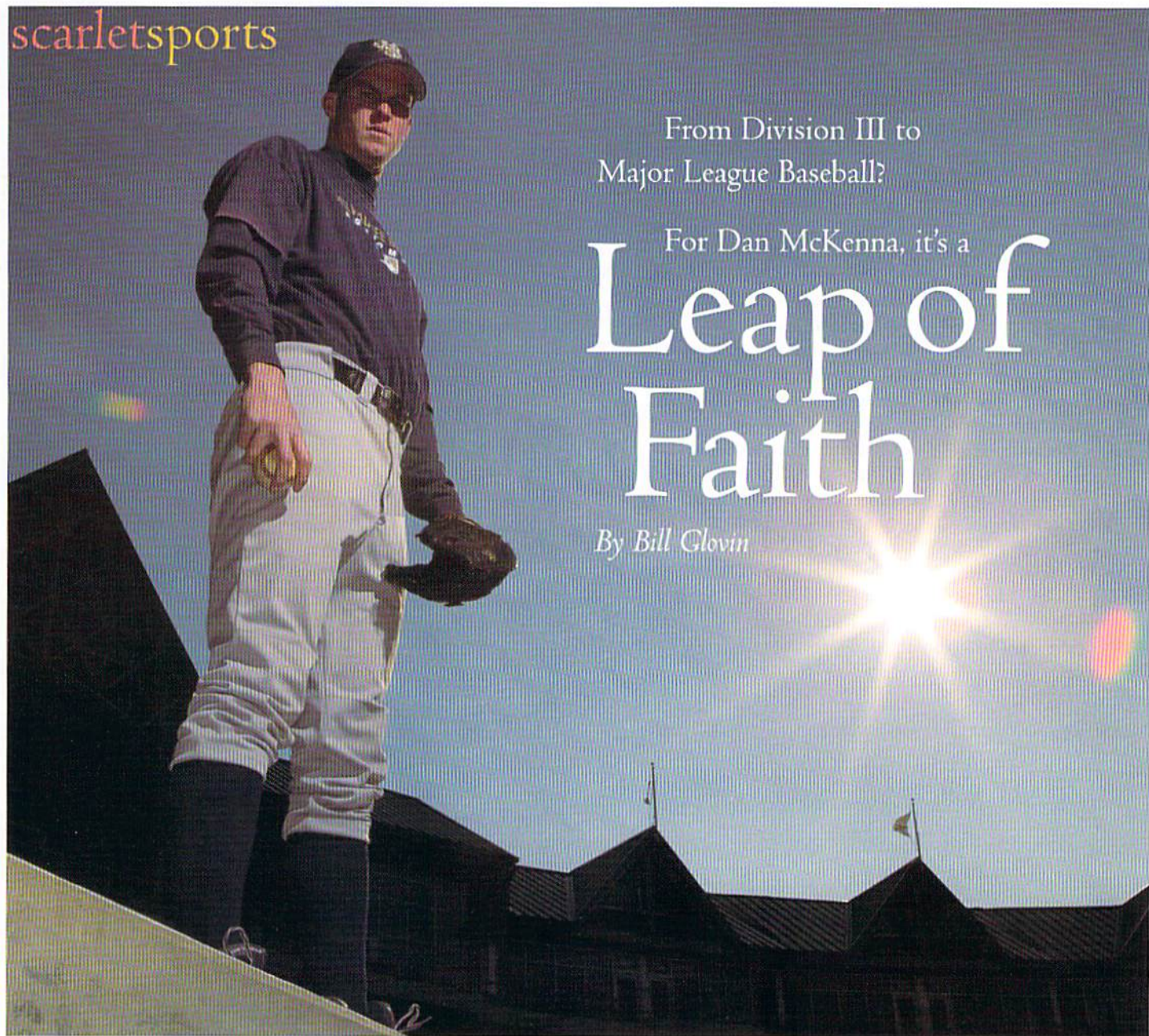


From Division III to
Major League Baseball?

For Dan McKenna, it's a
**Leap of
Faith**

By *Bill Glovin*



Dan McKenna threw his last warm-up pitch and settled in to face the first batter. He looked for the catcher's sign and nodded, his eyes zeroing in on the target. Nothing in his baseball career to this point had meant as much as this half-inning. This was the culmination of all the years of baseball practice, running and weight training, and endless bus rides to high school and college road games. His lifelong dream to play professional baseball now depended on the next few pitches.

McKenna, who had been a closer for the Scarlet Raptors at Rutgers-Camden, had earned an invitation to this Milwaukee Brewers predraft showcase by impressing the organization's scouts a few weeks before

at a metro-area tryout. He and his dad had paid for their own flights to the one-day event at the Brewers' home stadium, Miller Park.

