

Michalak tries to be the best for Royals

Mayo grad settling in as a leader of Rochester's top amateur team

BY GUY N. LIMBECK
Post Bulletin

Michael Michalak has learned over the course of his long baseball career that sometimes less can mean more.



Michalak

Michalak, who turned 24 in July, has excelled over the years on the diamond, at Mayo High School, Des Moines Area Community College, at Division I University of Illinois and with the Rochester Honkers in the Northwoods League. He has now settled in playing amateur baseball with the Rochester Royals.

"The older you get the more simple you have to keep the game," Michalak said. "So mainly just focusing on not trying to do too much and play baseball the way it's meant to be played, get runners on base, get them going, stealing bases and finding ways to manufacture runs for our team."

The right-handed hitting and throwing Michalak has had a stellar season for the Royals as the team's lead-off hitter and center fielder. The Royals are in the midst of the Section 1B playoffs and are playing a best-of-three series with Hampton to determine a Class B state tournament berth.

"Baseball is baseball wherever you're at," Michalak said. "And amateur ball has its own little twist to it. Out of college, the type of game is different, but coming out to the ballpark every day, I really enjoy it."

And the Royals enjoy having Michalak to anchor their lineup, both on offense and defense.

"Mike Michalak at the top of the order is probably as

good of a hitter as anyone in the state," Royals player/manager Tim Oesterlin said. "He's swinging it really well and we have a lot of veteran guys and young guys swinging it well up and down the lineup."

Of the regulars in the Royals lineup, Michalak leads the team in batting average (.330), OPS (.902), runs scored (24) and stolen bases (11). He is second in doubles (nine), home runs (three) and RBIs (23).

"I've been really enjoying making a name in the amateur ball world," Michalak said.

Like most amateur players, Michalak now has to balance playing baseball with a job. Michalak works for GoRout, a football technology company in Rochester. He also helps some at Rochester Batting Cages with baseball camps.

"The physical aspect is definitely a little different," Michalak said. "You are only playing games three times a week and you don't always have to go to work like you had to go to school."

"I'm trying to do a lot of different things in my life right now so keeping your body in shape and staying strong and explosive, it's definitely been a challenge to be where you were two years ago."

Michalak closed his Division I college career in the Big Ten Conference in 2019. With his high level of play and a number of current college players on the Royals squad, he has been a mentor to many of the younger players.

"I get them (questions) nearly every game, whether it's about a pitcher or what I saw at the plate," Michalak said. "I always try to give the youngest guys the most I can on a daily basis. I used to be in their shoes and baseball

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Post Bulletin file photo / Joe Ahlquist

Mike Michalak, right, and Sam Warren greet each other at the plate during a 2020 Rochester Royals game. Michalak has been a standout on both offense and defense for the Royals during the 2021 season.



Joe Ahlquist / Post Bulletin

It's been 25 years since Jay Ryan had a heart transplant, and Ryan credits baseball with helping his recovery. "I wanted to play ball again," he said. "It was a big motivator."

LIVING FROM THE HEART

Rochester's Ryan has learned and taught life lessons after transplant

BY PAT RUFF
Post Bulletin

Jay Ryan almost died at the age of 19.

His girlfriend at the time — now his wife, Sarah Ryan — thought he was dead.

The rumblings in the Saint Marys Hospital hallway she occupied that afternoon, July 14, 1996, led her to that thought. Jay had gone into cardiac arrest just before doctors were set to hook him to a left ventricular assistance device, aimed to keep him alive as they waited for a donated heart to arrive for a transplant.

It was a bizarre nightmare that it had come to that. Just a few months before, Jay had been the picture of health, a strapping 5-foot-11, 200-pound freshman on the St. Cloud State University baseball team. He was a catcher, no less, playing that most demanding of positions, equipment strapped to his body and face. Jay was trained to keep everything in front of him in his control.

But then came a trip to the Boundary Waters with buddies and a mystery virus that would forever change his life.

Shortly after arriving back in his hometown of Northfield, Jay was coughing up blood and struggling to breathe.

The virus had attacked his heart, which was now being

measured at three times its normal size, accounting for those violent symptoms and — on July 14, 1996 — had him in cardiac arrest.

"My heart was completely useless at that point," said Jay, now 44 and a Rochester resident the past 20 years.

