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Christopher Heintz oral history interview with Mark I. Greenberg, 2005

Christopher J. Heintz, Interviewee

Mark I. Greenberg, Interviewer

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Mr. Heintz is a former USF baseball player.

Where did he grow up?
He was born on Long Island, New York, but moved to Clearwater at a very young age.

Involvement in sports
He was involved in athletics as a high-school student, playing both basketball and baseball. “Early on I could kind of tell that baseball was going to be something that I could do things with.” USF took notice of his athletic ability, and offered him a scholarship to play baseball, “providing him with a good opportunity to come here.”

Was college always a goal of his?
His parents were both involved in education, the importance of which was instilled within him at an early age. A goal of his was to combine his love of baseball with his continuing education.

What did he look for in a college?
He wanted to go somewhere that he could play baseball, but also wanted to find a school where academics were equally important. When approached by USF during his senior year of high school with a scholarship offer, he decided it was “just the right place for me.” His coach, Eddie Cardieri, also made a strong impression on him, which served as an additional factor in his decision to accept the offer from USF.

Experiences as a freshman at USF
Baseball season did not begin immediately, so had time to become acclimated to student life at the university. He stayed at Fontana Hall with three other baseball players, which guaranteed a comfortable living arrangement while in school.

Combining athletics with academics
He originally came to USF with the intention of enrolling as an education major, hoping to find a career that enabled him to both teach and coach, as his father had done. The athletic department provided enough latitude to ensure some degree of personal
discretion in his class schedule. The two complemented one another well; “I never felt like I was missing out on either end.” His senior year he changed his major to economics, because his interests had changed and “it just seemed to come easy to me.” He also suspected that a degree in economics would give him more flexibility in terms of employment after his graduation from USF.

**Athletic practice**
Practice was typically held Tuesday through Saturday. He found that despite being so busy, the organization within the athletic department actually strengthened his own time-management skills. Practices themselves were very competitive and intense, and players were expected to perform at a high-level. The season itself begins in the spring, and games often took him out of town over the weekends, an “incredible experience” for him. He was a little overwhelmed by the schedule at first, however, recalling that his first spring semester may have been his worst academically. After that he regrouped and “did pretty well.”

**Playing schedule**
He regularly played teams like Virginia Tech, TCU, Tulane, and Charlotte as part of the Metro Conference. It was not until his senior year that USF joined Conference USA, as did many of the other teams.

**What made the team so competitive and successful?**
Shortstop Bud King went on to be a first-round draft pick for the San Francisco Giants. Several strong pitchers went on to play professionally. He espouses the strength of the coaching staff and the overall ability of the team in general. “For me to be involved in that … was a big step for me.”

**Coaching philosophy**
His experiences with the coaching staff at USF effectively prepared him for his professional career, “Which, to me, is the best compliment I can give them.” Off the field, he had a strong academic record in part because of the discipline instilled by the coaching staff and their attention to students’ course work. Not only do they make you a better player, Mr. Heintz asserts, but a better person overall.

**Extra-curricular activities**
Heintz did not feel a need to do anything socially outside of the time he spent among his fellow teammates. They often found themselves at a local sports bar where they were able to relax and socialize.

**Other sports at USF**
The arrival of the football program at USF was appreciated primarily as a positive among athletes, potentially increasing national recognition to the school and all of its athletic programs. He feels that the various teams were competitive as they all struggled to receive that recognition they all felt they deserved.
**Team successes**
The team was extremely successful, usually ranked in the top twenty-five, though doing as well as eighth in his senior year. That same year, the team went to three regionals, and won the Conference USA championship. Mr. Heintz played shortstop in his sophomore and junior years, and then was moved to third base for his senior year. It was not until he started playing professionally that he was transferred to the position of catcher.

**Icons**
Tony LaRussa represented an important connection between South Florida and professional baseball for the team. Another important figure was Scott Hemond, the highest-drafted player ever out of USF, who went on to play professionally for Oakland. Hemond was seen as the “Babe Ruth” of the local program because “he was so good while he was here.”

