

Keller accepts offer from No.1 Tar Heels

Written by Jim Ecker

Thursday, 21 February 2013 20:59 -

Mitch Keller was sitting in the baseball office at the University of North Carolina this past December when Coach Mike Fox offered him a spot on the team.

You could have knocked the Xavier High School junior over with a changeup.

"Wow!," Keller said Wednesday. "That was the first thought that came into my head when I was sitting in there.

"Wow, I'll actually have a chance to play here. It felt so right. Everything is awesome."

Keller, 16, accepted the offer this past Sunday while visiting North Carolina again. He watched the Tar Heels open the season with two victories over Seton Hall last weekend and came home as a future member of the team.

North Carolina is currently No.1 in the country and has made five trips to the College World Series since 2006 under Coach Mike Fox.

A year ago, Keller was a skinny sophomore on the Xavier baseball team with an 83 mph fastball on a good day. Now he's a well-built 6-foot-3, 195-pound junior with an 89 mph heater and a ticket to join one of the top college baseball programs in the country.

"It hasn't really set in yet," he said. "I don't know how to describe it. It's definitely a thrill ride.

"It's really exciting to know they are one of the perceived powers and I have an opportunity to go there."

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Keller compiled a modest 4-0 record and 3.73 ERA for Xavier last season when the Saints finished 21-15. He struck out 37 batters in 35 2/3 innings and held opponents to a .226 batting average, but those numbers do not scream "North Carolina Tar Heels!"

Keller caught North Carolina's attention while pitching in Perfect Game events. He attended the Perfect Game National Underclass Showcase at the Metrodome in Minneapolis last June, then pitched for the Iowa Select Team at two Perfect Game events in Florida this past October.

"If it wasn't for Perfect Game, none of this would have even happened," he remarked.

Keller saluted Steve James, his pitching coach at Perfect Game in southwest Cedar Rapids, for helping him develop into a Division I recruit. Keller also had offers from Indiana State, Missouri and Liberty and had been contacted by other schools.

He took two months to think about North Carolina's offer before accepting. "I had a lot of thinking to do and waiting to see who else was going to contact and offer and all that," he said.

All along, his heart was in Chapel Hill, N.C. "It's a beautiful campus," he said.

Keller throws a fastball, curveball and changeup and recently began working on a slider. He's gained about 15 pounds since the end of the 2012 high school season through hard work in the weight room and is looking forward to pitching for the Saints this season.

North Carolina fashioned a 46-16 record last year and went 22-8 in the Atlantic Coast Conference. The Tar Heels play at Boshamer Stadium, which seats 4,100 fans and looks like a well-manicured minor league ballpark.

"I'm really excited," said Keller. "I love that place. They are top-notch."

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Keller's older brother, Jon, pitched at the University of Nebraska and has transferred to the University of Tampa this season.