Jay didn't die that day. Those had been just frightened hallway rumors, though it was close.

"His heart had gone into cardiogenic shock," said Dr. Brooks Edwards, one of the cardiologists working on Jay that day and one who's been overseeing his care ever since. "His heart had given up."

Dr. Edwards and the rest of that Saint Marys Hospital team did not give up on Jay. They revived him. And for the next 19 days, they successfully kept him alive, blood pumping through Jay via — by today's standards — a crude left ventricular assistance machine.

On Aug. 1, 1996, a gift arrived: A donated heart. Some 24 hours later, it was residing in Jay's chest.

What a journey. Jay had been wheeled into the operating room that frightful July 14, 1996, day as an "angry" 19-year-old, wondering why his life had taken such a turn.

Now, 25 years later, this husband, father, coach and baseball player is anything but. And he comes complete with a message.

"Life is all about your effort and your attitude," Jay said. "That's all you can control in life. My effort and attitude, those have been the pillars of my success. I try to teach them to those I come in contact with."

TEACHING MOMENTS

Spreading his message of "controlling the controllables" is something Jay had been doing since May with the Rochester Tornadoes 14-and-under AAA baseball traveling team. Jay was its head coach, and the players included his son, Jack Ryan, who also happens to play catcher.

Baseball isn't "everything" to Jay. But it is right up there and always has been.

"I can't tell you how many hours I sat there and listened this summer as Jay talked about this (Tornadoes) team," said Sarah, love in her voice.

Jay isn't just a coach, he also remains a baseball player. Looking as fit as can be these days, a powerfully built 220 pounds, Jay plays in a 35-and-older league as a member of the Northfield Millers.

He does that not only because he still relishes making throws and catches and swinging the bat, but because he wants his two kids to see him playing.

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'I'm really pumped': Berge to coach wrestling at SDSU

After retiring from wrestling, former K-M great is ready for his next journey

BY ISAAC TROTTER
Post Bulletin

Brady Berge never planned on getting into coaching college wrestling.

After the former Kasson-Mantorville standout announced on April 7 that he was retiring from wrestling and would not use his fifth year at Penn State, Berge believed he would start a wrestling club for youth wrestlers and high schoolers.

Everything changed when the South Dakota State coaching staff was recruiting Brady's younger brother, Bennett, and asked what

Brady's plans were. When they found out Brady might be available, they reached out and asked if he'd be interested in joining the Jackrabbits' coaching staff as a volunteer assistant.

It turned out to be an opportunity that Berge just couldn't pass up.

"We are ecstatic to announce the addition of Brady Berge to our coaching staff," South Dakota State coach Damion Hahn said. "Brady brings a wealth of knowledge and experience having competed on some of the biggest stages. His wrestling mind and strong work ethic will most definitely elevate our program."

Berge has been through it all throughout his standout wrestling career. He's been at the top of the mountain,

winning four state titles for Kasson-Mantorville and earning a spot in the lineup at an elite Division I college program. He's also laid in a Budapest hospital bed after taking a knee to the head at the World U23 Championships in October of 2019. Berge didn't know if he would ever wrestle again, but he worked tirelessly to get back on the mat, only to see concussions force him to retire for good.

Berge has seen the highest of highs. He's experienced the lowest of lows. And now he believes his wealth of experience can help the next crop of wrestlers.

"I'm obviously really thankful for the coaching staff out there for reaching out to me and taking a chance on me," Berge said. "I'm really pumped up about it.

It's a challenge for me and it's honesty trial and error. I'm young. I have always been the competitor, not the coach. I'm very open-minded to that stuff. I like new things and taking things from some of my coaches in the past."

A PASSION FOR WRESTLING

Even when Berge was little, he said he was always a film nut. He'd break down foreign wrestlers and try to master the little details and techniques. He'll bring that passion for film study to South Dakota State and Berge hopes he can bring new ideas that can only add to the wealth of knowledge of the SDSU staff.

He changed from a boy into a man in the Kasson-Mantorville wrestling room. KoMets coach Jamie Heidt is a master on the mat but his

ability to connect with his wrestlers and form life-long bonds is special. Heidt helped Berge figure out his goals early in his wrestling career and then went to work to help him achieve those lofty plans. And at Penn State, Berge learned from their coaching staff and training staff about listening to his body.