**Post-graduate plans**
He was considering coaching at the university in some capacity, continuing his education while staying involved with the team. Going into his senior year, he did not have any definitive plans, wanting only to “go out and make the most of it.”

**Transition into professional sports**
He had a very good senior year, and was chosen Conference USA Player of the Year, leading the league in both batting averages and RBIs. He also feels that certain strong performances at regional games were valuable in achieving some recognition among professional scouts. A highlight was having the opportunity to workout with the Yankee organization at their local spring training facility, Legends Field. Three weeks following the end of his spring semester, he was drafted by the Chicago White Sox in the nineteenth round.

A “workout” is the opportunity for a player to demonstrate their skills and abilities on the field. Catching is characteristically a position that provides some longevity, so he gladly made the transition when asked to do so.

**Minor League experiences**
During the summer, he went down to Sarasota for spring training with the White Sox for about ten days. He was then sent to Bristol, Virginia, where he played for two weeks at the rookie level. Following that, the Sox sent him to South Bend, Indiana, where he played minor-league ball for the remainder of the summer. The difficulty in minor league baseball, he notes, is that while it pays well enough during the six-month season, players are left during the off-season to find alternative means to support themselves. He came home after that first summer and told his parents, “As long as I keep moving up … I’ll keep playing, but it’s a very hard life.” He considers the hardest part to have been getting used to the responsibility of playing baseball as a job, “If you have a bad day … and you’re not really performing as a player, then you’re not going to be around.”
Reflections on his experiences at USF
He remembered everything he was taught at USF, much of which was reiterated by major league teams and coaches. He feels he was ultimately successful in the major leagues because of what he had learned while playing baseball at South Florida.

Professional career
He played with Chicago for the length of his contract, which was six years, playing double-A and triple-A baseball. “The hardest part,” Heintz says, “is getting that opportunity and showing somebody … that you can do it.” After leaving the White Sox organization, he called around to other teams, and was signed with the St. Louis Cardinals.

Rising through the ranks
Often times, it was a particular weakness that kept good players out of the Major League. While he had always been a good hitter, his transition into the position of catcher had not gone as easily as he had hoped. After his experiences, he has a “more profound” respect for catchers, noting, “It was a lot more difficult than I thought it was going to be.”

Role of agents
His former coach at USF, Eddie Cardieri, was instrumental in helping Mr. Heintz make connections to big league organizations. It was not until after a “breakout year” with the Cardinals that he decided to hire an agent. It was with the Cardinals that he made the double-A all-star team in New Haven, Connecticut, where he picked up his first agent.

Personal life
He met his wife through his connection to athletics at USF. Because he returned to the university annually in order to prepare for his upcoming baseball season, he was able to meet his wife who works as the assistant softball coach. They were recently married in November 2003.

Mentoring at USF
The coaches felt it was good for the program to have professional players return to USF and provide some mentoring for younger, less experienced players on the team. Because of his wife’s continued involvement at the university, it is convenient for him to continue participating in the baseball program.

Current status
Mr. Heintz is looking forward to training with the Minnesota Twins this summer, noting that it is a “nice experience rubbing elbows” with the more advanced players. Last year he regrets not having the opportunity he would have liked with the Pirates. This year he goes into the season without any expectations, he “just wants to play … and see what happens.” Now that he is married and looking forward to a family, however, he hopes to find something with a little more stability.
After baseball
Looking past his career as a player, Mr. Henitz would value an opportunity to do some coaching in the future, seeing Eddie Cardieri’s position at USF as a “dream job.” Because of his success at the university, he would like to maintain his connections here. Coaching a college-level team would be ideal for him. “I think I could relate to kids … stressing academics, because I did it and I had success with both at the same time … I think I would be good at it.”

What stands out among his experiences at USF?
“I was never more proud of myself than the day I actually finished my degree.” He considers his academics a particular success because he worked hard at his studies, though they were “not always something that I wanted to do … just that degree on my wall says a lot to me about myself.” The friendships he made while here at USF continue to be important to him, and helped make his college years so enjoyable.

End of Interview