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Baseball: Keith taking Express route

by Dan Greenberg | Staff Writer
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It's early in the 2007 Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League season, but Rockville outfielder Kevin Keith has already made an impact on his Express teammates. So much so, that he's already earned two nicknames: Squints and Chuck Liddell.

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The first is in reference to the 5-foot-11, 190-pounder's uncanny resemblance to Michael "Squints" Paledorous, who like Keith, was also a left-handed throwing center fielder in the movie "The Sandlot." The second alludes to a long-time Ultimate Fighting Championship mainstay known for mixed martial art prowess.

"Well, they say I look like the kid from "The Sandlot," so that was just given to me when I got here," said Keith, a 2005 Damascus graduate. "And with Chuck Liddell, we were telling stories the other night at one of the houses and I know a lot of UFC moves. One guy was like, 'Oh, this is Chuck Liddell over here.' I don't know, it just stuck."

If Keith can hit the baseball anything like his UFC hero hits opponents this summer, the Express (2-0) will not only be grateful for their first-year addition, but also have legitimate hope for their first league championship.

And one look at his resumé shows that the potential to do so is there. Keith was an absolute monster in high school, showcasing exceptional power for a player his size. In his junior season (2004) with the Swarmin' Hornets, Keith batted .585 with seven homers, seven doubles, six triples and 39 runs batted in. His astronomical production increased in his final year at Damascus, in which he was named Gazette Player of the Year, batting .591 with 10 homers and 43 RBI.

The adjustment to college-level pitching hasn't proven too difficult for Keith, either. This past



Brian Lewis/The Gazette
Kevin Keith takes a swing for the Rockville Express of the Cal Ripken Sr. Collegiate Baseball League last Thursday. Keith, a Damascus High graduate and rising sophomore at Montgomery College-Germantown, is making a good impression in the prestigious wooden-bat league.

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spring, his first with Montgomery College-Germantown, he hit .308 while leading the team with 42 runs scored, also homering five times. He capped his debut season with a strong showing at the Division III Junior College World Series, earning a spot on the All-Tournament Team.

“Kevin’s got a lot of pop for his size,” said Express manager Tom Shaffer. “I’ve known him for six years and I knew he was going to play for this team sooner or later. He has a lot of speed, too, can really track them down in the outfield. He really has pop though — we play at a bigger park than Germantown and he can still take it out with the big boys.”

The one thing that Keith lacks is a big-time arm in the outfield, but that’s through little fault of his own. Following his senior season in high school, he had ulnar collateral ligament reconstruction, otherwise known as Tommy John surgery, to repair damage in his left arm.

He had felt the pain as far back as his sophomore year of high school, when the ligament in his elbow gradually began to tear. He wasn’t in unbearable pain because of the scar tissue that formed, which allowed him to keep playing at such a high level. However, the pain eventually got to the point where he moved from center field to first base prior to his last year with Damascus.

Because of the surgery, he had to take a whole year off from baseball, and could not make good on the full scholarship that was offered to him by West Virginia University before the operation. But he knows his ability is still there, which is why he believes he’s on the level of his Express teammates, many of which are NCAA Division I college players.

“I’m playing with guys that are playing D1 and I’m D3 [junior college], but it’s not that these guys are that much better than I am. It’s just that they had everything going for them, and I had to step back because of my arm. They’ve had more experience with this kind of pitching, but it’s nothing that I’ve never seen before. I adjusted to it pretty quickly.”

Keith’s father, Kenny, is staying involved with his son’s tenure with the Express — in fact, he’s housing several non-local Rockville players for the summer. He has coached his son throughout his playing career, and managed the Damascus Post 171 American Legion team that Kevin played on for years.

He is realistic with his son’s future prospects, but has seen enough throughout Kevin Keith’s childhood to believe that he will go on to do bigger and better things with the sport.

“We knew it very early on when he was very young — he had extremely quick hands and I can remember throwing Wiffleballs at him when he was still in diapers and he would rip a Wiffleball like it was nothing, and this is when he was just learning how to walk,” said Kenny Keith, who resigned from Damascus Post 171 after five years to follow his son more closely. “He actually started as a 15-year-old for Damascus Legion. I’ve been with them for 18 years and we’ve only had one other kid who started at that age. Not only did he start but led team in four offensive categories and we went 44-4.

“Overall, I think he’s recovered okay. His arm strength maybe isn’t where we’d like it to be. So, what do I hope for Kevin? You know, I’d like to see him move up to next level. As long as he has a good junior-college season next year, gets his [Associates in Arts] degree and moves on, I’m happy.”

If his first go-round with the Gryphons is any indication, Keith has had a near-complete recovery from the operation. Shaffer, who manages at MC-Rockville during the spring, couldn’t be happier, and was glad to take him on board for the summer. In fact, he’d like to see Keith transfer over to his Knights for his sophomore season though he doubts it will happen.

Shaffer remembers being intrigued by his young outfielder all the way back in 2002, when he first spotted Keith during an American Legion game at MC-Germantown from the press box. He became pretty good friends with the family once that game was over, and has followed the Damascus product’s maturation ever since.

However, as he jokingly suggests, he’s got an axe to grind with him. During one of the Knights’ meetings with the Gryphons this spring, Keith got sent to first base on a pitch that “allegedly” hit him. MC-Germantown went on to win the game.



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*Membership eligibility required.

“He got hit by a ball, supposedly, with a fastball on the inside corner,” Shaffer said. “The umpire said it nicked him and he went to first base, but it didn’t touch him. We [laugh] about it. It’s friendly competition.”

But for now, they’re joined forces. And he has high hopes that the man he calls Squints can help him his team win, for a change.

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