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24 HOURS A DAY

STRAIGHT FROM THE HEARTLAND LINCOLN UP WITH JOBA AND HIS PROUD DAD



FACES IN THE CROWD: A slightly incognito Joba Chamberlain sits next to his dad, Harlan, at a Nebraska Cornhuskers basketball game Last Sunday.

posted by



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LINCOLN, Neb. - This was long before [Joba Chamberlain](#) became JOBA!

Back in 1998, when Northeast High won the Nebraska state basketball championship, one of the first on the floor to celebrate was the ball boy, who was so into the team and winning that he didn't get just any haircut before the big game, he had the team's nickname shaved across the back of his head, ear to ear, in big, bold letters: Rockets.

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Now that ball boy is throwing rockets for the [Yankees](#).

Joba Chamberlain is lined up as the centerpiece of the Yankees pitching staff at the tender age of 22 after his stunning, four-level rise up the system this past season.

"Joba was about 12 years old when that team won the championship," explains Doug Kaltenberger, who was Northeast's assistant basketball coach at the time. During Joba's first three years in high school, Kaltenberger was the varsity baseball coach. "Joba was a great kid to have around, he was a fanatic. He was one of those kids who loved to be in the middle of everything and always wanted the team to do well."

To truly understand the phenomenon that is Joba Chamberlain, travel through his hometown with his dad, Harlan, 55, who was well known in local sports circles long before Chamberlain became a star with the University of Nebraska and then a Yankee.

No one believed in Joba like Harlan believed in Joba.

"I always tried to instill in him that he was the real deal," Harlan tells me in a strong voice. "He knew the game, but I don't know that he knew in his heart until he went to the university that he fully realized what his potential was. I remember him saying, 'Dad, I'll play a little college ball and then find my place in the community.' But I honestly believed that he had a gift. It was just trying to make him believe in himself and realize his full potential."

When the promotion to the Yankees came, Joba was having lunch at a Wendy's in Scranton, Pa. The first person he called was Harlan, who was calling a bingo game at the time for a senior citizens group.

"Dad, I got the call, I got a lot of packing to do," Joba says. "I love you. I'll call you later."

The father constantly steered the son in the right direction.

"You knew that Joba was going to take care of business," says his old coach Kaltenberger, "because if he didn't, there was Harlan right there."

They went to sporting events together, everything from local high school sports to professional wrestling. Harlan loves amateur sports. His deep voice can be heard calling the public address for baseball, wrestling, basketball and volleyball at local high schools, including Northeast, where he also went to school.

The man has a unique feel for sports. He knew Joba would "evolve" into a pitcher, though Joba spent his high school years as a power hitter. Joba hit over .500 his last

year in American Legion, and didn't really develop as a pitcher until he got to Nebraska and worked with pitching coach Rob Childress, who is now the head coach at Texas A&M.

Bob Steinkamp, who has coached the Beatrice Bruins for 39 years in the collegiate M.I.N.K. League, which stands for Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska and Kansas, and is also a scout for the Seattle Mariners, watched Chamberlain play many times in high school when the chunky right-hander topped out only in the low 80s his senior year.

After pitching at Nebraska, Joba came to the Bruins.

"The first pitch he threw was 96," Steinkamp says. "I turned to my pitching coach and said, 'I think we've got a shot here.'"

In two seasons, Joba never lost a game for Beatrice.

From the beginning, Joba was determined to succeed. Look at the picture of Joba at nine years old when he made his first select

team. There is that look in his eye. The words "I love you" are carved across the picture frame.

Love is all around when it comes to Harlan and Joba. Harlan gets around with a motorized scooter. A Native American, part of the Winnebago Tribe, Harlan was born on the reservation but then was hospitalized with polio at the age of 9 months. He spent the next six years, five months and 11 days in an orthopedic hospital. Growing up, Harlan was in and out of foster homes. He battled through the ravages of polio, suffered several other serious physical setbacks, has gone through countless surgeries, yet nothing has stopped him.

There is too much to live for.

Though money was tight, Harlan did what he had to do to prepare Joba for baseball life. Harlan and his wife divorced when Joba was 3 and Harlan got custody of Joba. Baseball was their dream. Harlan would sit and play catch with young Joba for hours. He would organize neighborhood ballgames.

