also batted .410 with 19 home runs his junior and final season on the Husker baseball team.

Erstad hits way into Angels lineup

By Trevor Parks
Staff Writer

ANAHEIM, Calif. — The front cover of the California Angels 1996 baseball media guide shows Garret Anderson, Jim Edmonds and Tim Salmon, who are the team's "Angels in the Outfield."

Now two-thirds of the way through the 1996 season, that cover may need a revision, thanks to former Nebraska baseball/football star Darin Erstad.

Since being called up from AAA Vancouver to fill in for an injured Edmonds on June 14, Erstad has made an impact for the Angels in a big way. In Edmonds' absence Erstad hit .321 with 39 hits, 27 runs, three home runs and 16 RBIs.

His performance earned him a surprise spot on the Angels 25-man roster once Edmonds returned July 18.

"He was given the opportunity to come up here and show what he could do under great pressure," Salmon said. "Everyone is watching him to see how he reacts in certain situations and he's passed everybody's test."

"He's done everything asked of him and more. He's opened eyes and his good play has created that," Salmon said.

Every time he had the opportunity to shine at Nebraska, Erstad did so. He helped the 1994 Cornhusker football team win a national title as the punter/placekicker. In his junior and final year for the Nebraska baseball team, he hit .410, hitting 19 home runs.

In his brief career, he's done everything the Angels thought he would do when they made him the first pick of the 1995 amateur baseball draft.

Although his average — now .292 since only having three hits in his last 17 at-bats — has dipped recently, Erstad is happy to be called the one thing every child dreams of becoming one day: a Major League baseball player.

First game

Erstad had just finished batting practice before a game at Edmonton, when Vancouver manager Don Long informed Erstad of his promotion.

"It was really a shock, I wasn't expecting to get called up but it was a great opportunity for me," Erstad said.

Erstad joined the parent club June 14 with

the Angels hosting the Toronto Blue Jays. He posted a .305 average with 39 runs scored, 16 doubles, four home runs and 29 RBIs in Vancouver. He had made only one error in 117 chances.

The first thing Erstad did when he found out he was going to the majors was grab the phone and call home. There wasn't any shock on the other end of the line, however, since his parents already knew.

The Angels assistant general manager, Tim Mead, had called the Erstads with the news, and had said to come out to Anaheim for those first few games.

"When I called them they had already heard so they were going crazy, and I think that they were already packed by the time I talked to them," Erstad said. "They were very excited and proud."

He had a rather auspicious debut, going 0-for-4 as the leadoff batter in a 7-4 Angels victory.

Despite all the hoopla that included a 25-minute pre-game press conference in the dugout, and taking batting practice wearing a floppy oversized helmet, Erstad wasn't overwhelmed as he shone in the spotlight.

"I'm not one of those guys who sits here and makes a big deal out of those things," the 22-year-old Erstad said. "To me it was just another ball game."

He earned a walk in his first at-bat, along with making a spectacular diving catch of a Domingo Cedeno bloop to center field.

Meanwhile, in the stands, 11 friends and family members from North Dakota watched No. 27 play his first game as a California Angel.

Erstad's 0-for-4 performance stretched to an 0-for-11 start, but he was not discouraged. The Jamestown, N.D., native picked up his first major league hit in his third game by singling to right field off Toronto pitcher Paul Quantrill at Anaheim Stadium.

Once that was under his belt, Erstad seemed to feel more relaxed at the plate.

"It was a matter of getting comfortable," Erstad said. "I've never started any season very fast before. I just kept my patience and my confidence and things turned around for me."

Away from the Big A, Erstad has hit safely in 16 of 18 games with an average of .338. Erstad also has eight multi-hit games in the last 21 games. In his fourth game in an

Angel uniform, he hit his first Major League home run off Chicago's ace Alex Fernandez, turning his play around after his slow start.

Everyday player

Since getting the call from California, Erstad has become an everyday player, only sitting out one game as of Tuesday night. Such consistency has caused manager Marcel Lachemann to do some outfield shuffling.

The only game Erstad sat out was Edmonds' second game back. Lachemann is in a situation where he is trying to fit four quality players into just three spots.

But in all this there is good news for Erstad.

"One thing the kid has going to him is that he is a legitimate leadoff hitter," Lachemann said. "That might get him more playing time than the others."

At Nebraska, Coach John Sanders used Erstad primarily as a leadoff hitter to give Erstad as many at-bats as possible. Since joining the Angels, Erstad has been lead-off hitter a team high of 34 times.

The person affected most by the whole thing is Anderson. Erstad has moved to the left while Anderson, the Angels everyday left-fielder for more than a year, has been sent to the bench.

Salmon, who has not been benched, said it was a difficult situation for Lachemann.

"I'd like to see Jim Edmonds, Garret Anderson, Darin and of course myself in the lineup everyday," Salmon said. "I'm glad Darin's here and he's going to help us."

"How can we make this thing work? That's the big question in the puzzle right now."

The last thing the humble Erstad wants to do is be an odd piece in the Angels' puzzle.

"They must be satisfied with my play if I'm still here," Erstad said. "Honestly, I don't worry about what other people think. I go out and play hard everyday, and just try to do what I can do to the best of my ability, and whatever happens happens. I don't try and do things that I can't do."

Besides his overall talent, there have been two major reasons Erstad is still an Angel and not back in Triple-A: his outfield teammates and Angels hitting coach Rod Carew.

Although competing for playing time with

Erstad's path to the majors:

- Drafted out of high school by the New York Mets in the 13th round of the 1992 amateur draft.
- Placekicker/punter on 1994 National Championship football team.
- Posted a .410 average with 19 home runs his junior and final year at Nebraska.
- Drafted as first pick in the June 1995 baseball draft by the California Angels. Signed a \$1.725 million contract, including a \$1.575 million signing bonus on July 26, 1995.
- Professional career began at Mesa, Ariz. (Rookie League), and was promoted August 6, 1995 to Lake Elsnore (Class A).
- Registered a .363 batting average with 24 runs, seven doubles, five home runs and 24 RBIs in 25 games at Lake Elsnore.
- Member of Tempe Rafters in Arizona Fall League. Erstad hit .344 with 53 hits and almost won the League batting title.
- Played 59 games at AAA Vancouver, batting .305 with 39 runs, four home runs, 16 doubles and 29 RBIs.
- Joined California Angels on June 14, 1996.

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