

A LOVE UNCONDITIONAL

Former Jordan High School player Alex Raburn works to prove himself on the UNC-Chapel Hill baseball team.

By Michael Lananna
UNC Sports Editor

Before his standout high school years and before his Division I playing days, there was Alex Raburn, the seventh grader.

Devy Bell remembers seventh-grade Alex Raburn quite well.

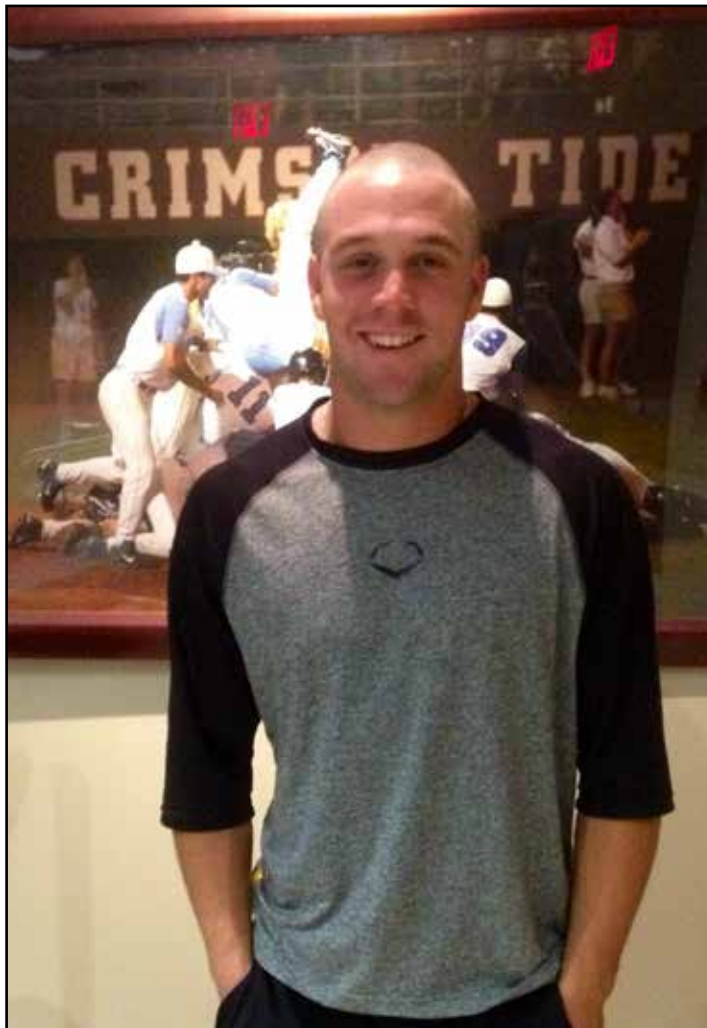
Even then, Bell — Jordan High School's baseball coach — noticed something special in him. The youngster approached Bell's youth baseball camp with a fiery competitiveness, a make-every-play-count mentality. Raburn was hard-nosed in the most figurative and literal of ways.

"On the third day of camp, he took one to his nose, and I think he may have broken his nose just a little bit," recalls Bell. "Wednesday, I'm working on trying to give a little money back to him, and he shows up on Thursday with a face guard on, and he's ready to go.

"That gives you an idea of what it is we knew we were working with."

A Durham native, Raburn would later go on to play for four years under Bell at Jordan, starting at third base from his freshman year onward. He earned all-conference honors all four years, all-state twice and team MVP his sophomore and senior seasons. Bell calls Raburn one of the best players his program has ever had—a type of personality that only comes along every five or six years.

Now, in his second year at UNC-Chapel Hill, Raburn is trying to prove himself all over again.



Sophomore Alex Raburn, once a star for the Jordan High School baseball team, is in his second year with the Tar Heels. (Staff photo by Michael Lananna)

New coaches. New teammates. New fans. He's one name on a UNC baseball roster that is crowded with talent, and at times, he's found himself buried on the depth chart.

He's had to be ready at a moment's notice, subbing in at different positions all across the diamond.

"Mentally — it's just mentally taxing," Raburn said of playing off of the bench. "It's all between the ears. I try to take pride in that, just staying ready. It is hard. That's really all you can do. You can't really control it."

Once primarily a third baseman, Raburn now owns four separate gloves. He has an outfielder's mitt for his occasional appearances in left or right field. He has a smaller

infielder's glove for second base, a slightly bigger one for third, and he has a first baseman's glove that he shares with senior teammate Parks Jordan.

Before this season, Raburn hadn't played first base in his life.

Still, Raburn brings the same attitude he had as a seventh grader—the one that Bell cherished. Each role earns Raburn's full attention and effort.

If Raburn is discouraged with a lack of steady playing time, he doesn't show it. There's an upbeat aura about him, a constant smile.

"Alex, to his credit, he understands (his role)," said Mike Fox, UNC's head coach. "He can play anywhere on the field at any point in time. I told him, 'You're probably not going to be a guy who starts a lot of games, but we can use you at any time.' ... You have to have one of those guys on your team."

Still, Raburn has his eyes set on something more — if he keeps working, maybe a starting role. Bell has that hope, too.

The coach still keeps up with his former star player, checking in with him on a regular basis. During breaks from school, he goes through hitting and fielding drills with Raburn.

Bell was once a Tar Heel himself. He knows what Raburn is going through, and he also knows what he is capable of.

He saw it when he had Raburn in his youth baseball camp as a seventh grader. He saw it when, years later, Raburn helped lead those camps.

"He was a leader just with the way he handled the game," Bell said. "That's the kind of kid he is."

"And I know that's the kind of kid he's going to continue to be at Carolina."