Berge hopes to take those lessons about relationships and trust to South Dakota State. All those lessons with Heidt and those trials at Penn State have shaped Berge into someone who's excited to take this next step.

"Am I fully prepared? No," Berge said. "I've never coached! That was one of the reasons why I took this job at South Dakota State."

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Alexander ‘a completely different guy’ in second stint with Vikings

BY CHRIS TOMASSON
St. Paul Pioneer Press

When Minnesota Vikings cornerback Mackensie Alexander was a rookie in 2016, he was a handful for head coach Mike Zimmer. The two clashed regularly.

They slowly began to get along better for the three seasons that followed before Alexander signed with Cincinnati as a free agent in 2020. But Alexander returned to the Vikings this year, and he and Zimmer are seemingly best buddies.

“There were times when Mackensie was very difficult,” Zimmer said. “He’s very fortunate I’m more hard-headed than he is, but when he came back, like now, he’s like a completely different guy. He’s engaging. He’s communicating, listening to everything and not making mistakes.”

Alexander laughed Thursday when asked about what Zimmer said, and he agreed.

“I was young, very talented, very skilled, been the best my whole life, nobody’s told me, ‘No, you can’t do this, you can’t do that,’” he said about arriving in 2016 as a second-round draft pick out of Clemson. “And I’ve been doing it my whole career. So when you come to a new system, and they don’t want you to do it your way, it’s kind of different. ... You know you can do it, they know you can do it, but that’s not what they need you to do at the time.”

Alexander initially complained about the nickel role, believing he was better suited to play outside corner. But now he’s likely to be the Vikings’ primary nickel back in 2021, and he’s fine with that.

“It’s year 6 (in the NFL). You grow,” Alexander said. “Every player at the pro level, at some point, has to grow to evolve to be a better player and human being, too.”

Now, Alexander is hoping the Vikings can



Brad Rempel / USA Today Sports

Minnesota Vikings defensive back Mackensie Alexander (20) celebrates after a sack in a November 2018 game against the Detroit Lions at U.S. Bank Stadium.

make another deep playoff run. He was on the 2017 team that made it to the NFC Championship Game, but spoke more highly about this 2021 team.

“This is the best roster I’ve been a part of in my career so far, for sure, without a doubt,” he said. “We’ve got a great defense coming in. I mean, I’m all about winning.”

HUTCHINSON TO HALL

Steve Hutchinson grew up wanting to be “the best.” And on Saturday night he’ll have a bust in Canton, Ohio, to show that he reached his goal.

The guard, who played in the NFL from 2001-12, including 2006-11 with Minnesota, will be inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. He was elected to the hall in February

2020 and scheduled to be inducted last August before that was delayed for a year by the coronavirus pandemic.

“I can close the book on my professional career, my football life,” Hutchinson said. “I wanted to be the best, and when you (make the hall of fame), it kind of confirms it.”

Lauding Hutchinson this week was Vikings co-defensive coordinator Andre Patterson, who entered the NFL as an assistant in 1997 and once tried to design defenses to combat him.

“He’s one of the best to ever play,” Patterson said. “He was strong, he was physical and athletic. (Former Dallas and San Francisco guard) Larry Allen was the best that I’ve ever seen but he was right there. It’s well deserving for him to be a member of the hall of fame.”

BRIEFLY

— Kicker Riley Patterson was removed from the PUP list after passing his physical and

he practiced Thursday. He missed the first week of training camp due to an undisclosed injury.

— Atlanta signed free-agent receiver Trevor Davis, who had flown to Minnesota for a workout scheduled for Wednesday. A source said Davis took a physical that day with the Vikings but did not work out, then left when the Falcons made an offer. Minnesota did not make an offer.

— Former guard Mike Harris has joined the Vikings at training camp this week as an intern from the NFL’s Nunn-Wooten Scouting Fellowship program. Harris, who played for Minnesota from 2014-15, is learning from the scouting department and evaluating the offensive line.

— Possibly due to their veteran status, not practicing Thursday were wide receiver Adam Thielen, safety Harrison Smith, cornerback Patrick Peterson and guard Dakota Dozier.

Twins send Nick Gordon to Triple-A to get consistent playing time

BY BETSY HELFAND
St. Paul Pioneer Press

For the next two months, the Twins will be watching their young players closely and making assessments as to how they might fit in the team’s plans moving forward. For Nick Gordon, once a top prospect, that could perhaps be in a super utility role.

