

The mixed message of Jesse Biddle

By **WILLIAM C. KASHATUS**

THE PHILLIES' recent signing of Jesse Biddle, a 6-foot-5-inch, 225-pound, 18-year-old lefthander from Germantown Friends School, brought back some bittersweet memories.

In 1974, Ruben Amaro Sr., then director of the Phillies' Latin American scouting, signed Jorge Lebron, a highly touted 13-year-old Dominican infielder, to a pro baseball contract. I was jealous as hell.

I was a catcher-third baseman at Abington Friends School, right there in the Phillies' backyard. At 14, I was a full year older than Lebron, and they didn't even know I existed.

And rightfully so.

I couldn't hit my own weight, which was 170 at the time. My arm was inconsistent at best, and I played for a small Quaker school that was better known for its academics than its sports.

Three years later, Lebron, at 16, was all washed up. He never made it higher than Class A ball.

On the other hand, I went on to Earlham, a Quaker college, where I was inspired to become a historian and writer. Like many of the players I coach these days, I didn't have the maturity to understand that I didn't have the talent to play professional baseball. I thought that my passion for the game and sheer hard work would be enough to earn a pro contract.

But it takes a lot more than that. According to the NCAA Web site, the numbers are stacked against the overwhelming majority of baseball-playing

teenagers. Fewer than 1 in 200 (0.44 percent) of high school seniors playing interscholastic baseball will eventually be drafted by a major league team. The odds are better if the student-athlete goes on to college, where approximately 9 in 100, or about 9.1 percent of NCAA seniors, get drafted.

Pitchers like Biddle are extremely rare. His natural ability to

throw a 96 mph fastball is a gift he was born with. At the same time, Biddle is to be admired for his desire to improve. Not only did he work year-round at the sport with a pitching coach and personal trainer, but he created the opportunities for himself to be seen by pro scouts at national showcases.

That kind of effort reflects his respect and passion for the game, something that's also rare among adolescents.

What's more, he's smart. He listens and learns quickly — something reinforced by his education at GFS. That's a tremendous advantage that should allow him to excel at the lower levels of pro ball.

But even all that doesn't guarantee success in the big leagues, let alone the minors. Biddle will have to remain healthy. Pitchers are most vulnerable to injuries because of the constant stress they put on their arms. The road to the majors is strewn with those who might have been great

if not for rotator cuff tears and Tommy John surgeries.

And he'll have to enjoy a certain degree of luck, the same kind that allowed him to sign with his boyhood team in the first round after Milwaukee passed on him. He'll have to be managed by the right coaches, capitalize on his talent at just the right time and survive the curse of great expectations as well as the roller-coaster emotions that come with equating self-worth with personal statistics.

I wish Biddle well. I think he made the right decision by choosing the pros over the University of Oregon. Perhaps his signing will also motivate the scouts to take the Friends School League more seriously, or at least to realize that exceptional talent can be discovered at any level of competition.

Let's not forget that Herb Pen-

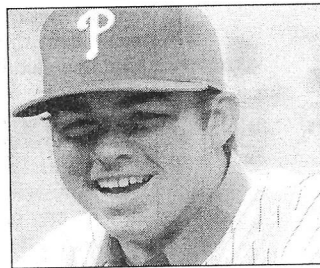
nock, another Quaker school product, went from the Westtown School to a Hall of Fame pitching career after signing with his hometown Philadelphia A's in 1912.

But I'll continue to encourage my son and

other players to go to college and channel their passion for baseball into a scholarship and a career in the front office, journalism or education after they earn their degree. There are, after all, many ways to live out your passion for baseball. ★

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OPINION



YONG KIM / Staff Photographer

GFS pitching phenom Biddle.