

Sam Ballard's hard work pays off with baseball scholarship to University of Illinois-Chicago

by Brent Feeney, Sports Writer
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GODFREY – Sam Ballard has moved his way through the ranks and become one of Alton's top pitchers, doing it with hard work, learning what it takes to become a good pitcher and someone that Redbird coach Todd Haug can hand the ball and expect a good outing.

Ballard's competitive nature and work ethic paid off Wednesday when he signed a letter of intent to attend the **University of Illinois-Chicago**, a member of the Horizon League, starting this fall, in a ceremony at Alton High.

“He's a true self-made man, a tremendous athlete with a lot of untapped potential that we figure is just going to blossom even further once he gets to the collegiate ranks,” said **Redbird coach Todd Haug**. “If he makes any type of jump from age 19-20 that he's made from age 16-17 to 18, just look out; it's going to be a situation that he has tremendous stuff on the mound.

“Once he becomes a full-time pitcher and gets into it on a year-round basis in their program, I expect nothing but outstanding things from him.”

No doubt, Ballard's decision to go to UIC and play on the NCAA Division I level was a huge decision for him. "It's probably one of the biggest things I've done so far in my life," Ballard said. "It's real exciting; it feels good just knowing all the work worked out in the end and I found a spot to play.

"I love the location, the coaching staff up there is awesome; they're very competitive – that's another big reason. It was the perfect distance away from home."

So far this season, Ballard has thrown 16.1 innings, having given up 10 earned runs for a 4.29 earned-run average, conceding 12 hits, walking 19 and striking out 27; he has not allowed a double, triple or home run on the year.

Ballard developed himself through hard work. "He worked very hard in his summer programs," Haug said. "Working through his current pitching coach, Brett Huber (who recently took over as director of baseball operations at Mississippi after a stint with the St. Louis Pirates baseball club as a pitching coordinator), they worked really hard during the off-season. He's gone from a kid who routinely pitched 80-83 to a kid who has topped out at 92 this year for us.

"Velocity-wise, it's come; he's still managing his control, working on that, but also a hard, tremendous off-speed pitch and developing a change-up as well. That's all things he's going to take up to Chicago with him."

"Last season, I kind of realized that if I wanted to have a future playing the game in college," Ballard said, "I spent all summer and winter working on it and trying to get better and realize I was going to be a big part of our team this year and see where I go with it."

Ballard plans to major in political science with the view of hopefully becoming a lawyer. "I hope to be a big part of the team right when I get there, do whatever I can to help them to win games," Ballard said.

"It's my home," Ballard said about what he'll miss about being a part of the Redbird program. "Alton's my home; it's just nice going out there and playing baseball for your hometown."

