

Minor League Baseball

A 58th-Round Draft Nugget

Ex-Pitcher Conine Transformed to Bat Star in Memphis

By ROB RAINS

ST. LOUIS—With all the depressing news at the major league level for the Kansas City Royals this season, there has been a pleasant development with **Jeff Conine** at Memphis.

Conine, a 58th-round draft choice in 1987, was leading the Southern League in batting with a .346 average and in runs batted in with 84 through July 31. Toss in the fact that Conine had just one at-bat in three years in college—as a pitcher at UCLA—and hadn't played a position since high school, and you've got an even better story.

"Nobody could have forecast his having this kind of year," said Guy Hansen, the Memphis pitching coach. Hansen, a former UCLA pitching coach who moved on to scout for the Royals, recommended that the club draft and sign Conine.

"He has turned into a terrific player. From a scouting standpoint, he had all the tools to do what he's doing now," Hansen said. "He is a Steve Garvey type of hitter. He's very strong and intimidating with a line-drive stroke. He's a special guy, there's no doubt about it."

When Hansen was on the UCLA staff, the Bruins' head coach rejected his suggestion that Conine be given a chance to play a regular position. After Hansen joined the Royals' scouting department, he filed Conine's name away in his mind for a future draft.

"When I suggested he become a position player, **Jeff** thought I was nuts," Hansen said. "But once I drafted him, he knew I was serious. He was a guy the scouting director hadn't heard of and the scouting bureau didn't even have a report on him. But I knew he was a good quality athlete. I wanted him to give it a shot."

Conine, who was a national rac-

quetball champion at age 18 and credits that skill with making him a better baseball player, was willing to take the chance. After being drafted in '87, he showed enough ability in a Southern California summer league to convince the Royals they should sign him.

He spent the 1988 and '89 seasons with Baseball City (Florida State), leading the team in home runs each year although his performance was less than spectacular.

At Memphis, the 24-year-old righthanded hitter has become convinced that he is an outstanding player.

"I think I've caught everybody off-guard by what I've done," Conine said. "I've surprised myself. But I thought I was going to have a good season. I had worked hard in the instructional league (in Florida last fall), and from the middle part of last year on I felt more comfortable and started to wipe out any doubts I still had."

The Royals think Conine made himself into one of the best prospects in the organization through hard work. He learned what he had to do to take advantage of his natural ability.

"He just might be the best 58th-round player of all time," said Joe Klein, the Royals' director of player personnel. "He's going to be the Don Nottingham of the baseball draft."

(Nottingham, a stumpy running back from Kent State, was chosen by the Baltimore Colts with the next-to-last selection in the 1971 National Football League draft. The Human Bowling Ball not only survived training camp, but amazed NFL observers as he plowed through defenses for seven years with the Colts and the Miami Dolphins.)

Conine's statistics at Memphis included 12 home runs, 30 doubles, 84 walks and 17 stolen bases. He also had proved to be an above-

average first baseman as he utilized skills developed in racquetball. Conine's excellent quickness and range enabled him to make some spectacular plays in the field.

"He's probably going to step onto the turf at Kansas City and be the best first baseman in the history of the franchise," said Hansen. "He's going to be the best fielding first baseman in the history of the Royals, easy."

Such high praise might be considered excessive hype if it didn't come from every level of the Kansas City organization.

"The more I saw him (the last two years) the more I was convinced that some day he was going to make himself a ball player," said Memphis Manager **Jeff Cox**. "All his hard work and the desire he has put forth are paying off. He's putting everything together."

Conine's consistency, his patience and ability to make quick adjustments at the plate have impressed Cox and Hansen.

"In all the years I've played or coached in this league, I've never seen a player be as consistent as he's been," Cox said. "I can't speak highly enough about him. I'm a fortunate manager to have him."

Said Hansen, "This has got to be the toughest league in the minors because of the travel and all the heat and humidity, and **Jeff** has made believers of everybody. He probably would be hitting 20 points higher except he twisted an ankle and didn't say anything about it for a week."

"What he's got that I couldn't envision him having so quickly is the ability to adjust to pitchers after just one at-bat. And it seems like any time he needs an RBI at crunch time, he hits the ball hard."

Conine knows the last player to jump directly from Memphis to the Royals was Bo Jackson. But he is hoping for a September promotion and would like to compete for a job



Jeff Conine, a 58th-round draft choice, has been nothing but good news for a Royals franchise that desperately needs some.

with the Royals next spring.

"I'm not looking at Triple A," Conine said. "From what I've heard, there isn't much difference between this level (Double A) and Triple A except experience. I think I still have a little way to go mentally, but that will come with time."

Hansen has marveled at Conine's performance all year, so what happened before a recent game in Knoxville should not have surprised him. But it did.

