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Article published Jul 1, 2007

## COLLEGE RECRUITING

# Vanguard prospect molded by work, family sacrifice

**BY BYRON SAUCER  
STAR-BANNER**

OCALA - Another day. Another diamond. That's life for Vanguard's Eric Grabe, a rising baseball prospect entering the stretch run of his recruitment.

After hanging up his high school spikes, Grabe began his second and third seasons, respectively, swapping jerseys daily while playing for the Central Florida Renegades - an elite all-star team that will travel to eight Division I campuses and five states this summer - and the Vanguard summer league team.

Grabe plays infield, outfield and pitches. It just depends where his coach needs him that night.

The one constant, though, is his bat. Grabe finds his way into the batter's box regardless of defensive assignment or team colors. His .400 average with 3 home runs, 14 doubles, 40 RBIs and 24 runs landed him on the Class 5A All-State team as a junior. Instead of patting himself on the back, Grabe suited up for a summer spent fine-tuning a game he hopes will land him in the promised land before it's all over.

"My main goal is to get to the big leagues," Grabe said. "It is going to take a lot of work to get there, and unless I get drafted in the top 10 rounds, I want to go to a major D-I college or junior college. I don't care which one as long as



Zoom

ERIC GRABE FILE

I make it in the lineup."

Tuesday night, Grabe, back from a four-day Renegade tournament at the University of Louisville, had the rare night off. Instead of settling in on the couch for a night of Xbox, he suited up for his high school coach Ed McPadden and squared off against Forest in a mid-week, business-casual affair.

Grabe played shortstop out of necessity that night, hit a monster home run that cleared the portables behind the left-center field wall and pitched two scoreless innings of relief for his VHS teammates.

"More than anything else, he has the burning desire to succeed," McPadden said of Grabe. "He is willing to set goals, make sacrifices and has great work habits."

And it's not just on the field that Grabe draws praise. McPadden, the very definition of old school, provides the most telling compliment when he talks of the person behind the athlete.

"Eric is a great kid," McPadden said. "Very coachable, very knowledgeable of the game, and willing to go the extra mile to reach his goals. He is of solid character. I would call Eric a man of integrity."

Eric's father, Jonathan Grabe, spends about 10 hours a week handling his son's baseball affairs, which include mailing out recruiting packages to potential college suitors and planning vacations around Eric's endless baseball schedule. From the time Eric began making consistent contact with his Wiffle

**AGE:** 16

**SCHOOL:** Vanguard

**POSITIONS:** Third base; left field; relief pitcher

**2007 STATS:** .400, with 3 HRs, 14 doubles, 40 RBIs and 24 runs. Had 4 saves as the Knights closer, showcasing an 88 mph fastball.

**HONORS:** First team All-Area; Class 5A All-State honorable mention; Renegades Fall Coaches Award winner.

**INTERESTED COLLEGES:** FSU, Coastal Carolina, UCF, USF, FAU, Florida, Georgia Tech, Vanderbilt, Ohio State and Daytona Beach Community College.

**GRABE SAYS:** "Last fall I went to a showcase in Fort Myers. I did really well and that is when I started hearing that colleges were interested in me. It made me start to think I really did have a chance to play in the next level."

PHOTO BY SCOTT HUGHES/STAR-BANNER

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## RENEGADES FILE

Eight Renegades taken in 2007 MLB Draft:  
Michael Main (1st round); Jonathan Holt (5th); Mark Gildea (9th); Ryan Straus (35th); Jeff Schaus (35th); Brandon Bonner (44th); Billy Falasco (46th); Nick Purdy (50th).

18 Renegades verbally committed to colleges last year, including a pair of pitchers headed to Florida State in Main and Ryan Vigue. Fellow pitchers Billy Falasco (Richmond) and Zach Pietrzyk (South Florida) also committed to four-year schools. Outfielders Jeff Schaus (Clemson) and Jeff Simpson (Stetson) rounded out a stellar Renegades class.

Since 2000, 35 former Renegade players have been drafted in the MLB Draft, including seven going in the first five rounds.

ball bat at the age of 3, the Grabe household has backed his dream of playing baseball for a living.

Sixty-four former Renegades players have signed college scholarships from 2000-2007.

By the time Eric was 10 he had a full-time hitting coach in Tampa. Currently he works with former major leaguer Denny Doyle when he isn't on the diamond or taking grounders at home.

"You reach a point of no return," Jonathan said. "We have been there for a while. The lion's share of our disposable income is allocated toward Eric reaching his dream.

"His four brothers and sisters are very aware of this. Not really a contentious issue, but one that is obvious. Summer vacations and weekends have been spent at baseball fields for quite a while."

Ask around though and most agree an all-in approach is the only way to truly improve the long odds that kick in when you start talking about Division I scholarships and a professional sports career.

It's certainly something Eric understands. With so many different people coaching and overseeing the 16-year-old's progress, the situation could become dizzying.

Instead, Eric drinks in as much baseball knowledge as possible. From constructive criticism on the field to helpful advice centered on achieving his baseball dreams, Eric points to two men - Doyle and McPadden - for keeping him straight.

"Both know a great deal about baseball and are both a positive influence on me," Eric said. "The biggest thing that I have heard from Denny is that I need to develop a routine for myself in order to develop a good work ethic.

"Coach McPadden stresses the fact that 'If I am not working hard every day to get better, someone else is working hard and passing me by.'"

As colleges begin lining up - Florida State and Coastal Carolina are the two early leaders - Grabe takes his training regimen up another notch. With only this summer and his senior year at Vanguard standing between the MLB Draft and/or signing a college scholarship, the next step is within reach.

For McPadden, who has helped guide Joe Bowen (Tigers organization) into the draft and sent brothers Ryan (CFCC) and Andy (Florida College) Paul and Star-Banner Player of the Year Matt Wright (DBCC) to the college ranks over the past two seasons, Grabe is a slam-dunk due to his work ethic.

"Sacrifices have to be made," McPadden said. "Many days, Eric forsakes hanging out with friends to drive south to meet with Denny Doyle for private instruction. He is constantly working on his game and his studies as well.

"Eric is one of those special kids, who because of his drive and determination, will achieve those goals - both personal and professional - that he has set for himself."

Jonathan has done all he can do. He has provided all the help a father can give. All the lessons, the summer trips, the countless checks written over the years. Now he can only watch as his son sinks or swims in the cut-throat world of competitive sports.

Years of building the perfect baseball beast is coming to fruition. But Jonathan isn't worried. Not really.

"The road is full of potholes, especially if Eric's bat gets quiet at the wrong time," he said. "We don't know what the future holds, but do believe that Eric has many excellent years of baseball ahead of him.

"I am confident that, barring injury, he will play professionally at some level."

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