

TEAMMATES FOREVER: GRASSO NEVER TAKES THE FIELD ALONE

by Stan Hudy



HOMETOWN TALENT MIKE GRASSO IS ON THE HEELS OF MARCUS GILES, ATLANTA'S STARTING SECOND BASEMAN, PHOTO CREDIT: DANVILLE BRAVES

When 24-year-old Colonie native Mike Grasso trots out to second base for his Atlanta Braves minor league franchise, he always takes his older brother, Joe Grasso Jr. with him.

In 1992, 20-year-old Joe Jr. developed a viral infection that led to an enlarged heart and fatal heart attack. The sudden loss of the Grasso family's oldest son affected the entire family, but it was especially hard for 12-year-old Mike Grasso.

"He was everything to me," Grasso said.

"He was my best friend, my mentor, my role model. After losing him, I had to grow

up real quick and come to grips with what had happened."

Older brother Joe's teachings were not wasted on his little brother, Mike, who was a three-sport star at Bishop Maginn High School in basketball and baseball, in addition to playing football under his father and high school principal, Joe Grasso Sr.

A broken ankle in the first game of Mike's junior season ended football for the year, but Grasso recovered in time for the start of basketball. Fate intervened again as he re-injured the ankle playing AAU basketball and was forced to miss his junior year of baseball.

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With film footage of a full sophomore football season, a scrimmage and half a game, Grasso still managed to impress the coaches from the University at Rhode Island where he played two seasons of Division I-AA football.

Despite having continued success on the gridiron, Grasso still wanted to do more.

"I had always kept in the back of my mind playing another sport," Grasso said.

“As a freshman I wanted to play baseball too. The coach told me to concentrate on my academics, work out in the spring and when I came back as a sophomore, play baseball.”

Fate intervened again. While Grasso was uneasy about the football team’s direction, a coaching change made him assess his situation.

“I wasn’t homesick, but I wanted to play both sports,” Grasso said. *“It’s tough to transfer somewhere I wasn’t known.”* The University at Albany would become his new home.

“The football program was well established and baseball was headed in the right direction,” Grasso said. *“I wanted to get back to the area and do what I could to contribute to those programs.”*

Under NCAA transfer rules, Grasso had to sit out the fall football season for the Great Danes, but could compete immediately for the 2001 University at Albany baseball squad.

“Coach Mueller put me in the lineup and told me ‘you’re going to grow and learn on

the fly,” Grasso said. *“He gave me the opportunity to get the at-bats and get the innings I needed.”*

According to Grasso, he had played less than 40 games in the previous two and one-half years and his emergence back into baseball full-time paid off.

“I LISTENED TO THE DRAFT ON THE INTERNET... WE WENT NUTS”

“The experience, the at-bats, being injury-free and getting the innings, I saw an improvement in the spring and summer,” Grasso said.

Grasso faced another tough decision as the fall football season rolled around.

“As I continued to improve I decided to stick solely with baseball. It wasn’t an easy decision to give up something that you’ve played since you were nine years old,” Grasso said. *“I was getting some attention and the possibility existed of being drafted. I had to take every opportunity to succeed.”*

Grasso caught the eye of Atlanta Braves scout John Stewart, among others, and the University at Albany single season and career record-holder for triples was invited down to Richmond, VA for a workout.

“They liked what they saw and were up front with me and told me how everything was going to happen and they stuck to their word,” Grasso said.

Unlike the National Football League’s draft, the Major League Baseball’s draft is not



GRASSO IN THE LIVING ROOM OF HIS HOUSE, HOLDING A PICTURE OF THE DAYS HE PLAYED FOOTBALL



televised so Grasso had to rely on his PC.

"I listened to the [2002] draft on the Internet with my family and when they announced my name in the 11th round we went nuts," Grasso said.

He was chosen as the third baseball player drafted from the University at Albany. Other than Grasso, those were chosen from the classes of 1974 and 2001.

Grasso began his playing career in the Rookie-level Appalachian League with the Danville (Virginia) Braves. After an extended 2003 spring training stint at the Wide World of Sports Complex in Orlando, Florida, where he attempted to become a switch-hitter, Grasso moved up to the 2003 South Atlantic League Champions, the Rome (GA) Braves. Grasso said he could start this year with A-level Rome or move up to the Advanced A-level Carolina League Myrtle Beach (S.C.) Pelicans.

"My plan is to play everyday and get as many at-bats and show what I can do for a full season," Grasso said. *"I can put up numbers and continue to show them that I can steal the bag and continue to improve. If I put up the numbers, everything else will take care of itself."*

Grasso credits Joe Jr. with his success on the athletic fields.

"I use him as motivation to achieve everything I can, he was just that type of



Mike Grasso


Hometown: Colonie, NY
 2B - Bats/Throws: R/R
 6'0", 180 lbs.
 DOB: 12/25/79

PHOTO CREDIT:
 ROME BRAVES

individual," Grasso said. *"He was loving and caring about his family and friends. He was a hard worker and put his best effort in everything he did. He passed that on to me when he passed away. I have a lot of his spirit in me."*

With each step he takes toward the majors, his older brother, Joe Jr. will be with him.

"Every inning that I go out on the field, after infield warm-ups I flip the ball to the shortstop and in the dirt I write the initials, JG Jr.," Grasso said. *"It shows that he's with me and playing right alongside me."*



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