Harlan taught Joba how to be an athlete and how to be respectful of others.

"I'm a firm believer in being good to people," Harlan explains. "Parents also have to not be afraid to say no to their kids."

Any father would be concerned about his son going off to the big city, but Joba has stayed grounded and often returns home.

"I think he appreciates his gift a little more now," Harlan says of Joba, who has his own young son. "We've been blessed and we feel real fortunate. To not give back would be a sin."

On this December weekend, Harlan goes to the Devaney Center twice. First to watch the Nebraska women's basketball team play on Saturday, and then to watch the men beat Rutgers on Sunday. He often works there as part of the event staff.

As he sits on his scooter, everyone from Dr. Tom Osborne, the school's legendary football coach and current athletic director, to students in the cheer section come over to greet Harlan. Everyone knows him. When one youngster comes over, Harlan tells him to reach into his "Joba" bag that hangs from the three-wheel scooter's handlebar.

"Just take one," Harlan says.

The youngster slowly pulls out a dog-tag medallion and smiles when he sees it is a picture of Joba in a Yankees uniform. Nearly everyone in the building is wearing red. Harlan proudly wears his dark blue Yankees cap. Early in the first half, Harlan disappears, speeding away down the back hallway. He returns with his son. Joba takes a seat next to Harlan and is soon introduced to the crowd and is given a loud ovation.

The previous weekend, Joba made sure to attend a baseball banquet to raise money for his old team, the Bruins. That dinner usually draws around 200 people. "It was sold out three weeks in advance, over 400 tickets," Steinkamp says. "I had people from St. Louis, Kansas City and everywhere in between. There were even people from New York."

After high school, Joba couldn't even get the local Division III college, Nebraska Wesleyan, to take a look at him. Now he's hitting 100 on the radar gun and is on the cover of ESPN the Magazine, highlighting their "NEXT" issue.

"This is the damndest story I've seen in 39 years of coaching," Steinkamp says. "In my opinion, he's got one of the four or five best fastballs in the big leagues, the best slider in the big leagues, and he's got a good curveball and changeup and he's got good command."

"They should make a movie out of this."

They just might. Screenwriter Angelo Pizzo, of "Hoosiers" and "Rudy" fame, has been in contact with Spencer Lader, who handles Joba's memorabilia. Pizzo has shown interest in making a movie of Joba's life story.

"I have never seen the amount of interest and excitement that Joba brings," Lader explains. "At his first New York signing, there were 1,000 people lined up around the corner. And there have been more hits on our Web site (www.authmem.com) and the Steiner Web site for him than for any other player. He's Joe Namath in 2007."

At the Nebraska basketball game, Joba is wearing a dark jacket and a dark winter hat pulled down low. He also wears a goatee, something you don't see in Pinstripes, but is popular along Cornhusker Highway. Lincoln, says Joba, who recently purchased a condo in Tampa, "is always going to be home, and it's always going to be where it all started. It's special to be here."

Most of all, Joba knows how special it is to spend time with his dad.

"If I could just be half the man he is, that would be great," he says.

"We are blessed," adds Harlan.

Joba also has a sister, Tasha, who is four years older than him. Harlan watched closely over both his children. Growing up, their house had only two bedrooms. One bedroom was for Tasha, the other for Harlan and Joba. The family took care of one another.

Now, Harlan says, Joba has found the perfect home in The Bronx.

"Joba was drafted in the sandwich rounds, prior to that we were thinking he was going to go higher," Harlan explains. "But the Good Lord works in many ways, and he sent us to the Yankees for a reason.

"Joba would not be where he is at today, at the pinnacle of his athletic career, with any other organization because he's playing now for the world's most famous sports organization," Harlan says. "He couldn't play on a bigger stage. And he's handling it."

So what is the secret?

"Just always remind your kids that you love him," Harlan says. "A day does not go by that we don't tell each other we love each other. At least several times. To me, it's a lot simpler than people think. It doesn't take that much time.

"And if you say it from here," Harlan says as he leans back in his scooter and points to his heart, "You can't help for it to be right."

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