

SPORTS AND LEISURE

Georgetown teams earn OMHA titles

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Hill eager to take the mound for Nationals

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Staff Writer

Major League Baseball's 2007 regular season starts up this Sunday night and Georgetown's Shawn Hill has by all accounts enjoyed an excellent spring training, earning the second spot in the starting pitching rotation for the rebuilding Washington Nationals.

The 25-year-old Hill was scheduled to pitch yesterday (Thursday) afternoon against the Baltimore Orioles in Norfolk, Va. in his final pre-season appearance and will take to the mound Tuesday night at Washington's RFK Stadium against the Florida Marlins— his first big league season start since pitching against the Blue Jays in Toronto last June.

Hill, who had reconstructive right elbow surgery in 2005, posted a 1-3 record and threw nearly 100 innings through the first half of the 2006 campaign before tightness in his pitching arm in the Toronto game caused the Nationals to shut down his season. Now rested and rehabbed, Hill turned in some impressive performances this spring in Florida, even though he said he isn't fully confident in the command of his pitches and still feels some tightness in his forearm. He didn't appear tentative in a recent spring training start against a powerful New York Mets' offence, however, giving up a one run and no walks in four innings of work.

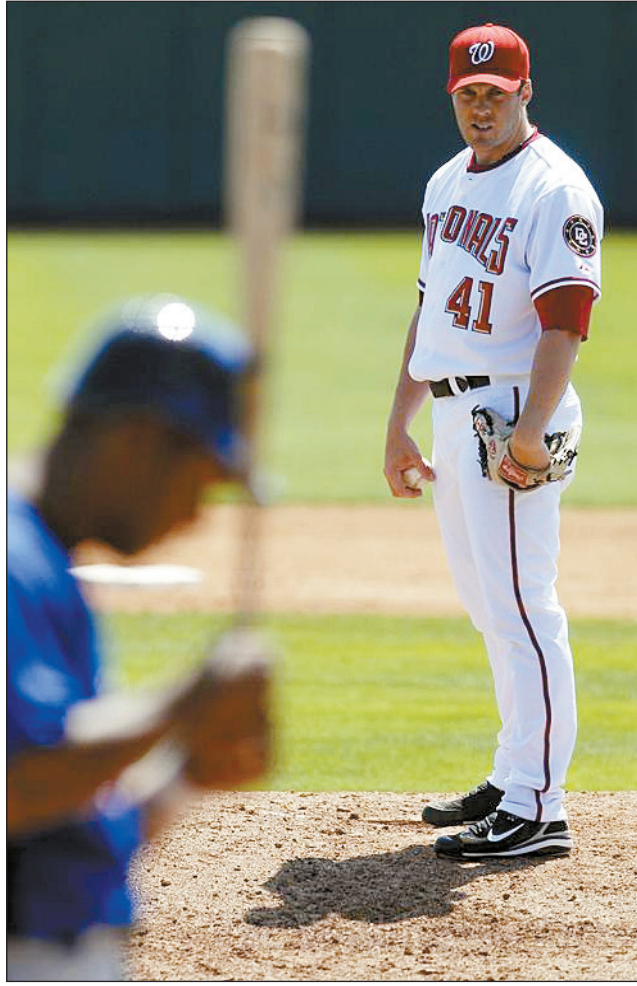
"I thought he did a tremendous job. I hope he can get those results during the season without having his command," said new Washington manager Manny Acta. "He gave us a real chance to stay in the game against the great lineup the Mets have. We never had any doubts about Shawn Hill. It's just a matter of staying healthy."

Hill hasn't had an injury-free season since 2003 when the Nationals were known as the Montreal Expos, but he's confident about this year's situation in Washington. Veteran starting pitchers left during the off-season, as did all-star centrefielder Alfonso Soriano and manager Frank Robinson. New ownership is in place and the team is moving into a new stadium next spring with a low-budget, youngster-driven roster makeup, similar to the successful Marlins' team of last year.

"Everyone's looking at our starting rotation as the biggest question mark on the team and it's one of those things where almost all the spots were open to be won," said Hill this week from his winter home in Melbourne, Fla., near the Nationals' spring training home in Viera.

"And the way things have gone so far in camp, I couldn't have asked for anything better. With my arm, it's just a matter of staying on top of it between starts and managing it. My rehab is co-ordinated by the Nationals and one of the trainers has made it his goal to keep me healthy all year. If there was one positive thing is that I was up (in the Majors) when (the injury) happened and not in the minors."

Acta, who was a third-base coach with the Expos in 2004



Georgetown native Shawn Hill has locked up the second spot in the Washington Nationals' starting pitching rotation after shutting down his 2006 season early because of an arm injury.

Photos courtesy Hill family

when he saw Hill strike out St. Louis Cardinals' slugger Albert Pujols looking, brings a different attitude to a D.C. team that has played in the cavernous football configuration at RFK under the moody Robinson.

"It was great to have the new ownership in place now before we move into the new park and Manny just brings a different outlook, more upbeat," added Hill, a 6-foot-2, 185-pound righthander. "Frank could be grumpy— not all the time— and he was used to managing teams that had a lot of veterans on it. Don't get me wrong, Frank wasn't a bad person, but I think Manny's the kind of guy who would probably work better with a young team like us. We've got a core group of mostly young guys who are easy-going and are just excited to play the game. That's the one thing I noticed

about the Marlins last year. They looked like they were having a lot of fun and when you're winning, that's the best time to be playing baseball."

The 2006 season was far from a write-off for Hill, even though he started the year with Washington's AAA affiliate in New Orleans, just months after Hurricane Katrina hit. He still lists his experience at the 2004 Olympics in Greece in which he played a key role in Canada's run to the semifinals as his career highlight, but starting games at Fenway Park in Boston and taking the hill against the vaunted New York Yankees last June still make the top-10 list. His lone victory of the season was a seven-inning, two-hit shutout effort against the Philadelphia Phillies.

"Pitching at Fenway was really neat. Just the history of the place is what gets you, because the building itself is pretty beat up," said Hill, who married longtime girlfriend Ashley in the Orlando area this past October. "When we played the Yankees at RFK there were 45,000 fans there and 20 to 25,000 of them were New York fans. It was just really loud and there was so much energy in the stadium. Pitching in Toronto was cool too because my grandparents and a lot of family and friends got to see me, even though we lost the game and I had to leave with my arm. I think there was about 80 or 100 people that signed for a pass to get in."

The Nationals are slated to return to Toronto June 15-17 for a weekend series with the Blue Jays and Hill joked that the ticket requests are bound to start soon, but most of his focus is currently on Tuesday night.

"For one, I have to pitch well enough to still be in the Majors (in June) and the second thing is that my turn in the rotation has to come up," said Hill, originally taken by San Diego in the 33rd round of the 1999 draft. "My sister (April) charted it on our schedule by looking at every fifth game and she says I'll be pitching, but we'll see."



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