But while the Twins try to evaluate how Gordon could fit going forward, they need to find him consistent at-bats and playing time in the field, and with plenty of veterans still in their lineup, that wasn’t going to be happening at the major league level. The Twins optioned the rookie on Thursday, sending him to Triple-A where he’ll get a chance to play every day with the Saints, while activating



Katie Stratman / USA Today Sports

Minnesota Twins center fielder Nick Gordon (1) reacts after the win against the Cincinnati Reds at the end of the Aug. 3 game at Great American Ball Park.

Rob Refsnyder from the injured list.

Gordon, manager Rocco Baldelli said, “has done a great job at the major league level. He’s handled himself great. ... But what he needs to do more than anything is play, and

right now at the major league level, he was playing occasionally but was not going to play every single day. What he needs to do right now is play — play all over the field, all over the outfield and get as many

at-bats as he can.”

A middle infielder by trade, Gordon has played center field at times this season, and he responded well there. But Baldelli would like to see him get some time in left field, too, because center field won’t be an option once Byron Buxton returns. Gordon also will play shortstop, third and second base while with the Saints.

“He’s going to be moving around a lot, probably slightly more in the infield than outfield if possible,” Baldelli said. “Logging those innings and just being on his feet and playing every single day is going to bring a ton of value to him and help him continue to develop.”

Refsnyder, another infielder-turned-outfielder, had been on the injured list

since June 14 dealing with what Baldelli called “a pretty serious combination of muscle injuries” in his left hamstring. Refsnyder will play primarily in the outfield, but Baldelli said he was available to move to the infield if needed.

GANT WANTS TO START

Newly acquired reliever John Gant started the season in the Cardinals’ rotation and if given a chance, that’s what he’d like to do in Minnesota, too. “I’m still waiting to hear on a specified role,” he said. “Really hoping to get a chance to make some starts. I think of myself as a starting pitcher. I’d really like that opportunity to prove myself.”

After not making a start in the previous two seasons, Gant made 14 for St. Louis to begin

the season before being moved to the bullpen in late June. The right-hander has made 42 starts in his major league career but thus far has slotted into the Twins’ bullpen.

“I think they are aware that I would like to start,” Gant said. “I haven’t made a formal request or anything like that, but we have talked about it.”

BRIEFLY

Taylor Rogers (finger) has seen some improvement with his symptoms but still has not made a final decision as to whether he might have a procedure, Baldelli said. ... **Joe Ryan**, acquired from Tampa Bay as part of the Nelson Cruz trade, threw 4 1/3 innings of one-run ball in Team USA’s Olympic victory over South Korea to send the Americans to Saturday’s gold medal game.

Gophers’ Faalele looks to ‘dominate’ the Big Ten before pursuing NFL dream

BY ANDY GREDER
St. Paul Pioneer Press

ST. PAUL — Daniel Faalele’s size has always seemed mythological, but now it’s a little less so, and that’s a good thing for the University of Minnesota Gophers football team.

Since the Australian offensive lineman came to Minnesota in 2018, he has been associated with an otherworldly 400 pounds and a height that stretches toward 6 feet, 9 inches. Before the coronavirus hit, he said he was actually up to 405. Just some you-got-to-be-kidding-me numbers.

Now going into his fourth year, the right tackle from Australia has shed 25 to

30 pounds to get down to the 375-380 range — which is still pretty insane and undoubtedly enormous.

Faalele opted out of the U’s 2020 season out of concerns on contracting COVID-19. But he’s back on the field and motivated as the Gophers opened fall camp Wednesday.

“I just want to be as dominant as much as possible,” Faalele said Tuesday. “... I want to win games, and I missed that feeling of competition.”

The NFL will be closely watching him play this fall.

Pro Football Focus didn’t put Faalele in the top five offensive linemen prospects for the 2022 draft class but gave him a “wild card” label, with his size as the obvious

leading reason why. PFF also cited his lack of experience in the game. He only played one season of football in high school, at IMG Academy in Bradenton, Florida, in 2017. The site also mentioned his improvement at Minnesota.

Faalele had an overall grade of 60.4 in 10 games as a true freshman in 2018 and that assessment jumped to 72.3 in 11 games in 2019, a season cut short due to a lower-leg injury. He left during the win over Wisconsin in Madison and was in a protective boot for the Outback Bowl victory over Auburn.