The 21st pitcher of 25 called to the mound in this simulated game, McKenna knew the Brewers expected heat. But the first batter sat on a pitch and lined it into the left-center field gap for a triple, and the second batter hit a sacrifice fly to drive in the run. "The coaches were yelling encouragement. I think they felt sorry for me," McKenna says. With nothing left to lose, he reared back and fired, striking out the next two hitters with his go-to 94-mile-per-hour fastball.

Returning home to Marlton, the Rutgers senior waited anxiously for June 4, 2003—Major League Baseball's draft day. "It was a long week. The day of the draft, I did the laundry to keep from going stir-crazy

and waited for the phone to ring," he says. "When it did, I dropped the laundry basket. It seemed to take forever to get to the phone." A Brewers scout was on the line: the team had nabbed McKenna in the 27th round.

No one had ever mistaken McKenna for a baseball phenom à la the fictitious Frank Merriwell. The coaches at Bishop Eustace Preparatory High School in Pennsauken groomed the 5'9" youngster as a pitcher because his brother—three years older—had excelled at the position. He sprouted to 6'4" but didn't start a game until his senior year. When he finally got tapped, McKenna helped his team win the Diamond Classic, an elite tournament for South Jersey high schools.

The only college recruiters to actively court him were from Kean University, a Division III program. After a standout freshman season in 2000, the coach insisted he develop a slider. "I just wasn't getting it," says McKenna. "My mechanics were way off, and my arm started hurting. Plus, I couldn't throw strikes anymore." Feeling miserable and knowing that the coach had lost confidence in him, he called Keith Williams, the Scarlet Raptors' baseball coach, who had managed his older brother. "We welcomed Dan," says Williams. "He had a lot of talent and was still maturing physically."

Coach Williams determined that McKenna could best help the Raptors from the bullpen. "Dan threw hard, was durable, and had the mental makeup to shake off a bad outing—all important qualities in a closer," says Williams. "In his junior year, if we were leading, it was lights out." McKenna finished the 2002 season with a 1.61 ERA and 18 strikeouts in 22 innings. His six saves helped the Raptors finish 32-10 and shatter nearly every school baseball record. McKenna shook off a bad start in his senior year to finish strong, allowing only one earned run in his final nine innings. He completed his career as the Raptors' all-time career save leader. "At Rutgers-Camden, baseball was fun again," says McKenna.

With college ball behind him, McKenna took his modest signing bonus and headed for Helena, Montana, where the Brewers had assigned him to a league for players beginning their professional careers. On the field, he came out of the bullpen to strike out 21 batters in 17 innings and improved his velocity and control

by developing a more efficient motion. He also notched his first professional win, pitching three scoreless innings against an Anaheim Angels affiliate.

Off the field, the Northeastern collegian learned to adjust to teammates from all walks of life, from Latin-American immigrants with limited English skills to Midwestern farm boys straight out of high school. He also learned to survive on a salary of \$1,000 a month and to put his own interests first. During one running drill, McKenna let up so a teammate wouldn't be left in his dust. "Another teammate sidled up to me and told me that I was making a big mistake," McKenna recalls. "He said, 'You might think you're being a nice guy, but slacking off gets people released.'"



A major league influence on McKenna (above)—was older brother Tim (left), a Division I pitcher at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

During baseball's off-season, McKenna was back on the Camden campus, making up the credits he lost when he transferred from Kean to Rutgers. No longer eligible to play with the Raptors, McKenna concentrates on increasing his arm strength and honing his pitching mechanics. He's determined to develop a fast-ball that consistently pegs the meter at the high 90s, a commodity that might earn him a spot with a higher-level affiliate and, just maybe, a shot at the majors. "I know the odds are against me," he acknowledges, "but aren't the odds against everybody? If I've learned anything playing this game, it's that anything is possible."

Bill Glovin is senior editor of RUTGERS MAGAZINE.

League of Their Own



While Milwaukee Brewers prospect Dan McKenna, a former Scarlet Raptor at Rutgers-Camden, is the rare Division

III player to break into pro ball, graduates of the Division I program in New Brunswick consistently make the grade. Last season, 16 former Knights were signed with these teams.

Atlanta Braves

Bill McCarthy, outfield

Baltimore Orioles

Val Majewski, outfield

Chicago Cubs

Eric Brown, pitcher

Bob Brownlie, pitcher

Colorado Rockies

Buddy Gallagher, pitcher

Independent Teams

Jake Daubert, third base

Tom Crohan, pitcher

Alberto Vasquez, catcher

Kansas City Royals

David DeJesus, outfield

Darren Fenster, shortstop/
third base

Montreal Expos

Jason Bergmann, pitcher

Tim Sweeney, shortstop

Texas Rangers

Eric Young, second base

Pete Zoccolillo, outfield

The Nippon Ham Fighters, Japan

Angel Echevarria, outfield

Toronto Blue Jays

Vinny Esposito, third base