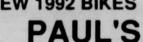
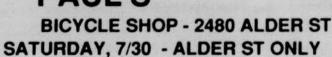
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Emeralds catcher down to earth

By Carrie Vincent

Murray Olderman's sportswriting class is not a mob of raving, digging media lunatics. In fact, the students are a bit quiet, almost shy for journalists, treading on new ground. Not unlike the intervie-

Mike Sweeney, the catcher for the Eugene Emeralds baseball team, is also treading on new ground. Having just turned 20 years old and in only his second year in the minor leagues, Sweeney, although a little reticent, seemed to enjoy being the center of attention. He (luckily for the class) has not experienced the prying, negative media in his career so far.

At Tuesday's game against the Everett Giants, the catcher, who leads the team in runs scored (17), seemed to be the darling of the crowd. The young man inspired the older fans to take almost a parenting tone in their cheering and the young kids seemed to love the sound of his name rolling off their tongues. "Sweeeeeney!"

In spite of the adulation he is receiving this year from the fans, last year wasn't so easy

'The crowds bothered me last year a lot," he said, "but this year is not so bad."

But he was still willing to talk openly with the class, politely listened to questions, tried to be aware of the names of the students and answered everything as honestly as any journalist could hope for. At the end of the interview he even offered to get passes for any of the students for an Emeralds game and shyly added to each and everyone as they were leaving, "Bye! It was really nice to meet you.

His manners can probably be attributed to his Irish-Catholic upbringing. As the second oldest of eight children, he often spends his off-seasons helping with his younger siblings in his hometown of Ontario, Calif.

But his love for baseball can probably be attributed to the fact that his father (Mike Sweeney, also) was a center fielder for the California Angels from 1971 to 1973. But neither his dad nor his mother ever pushed him into athletics, though they were supportive.

It's always been my lifetime goal to play baseball," Sweeney said.

Sweeney said that though his father playing for the Angels gave him the love for the team, it was Brian Downing, who used to be a catcher, designated hitter and finally an outfielder for the Angels, who was his true idol.

'I remember when I was five," Sweeney said, 'at the opening of the T-ball ceremonies my dad had him come and speak. I remember (Downing) looked like some big, mammoth man. But I always got a real thrill watching him play.

Sweeney, at 6-foot-2 and 195 pounds, is not exactly petite himself, but he said his size is fair-

'When I was a freshman in high school, I was only 5-foot-3 and 120 pounds," he said.

Sweeney is confident that his decision to play baseball, instead of going to college, was the right

"I don't feel any regrets," he said. "I feel I've learned a lot more in the last couple of years in pro ball than I would have in college.

Even if I make it in the big leagues, I'll probably still be driving my Honda Accord, not a Mercedes. That's not for me.'

> Mike Sweeney, Eugene Emeralds catcher

Sweeney said, however, that if he ever went to school he would like to stay in the area of sports, possibly studying physical therapy or sports med-

According to his contract, if he should get injured, the Kansas City Royals, the parent team of the Emeralds, would pay Sweeney for four years of

Sweeney, even at his young age, has a good financial sense. Instead of blowing his signing bonus of \$30,000 on cars or other luxuries, he invested two thirds of it in stocks and mutual

"Even if I make it in the big leagues, I'll probably still be driving my Honda Accord, not a Mercedes," Sweeney said. "That's not for me."

Sweeney lives with three other players in an apartment near the University campus, which makes their \$950/month stipend fairly easy to live on. The occasional Top Ramen is about as gourmet as Sweeney and his roommates get, he said, so most of his money goes toward food.

Because this is his second year with the Emeralds - he is the only returnee on the roster - he had hoped at the beginning of the season that he would advance to Rockford, Ill., the next-step-upthe-ladder franchise for the Royals. Although he thinks his young age is usually an advantage, Sweeney said this time it worked against him.

"I was told I was only 19 and they wanted me to stay with the Emeralds and learn from my manager, John Mizerock, who used to be a major league catcher," he said.

Sweeney was a pitcher in high school, but he is confident that the move to catcher was the right one. But when Olderman playfully questioned him about the "tools of ignorance" - the designation for receivers - Sweeney agreed.

"They certainly aren't tools of intelligence, getting balls thrown at you all the time," he said.

His contribution to the Emeralds and his humbleness were summed up in one sentence when he was asked how he felt about leading the team in extra-base hits.

"I am?" he replied. "I didn't know that. I guess you learn something new every day."

It didn't really hit Sweeney until he was a junior in high school that he might be able to play ball past his senior year. After his team went 26-0 and won the California state title in baseball was when it really hit him.

Sweeney believes the chances of making it to the majors with the same team that recruited him (in the 10th round) are pretty slim. Which is fine

"I'm still an Angel fan," he said, "even though they're lousy.'

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