

Red Sox minor leaguer Nate Freiman's love for baseball has yet to go away

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Nate Freiman has always loved baseball. As a young boy growing up in Wellesley, Freiman was so enthralled by watching the Red Sox take batting practice during a trip to Fenway Park that he told his dad and brothers, "When I'm older I want to play there." Little did he know then, but that wish would come true.

In 2013, that memory came back to Freiman as he took the field at Fenway Park as a member of the Athletics. It was one of the many incredible moments that baseball has given him throughout his career. However, as wonderful as his baseball career has been, it also has been challenging. In his eight years as a pro, Freiman has only cracked the major leagues once and has yet to stay with one team for more than two years. Freiman, 29, now is playing with the Red Sox' Double-A affiliate in Portland. And while some may think that Freiman's career is winding down, he has no plans to stop playing the game he adores.

Freiman began playing baseball in the Wellesley Little League, and as he climbed the ranks, his baseball prowess became evident.

"For starters, [Freiman] was always bigger and he always threw harder," said Mike Roberts, who played with Freiman from Little League all the way through high school. "He had an intensity and you could tell he loved the game from that age, and going through high school nothing changed — the intensity grew."

As a senior at Wellesley High School in 2005, Freiman helped guide the Raiders to a Division 2 South Sectional championship, getting picked as the 2005 Massachusetts Gatorade Player of the Year. He would go on to play baseball at Duke, where he helped resurrect the baseball program and still holds the record for career home runs (43) and slugging percentage (.616).

Freiman was recruited to Duke as a pitcher, but in the first inning of his first game the 6-foot-8 right-hander strained a ligament in his arm.

"We planned to redshirt him because he had missed so much of his freshman year and we weren't any good," said then-Duke coach Sean McNally. "We were in the teeth of the ACC



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Nate Freiman

schedule and we would be asking a kid who last played in high school in Massachusetts to jump into the ACC. I didn't want him to come back again and get hurt or really struggle. His dad said, 'Hey, we aren't in this to try to be a high [draft] pick, Nate just wants to get out there with the kids on the team and try to contribute and try to help this particular group win.' So we put him out there and it was unbelievable."

Freiman ended up hitting .304/.355/.496 with five home runs and 24 RBIs in 28 games. He also made the transition to first base in order to prevent further damage to his arm.

"You won't find a better teammate. He really wanted to do anything he could to help the guys around him get better," McNally said. "He is very selfless, which unfortunately is more and more unique in today's culture."

With a major in history and minor in math, Frieman could have had a multitude of job opportunities after graduating from Duke.

"Nate is on an another whole level intellectually than just about anybody I have been around," McNally said. "He will give you a brilliant dissertation about American history, but at the same time he is doing math equations where I would have no idea what he was doing."

However, all Frieman wanted to do was play baseball. The Padres made that dream a reality by selecting Freiman in the eighth round of the 2009 draft.

Freiman rose through the minor league system, and in 2013 he was able to make it to the majors with the Athletics after being snatched up in the Rule 5 draft. Since then, however, he has yet to find stable employment.

Freiman played 36 games with Oakland in 2014, spending the majority of his time in Triple-A. He remained in Triple-A for 2015 before getting released by Oakland. In December of the same year he signed with the Braves, but then in March of 2016 he was traded to the Nationals and sent to Triple-A, then eventually released. He went to play for an independent team on Long Island in April before signing with the Red Sox and joining the Sea Dogs on May 10.

"It has been a lot," Freiman said. "I have driven the minivan from Arizona to Florida to New York to Boston and now to Maine. I put a lot of miles on it. My wife and toddler are the classic baseball family, they are adaptable. That is how it is. We are really fortunate. This game has given us a lot."

The backing Freiman gets from his family has allowed him to keep playing the game he loves. Freiman's wife, LPGA golfer Amanda Blumenherst, decided to take a leave of absence from her sport in 2013 in order to spend more time with her husband and start a family.

"She understands what it is like to play a sport at a high level," Freiman said. "[Her support]

means everything."

Now as the Sea Dogs starting first baseman Freiman is working toward getting back to the major leagues. As of Tuesday he was hitting .271/.351/.470 with eight home runs and 31 RBIs, both of which lead Portland, in 49 games.

"My goals are to get my work in the cage and have good at bats tonight," Freiman said. "You can't control whether you get moved around or spots open up on another team, but you can control how you prepare and how you play that night."

While Freiman takes the day-to-day approach, his coaches are able to see the big picture and realize that the majors isn't a far stretch.

"He plays good defense and he can put a charge into a baseball," said Sea Dogs hitting coach Jon Nunnally, who also worked with Freiman in San Diego. "He can be the perfect guy to be a righty that faces lefties. Eventually I'm sure he will get the opportunity to go to Triple-A or maybe even the big leagues for somebody."

While Freiman said he doesn't think about the majors, he also hasn't considered retirement.

"I am going to keep playing until the game tells me I'm done," he said.

On a mid-June afternoon, as Freiman finished up his pregame routine, he took a moment to reflect on his time in the big leagues and that special day when he got to play at Fenway Park.

"I was a little kid who idolized the Red Sox, and to actually have the opportunity to play there was every bit a dream come true, and not a day goes by that I don't think about how fortunate I am to have that opportunity," Freiman said. "I hope I get back there. I really do. But even if I never do, to just have that opportunity is something that I never dreamed of having."

Then, just like that, Freiman's moment of reflection was over. He disappeared into the Sea Dogs clubhouse. There still was more baseball to be played.

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