Faalele was hitting his stride before the injury. Over the last six games in 2019, his grade was behind only Iowa’s Tristan Wirfs and

Northwestern’s Rashawn Slater among Big Ten tackles. That’s some top-tier company: Wirfs was the 13th overall pick by Tampa Bay in the 2020 draft, and Slater also went 13th overall to the Los Angeles Chargers in the 2021 draft.

Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis will host the NFL Combine next spring, and Gophers head coach P.J. Fleck was there talking about Faalele during Big Ten Media Days in July.

“He’s going to get a lot of attention, and he should,” Fleck said. “He’s a unicorn. My daughters love unicorns. He’s a unicorn. They don’t come around very often, some would think they don’t even exist. My daughters think

they exist, so they exist, but they are very rare. He’s got a rare size, rare strength, rare ability. Hard to find. He’s only played (three) years of football. He’s got a long way to go and he’s got a lot of untapped potential. The faster he taps into that himself and continues to change his best on a daily basis, the more success he is going to have down the road.”

Faalele said he “definitely” wants to pursue the NFL and shared what aspects he wants to improve on. “I would love to develop a lot of areas of my game, personally,” he said. “Off the top of my head, probably pass (protection), I just need to get better at that. In the run game, (my) technique on outside zone.”

Ryan

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He wants Jack, 14, and Luke, 10, to fall in love with the game as he has and for them to take all of the lessons it’s taught him and apply it to their lives.

“That’s what drove me to get back playing again, starting in 2012,” Jay said. “I needed that and now my boys cherish the game as much as I do. It was really just so important for me to be playing again.”

Baseball is brimming with failure, a game where even the top Major League hitters get out more often than they reach base. There are lessons to be learned

there, about reacting to disappointments the right way and setting personal frustrations aside for the sake of the team.

Jay considers such things to be the keys to life and the drivers for what has been a healthy last 25 years for him, post-heart transplant. It’s about controlling the controllables, having the right attitude and refusing to give up.

Baseball has helped him learn all of that. And his heart transplant, that’s been an even better teacher.

“What happened to me was a blessing in disguise,” Jay said. “Everything in life happens for a reason. Those are the things that turn us into the people we are today. And

(the heart transplant) is going to help shape who my kids are and everyone I come across in life. I feel like my life is a triumph of perseverance. I’m very proud of what I’ve done.”

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS

On Monday, Jay’s family, a few friends and Dr. Edwards gathered for a brief surprise party for Jay outside of Mayo Clinic, commemorating his 25th year with a transplanted heart.

The average survival rate following a heart transplant is 14 years. Jay has come close to doubling that, and has had no trouble in recent years as he’s taken impeccable care of himself and listened to and religiously followed

everything doctors have prescribed for him.

Dr. Edwards says that Jay deserves a massive amount of credit.

“Jay is just a wonderful guy who has been so grateful for the gift of life,” Dr. Edwards said. “From the moment he received it, he has taken exceptionally good care of himself and has been a good citizen and father. If anyone deserves a good outcome, it is him.”

And that baseball team of Jay’s, those 14-and-under Tornados, they also received a good outcome. Things weren’t looking so hot about one-third into their season. The Tornados were on a five-game losing streak, many of them muttering after striking out, occasionally

pounding their bats into the ground and seemingly having lost their way.

That’s when Jay had seen enough. He gathered them and told them his story, how he could easily have died, but instead refused to give up, as did everyone around him.

They controlled what they could those 25 years ago and after, kept putting one foot in front of the other and lifted each other along the way. Jay told the Tornados baseball team this with tears in his eyes, wanting so badly for them to learn from him.

They did. Rarely did another bat get pounded into the ground in disgust. They began operating as a real team

from then on, there for each other, now continually lifting and picking each other up. They became what Jay values most, a “family.” And they won. Out of eight tournaments, they reached the championship five times, winning four of them, including a state title to conclude their season.

“It was an emotional time for me,” Jay said. “I wanted them to respect the game and to play it the right way. The game of baseball deserves that. I’m just very grateful that I had a chance to impact their lives and get their attention.”

Twenty-five years ago, the game of life got Jay Ryan’s attention. It’s never let go.