

SPORTS AND LEISURE

Aikido Sensei visits local club

Page 3



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Eight local players to play for Ontario

Page 6



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Nats' Hill enjoys brief stop at home

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Staff Writer

Students at St. Catherine of Alexandria elementary school in Georgetown South had a Major League welcome in store when Washington Nationals' starting pitcher Shawn Hill returned to his hometown during his team's visit to Toronto to face the Blue Jays.

A full assembly was held in the school's gymnasium and groups of students performed elaborate cheerleader-type routines saluting the 26-year-old Hill and the Nationals.

"It was a pleasant surprise because we don't get this sort of thing in Washington," Hill said of the visit to the school, which his seven-year-old niece Ashley attends. "Especially with the road trip we've been on, coming up here to see this and spend time with my family at home is great."

Hill signed autographs and answered questions, recalling his youth baseball years as a shortstop with the Georgetown Eagles and how his first pro at-bat in double-A was a grand slam home run.

He also explained his reason for being unable to pitch against the Blue Jays that weekend; an injured left shoulder and sore throwing elbow was going to need a couple of more weeks of rest and strengthening in order for him to return to the starting rotation. On the disabled list since May 11, Hill was allowed to begin soft-tossing when he arrived in Toronto and hopes to be back after the All-Star break in July.

"The whole reason it happened was because of me being dumb on the basepaths and that's what makes it even more frustrating," he said of the incident in April when he originally injured his left shoulder, which began to affect his pitching motion and led to soreness in his right elbow.

"If I had just let myself get tagged out, I'm probably still pitching now and doing fine. I'm just antsy right now from sitting around doing nothing for so long. It seems like such a little thing to play catch and it's something you take for granted until you get hurt. Hopefully we'll get things cranked up pretty soon."

Hill had emerged as Washington's ace in its starting staff before going on the DL, posting a 3-3 record and 2.70 earned run average over eight starts. Even in those losses, Hill didn't get much run support for a Nationals' lineup that was expected to finish at or close to the bottom of the National League. However, since his injury, Washington has been playing better, winning five of six games heading into the Toronto series.

"There's a running joke going on with our guys about me," Hill added. "Since the game I got pulled we're eight games over .500 and the offence has been great. We're getting to a point now where we're not only better than a lot of other teams but we're creeping back into (the NL East) division race. It's not like we're expecting to win the World Series or anything, but we're in it and there's definitely a different attitude in the room this year."

What frustrates Hill most about his current injury absence from the team is that his reconstructed right elbow has held up well after surgery in 2005. Full recovery from what's known as 'Tommy John' surgery takes at least a year or two, but a pitcher can actually have a stronger arm afterward because of the ligament-replacement procedure. John underwent the operation in 1974 when most thought his career was over, but the L.A. Dodger great went on to win 164 more games and pitched in the majors until 1989.

See HILL, pg. 4

Washington Nationals' pitcher Shawn Hill of Georgetown dropped by St. Catherine of Alexandria elementary school to meet with students last week during a road trip through Toronto. He picked Mattia Tafaro's name out of a box in a draw for six tickets in the Hill family's luxury box in the Rogers Centre that was rented for the Father's Day game.

Photo by Eamonn Maher

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