"Here is a guy who's got the world by the tail, and it's a hot and humid day, and after batting practice he's out running wind sprints in the outfield," Hansen said. "I couldn't believe it. One of the other players was sitting next to me on the bench, and I motioned to **Jeff** and said, 'Can you believe he's out there?'"

"He turned back to me and said, 'That's why he's going to be a star.'"

NOTEBOOK

ST. LOUIS—The Dodgers say they are not concerned about an elbow injury that has sidelined lefthander Ron Walden, their first-round pick in this year's amateur draft. Walden was 3-0 with an earned-run average of 0.42 for Great Falls (Pioneer). Charlie Blaney, the Dodgers' director of minor league operations, said Walden was merely suffering from a strain and that surgery was not an option. "We're just giving him some rest," Blaney said. "He just needed some time off. He hadn't pitched for a month after getting out of high school, and he was too anxious, as a lot of 17-year-olds are." . . . Righthander Kiki Jones, the Dodgers' first-round pick in the 1989 draft, had not pitched for Bakersfield (California) since May 20 because of a shoulder injury. Blaney said Jones was scheduled to see the team doctor the first week in August and hoped to get a clearance to resume throwing in the last month of the season.

Three high school players who

were among the first six draft choices in 1989 were hardly sizzling in their first full professional seasons. The Phillies left **Jeff Jackson** in extended spring training until June, when he joined Batavia (New York-Penn). He was hitting .185 with two homers and 11 RBIs after 37 games. The Cardinals' Paul Coleman was hitting .217 with five homers and 27 RBIs after 78 games with Savannah (South Atlantic). The Braves' Tyler Houston was doing a little better, with 11 homers and 49 RBIs in 94 games for Sumter (South Atlantic), although his average was only .216.

The Peoria Chiefs, a farm team of the Chicago Cubs, were excited when writer Joseph A. Bosco spent the summer of 1988 traveling with the Midwest League team to gather material for a book, "The Boys Who Would Be Cubs," recently published by William Morrow. But team officials aren't smiling now.

Pete Vonachen, who owned the Chiefs in 1988—he sold his majority interest at the end of that season and now is board chairman—has banned Bosco and the book from the Peoria ball park. The author

was planning a visit to Peoria in August to promote the book.

Vonachen said he let Bosco have almost total access to the Chiefs because he thought a story about the minor leagues would be a good promotion for his team and baseball. But Vonachen wasn't pleased that the book featured players' off-field parties, sexual exploits and details of the owner's fabled temper tantrums that were laced with obscenities.

"I feel betrayed," Vonachen said. "I thought the book would be something we could sell at the ball park, but obviously, if you've read it, that is not something we could do—we're a family ball park."

According to Vonachen, "He generally portrays the team as a bunch of guys who play ball all day and chase girls all night."

Bosco said he was not surprised that Vonachen was upset.

"He is very, very offended, but he was expecting a fluff piece, with everything syrup and honey, and obviously they weren't expecting me to tell the truth," Bosco said. "Sometimes when you tell the truth, even when you think you are fair, you offend some people."

A Japanese sports group has purchased the Vancouver (Pacific Coast) Canadians from Molson Breweries for nearly \$5 million. The sale of the team to Japan Sports Systems Co. Ltd. was approved by the PCL board of directors. The team became the third minor league club owned by Japanese companies, joining the Birmingham (Southern) Barons and the Visalia (California) Oaks. . . . Frank Cashen, general manager of the Mets, said there was a possibility the organization would end its affiliation with Jackson (Texas) if promised stadium improvements are not completed. . . . Mike Maksudian was a 23-year-old business manager at Birmingham at the start of the 1989 season, but he had not lost his desire to play. Maksudian, who had spent two years in the farm systems of the White Sox and Mets, left his administrative job to play with the independent Miami (Florida State) club. In 83 games, he hit .313 with nine homers and 42 RBIs. The Blue Jays selected Maksudian in the minor league draft last December and he now is playing at Knoxville (South-

ern). A 23-game hitting streak in June helped him land a berth on the Southern League all-star team. Through July, he was hitting .292 with seven homers and 48 RBIs.

Minor league moves: The White Sox demoted lefthander Wilson Alvarez from Vancouver to Birmingham. Alvarez, considered one of the top prospects in the organization, was 7-7 at Vancouver with a 6.00 ERA. He won his first game at Birmingham. . . . The Pirates promoted their top picks from the drafts of 1988 and '89, infielders Austin Manahan and Willie Greene, from Augusta (South Atlantic) to Salem (Carolina). . . . The Rangers advanced righthander Robb Nen from Port Charlotte (Florida State) to Tulsa (Texas), the Yankees sent righthander Royal Clayton from Albany (Eastern) to Columbus (International) and the Royals moved lefty Jim Campbell from Memphis (Southern) to Omaha (American Association). Campbell had allowed only three earned runs in 42 1/3 at Memphis. . . . The Giants dropped lefty Eric Gunderson from Phoenix (PCL) to Shreveport (Texas).