Former Gobbler Dispelling Rumors

No Favors for Pirates' Sandy Hill

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It wasn't enough that Sandy Hill had batted over .300 in each of his first three years at Virginia Tech, or that scouts regarded him an excellent fielder. Never mind that Milwaukee had been impressed enough to draft him last year as a college junior.

When Pittsburgh made the Salem native its 86th-round pick in the June free-agent draft, there were whispers that the Pirates were doing some old friends a favor.

Hill realizes that one of the reasons he's wearing black and gold these days is the recommendation of area scout Kid Carr.

"I know what people say," said Hill, now with Charleston after opening the year with Niagara Falls, "but if the only reason they drafted me was because I'm from Salem, why didn't they send me there?"

Nobody can say Hill has received preferential treatment. "There was pressure from the start," he maintained. "I knew Pittsburgh didn't have a whole lot of time to waste on me. When Murray Cook (the Pirates' farm director) signed me, he told me I'd have to be the best player on the Niagara Falls team.

Jesse Jones, the Salem catcher who played briefly at Niagara Falls, said that Hill was going so well that the players were always speculating that he'd be sent to Salem. As it was, the centerfielder batted .321 (17-for-53) and quickly was promoted to Charleston.

The irony of that situation was not lost on the 23-year-old. With the kind of year he was having in the New York-Penn League, Hill would have been kept around for sure.

Moving up a notch, he'd have to prove himself all over again.

Cook was on hand for Hill's Charleston debut and suggested the former Glenvar High star try to hit more balls on the ground. Altering his stroke, Hill had 18 hits in his first 91 at-bats, a .186 pace. Apparently, he didn't have much luck, either.

In one game, the left-handed batter whistled a shot up the middle that the shortstop just barely reached with his glove. The opposing pitcher had a no-hitter at the time, prompting the official scorekeeper to give an error on a play Hill considered a sure hit.

At wit's end, Hill decided to imitate roommate Chick Valley, the Patriots' first baseman who opened the year at Salem. When Valley took his stance, he had all his weight on his back foot, smoothly shifting his weight to his front foot as the pitcher made his delivery, Hill remembered that was the way he had once hit, during sandlot and high school ball.

"A lot of people will tell you that's wrong," said Hill, "but, I tried it and now I don't think I'll ever change."

According to his own records, Hill has gone 18-for-74 since changing his stance, hitting his average to .278 (40-for-143) since coming to the Western Carolinas League. That may be a bit high; I thought I was batting closer to .265," he said. "But, I do know that since the start of August, I've hit about .340."

The slump with which Hill began his term at Charleston was not his first of the year. After batting .304 his junior year at Tech and leading the team in hitting, Hill slumped to .225 as a senior.

There was some question about his eyesight—Hill had his contact lenses replaced at the end of the season—but he doubts that was the reason. Told he would have to hit for more power to become a solid prospect, Hill "started trying to pull the ball. Even when the pitch was on the outside corner, I tried pulling it. Consequently, I hit a lot of weak ground balls."

Looking back, the decision to turn down Milwaukee last year, when the Brewers drafted him 21st, seemed less wise by the minute. "One of the reasons I didn't sign was that the team I was playing on in Staunton (the Valley League) was in first place," he explained. "I liked the town; I liked the people. Plus, I knew we'd have a good team at Virginia Tech."

Often, Cook and his staff rely on the judgement of the managers, in this case Luther Quinn at Niagara Falls and Jim Mahoney in Charleston. With his batting average climbing toward respectability, Hill could be safe with their recommendations.

"I'll be honest with you, I think I should be invited to spring training," said Hill, who usually does not make idle boasts. "I've hit the ball better than anybody in the month of August. I think I've improved 100 per cent.

"I just want the chance to play with the people I'm competing with. If I were released, at least I'd like to be convinced in my own mind that the players they keep are better."

Hill makes no secret of his desire to play in Salem next year. He took particular interest in talks between the Pittsburgh organization and Charleston outfielder Tommy Burke, who was fearful of losing his apartment deposit by coming to Salem for the final three weeks of the season.

"If he had stayed in Charleston, I don't know that I would have been called up," Hill said. "I can't say I wouldn't have minded it."

If for no other reason than to prove the skeptics wrong.