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## Blake Blasi

continued from page 5

probably as good a lead-off hitter as you're going to find right now."

"He brings such great discipline to the team, and it's hard to teach discipline," hitting instructor Tom Beyers said. "We're probably one of the youngest teams in the league, and without players like him, it'd be really tough."

Blasi softly chuckles when reminded that he is "the old guy" on the team at a ripe old age of 21. But on a team with many 19-year-olds fresh out of high school, his college experience is paying great dividends.

Blasi was a part of the rich baseball school of Wichita State. This past season, he led the Shockers in average with a clip of .391 and only committed nine errors in 163 attempts.

Such stellar play warranted him the Missouri Valley League Player of the Year.

"Awards like that are nice, but there are so many guys in the league that are deserving of it," Blasi said. "I was just the one who got it."

He was then drafted by the Cubs, which presented a dilemma to the junior, who had planned on coming back for his senior year.

"It was tough because I was on track to get my degree," Blasi said. "But if an opportunity is there to fulfill a dream that you've had growing up as a child, why wouldn't you take it?"

Blasi also knows how precious the game of baseball is.

That lesson was driven home to him on April 23, 1999.

Blasi was getting ready to start at second base for Wichita State as they prepared to take on Evansville.

He was fielding warm-up grounders from his first baseman when he saw it happen.

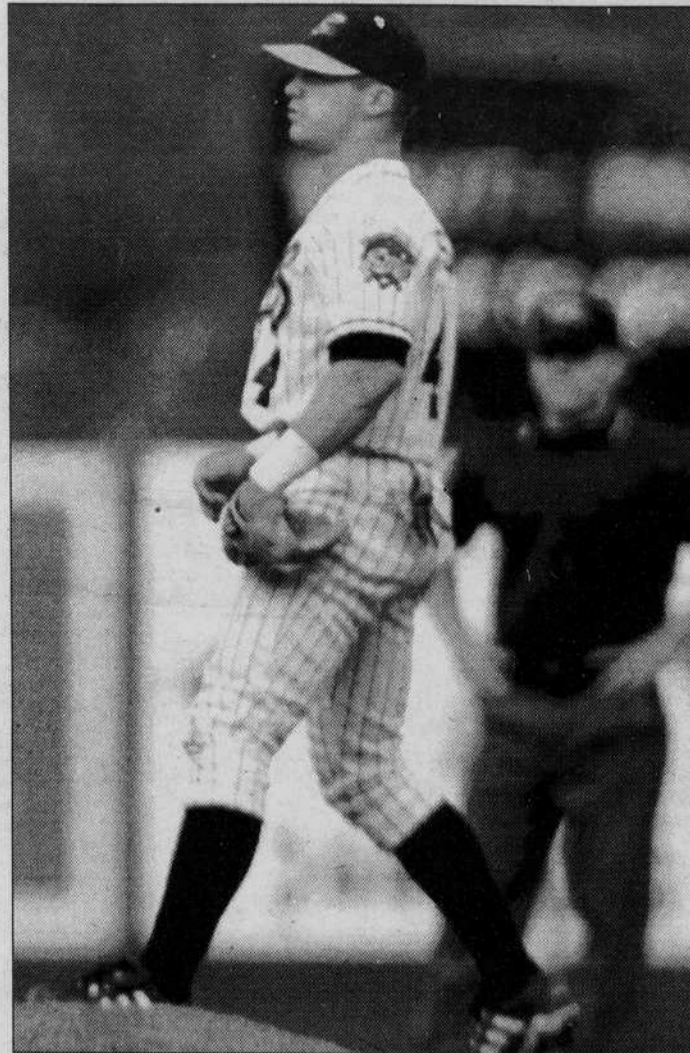
Wichita State pitcher Ben Christensen was getting irritated by Evansville batter Anthony Molina for creeping closer to home plate and timing his pitches.

Christensen fired a 90-plus mph fast ball directly at Molina's left eye and was ejected — still before the game had even started.

It may have taken 23 stitches to close the gash on Molina, but Blasi says nothing will ever be able to erase the memory of that eerie moment.

"It was crazy," said Blasi, while slowing shaking his head in reflection. "It's one of the weirdest things that I've ever experienced in baseball."

Christensen was a member of the Eugene Emeralds last year and



*Emerald*

Blake Blasi considers himself the elder statesman on the team, even though he is only 21 years old. His collegiate experience is vital to his fellow Emeralds teammates.

struggled. This year, however, he is a member of the Cubs' AA team, and is excelling. He's off to a 3-0 start with a 1.70 earned run average, and Blasi couldn't be more thrilled for his ex-teammate.

"Baseball is already a tough enough mental game, but it's got to be overbearing to deal with something like that every single time you play," Blasi said. "He's not someone who wants to hurt people. He knows he made a mistake."

One that Blasi uses to remind himself that baseball is a game that needs to be respected. A game where the moment you become complacent, you become vulnerable.

"When you get to this level, you find out that you have to get into good habits to keep improving," Blasi said. "There are so many talented athletes who never make it all the way."

But first things first, Blasi says. He wants to help lead the Emeralds to a Northwest League championship. His team is 10-11 in preparation

for the upcoming five-game home stand starting Wednesday against Spokane at Civic Stadium.

And about those critics of years past?

Too small, they said? "I think that's overrated," Sheaffer said. "I really don't know who wrote the book on baseball to show how big you're supposed to be. The bottom line is how you play the game."

Not enough home runs? Blasi knows he's not here to hit home runs, although that didn't stop him from belting two over the fence in Sunday's game against Yakima.

Never going to make it? Well, he has and you better believe he's savoring every moment of it.

"We're adults now and we can say we're playing a kids game and getting paid for it," Blasi said. "Who else can say their job is to play games every day?"

Clearly Blasi is thrilled to be a part of the game and Eugene should be the same that it gets to be his playground.

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