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Baseball: Mavs' tall shortstop stands out

BY ROB WHITE
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

There was a time Evan Porter wasn't sure he wanted to start playing baseball in college.



UNO shortstop Evan Porter is the Mavs' career leader in home runs and RBIs and is batting .405 as a senior.

Now it appears certain the UNO shortstop will play professionally by the end of the summer.

In fact, the 6-foot-5 UNO shortstop is likely to be among the first players from Nebraska selected in the draft next month — higher, in all likelihood, than most draftees from Nebraska and Creighton.

"I'm not going to try to outguess those (major league) guys, but the scouts I've talked to are talking about the eighth to the 15th round," said UNO coach Bob Herold, a longtime minor league coach and manager. "But I've thought some guys were going to be drafted for sure and never were, too, so you just never know."

Though Porter is intrigued by his future, he isn't sweating it much right now. He's preparing to help the University of Nebraska at Omaha (37-18) this weekend in the Mid-America Intercollegiate Athletics Association tournament. He and his teammates believe they'll need at least two wins to advance to regional tournament play.

UNO finished fourth in the MIAA at 27-13 and is ranked sixth in the region.

"Thinking about (pro ball) is real exciting," Porter said, "but right now all that matters to me is UNO baseball."

Porter, a senior from Millard North, is the Mavericks' career leader in home runs (41), RBIs (24) and five other major offensive categories. He's hitting .405 this year.

Although he's 6-5, he plays the most important position on the field defensively.

"We've brought in another shortstop every year thinking Evan was too big to play there, but those other shortstops are playing other positions now," Herold said. "He doesn't have great speed, but he gets rid of the ball so quickly and he's smart. We scout teams and we know where we want to play them, which direction we want to shade them, but when we look up to move Evan, he's already standing where we want him."

Porter played last summer for the Beatrice Bruins under coach Bob Steinkamp, who works for the Seattle Mariners. Steinkamp thought enough of Porter — offensively and defensively — to name him the Bruins' most valuable player last summer, even though there were number of Division I players on the roster. That group includes former Texas star Jordan Danks, a seventh-round draft pick who is now in the Chicago White Sox organization.

"He's also one of the nicest kids I've ever coached," Steinkamp said. "His makeup is off the charts — it just doesn't get any better. That's part of the reason someone will give him a chance."

Though professional concerns prevent Steinkamp from speculating where Porter might be selected, he said some franchise will give Porter a chance. He could be UNO's highest draft pick since Joe Benes went in the 10th round in 1981.

"He has some of the quickest hands of any player I've had," Steinkamp said. "If he has a drawback, it's that he's not a great flat-out runner, but he shows enough range that he could probably play the middle infield in pro ball. If not, he's versatile enough to play any of the four infield positions and do a good job."

Coming out of Millard North, Porter wasn't sure about UNO, and wasn't sure about baseball at all. Herold offered him a scholarship during the fall of his senior year, but Porter didn't take it right away. He thought about going with a friend to play junior college baseball in Texas, and also thought about just going to school with friends in Lincoln.

"I still loved baseball, and my parents told me I should play as long as I could," Porter said. "Thankfully they steered me in the right direction."

Porter hit .338 as a freshman, .336 as a sophomore and .385 last year. Herold said scouts asked about drafting Porter last summer, but Porter indicated he wanted to come back for his senior season. Porter doesn't have much leverage left now and his draft status becomes even less predictable as a senior.

He can compare notes with former roommates Robbie Knight, Darin Ruf and Zak Moore of Creighton when the time comes. For now, he doesn't worry too much about the scouts who have turned out to see him play.

It helps that UNO has gained a higher profile in scouting circles.

After just one player moved into professional ball in Herold's first eight seasons as coach, five signed contracts last summer and up to

six more could this year, with pitchers Chris Kessinger, Ben Percival and Kyle Dahman, second baseman Andrew Hansen and third baseman Brian Strawn also drawing interest.

"I've heard they liked what they saw, but you never know," Porter said. "I haven't let it affect how I play. If it happens, it'll happen. I'm not going to change because someone is watching."

• **Contact the writer:** 444-1027, rob.white@owh.com

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