



The following story was a feature that appeared in the Red Wings' 2008 yearbook. Later, it was featured on www.RedWingsBaseball.com after Brian Duensing was selected to go to the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing.

Duensing Red Wings' "Golden Boy"

By: Mike Spier

You could call Rochester Red Wings pitcher Brian Duensing a "golden boy."

In November 2007, Duensing started in the most important game of his life. It was the IBAF World Cup championship game in which Team USA defeated Cuba, 6-3. The win ended a 33-year drought for Team USA and ended Cuba's 25-year supremacy of the gold medal.

"I knew Cuba was good but I didn't exactly know how unbelievably good they were in that game," said Duensing, who pitched a scoreless game until he yielded a two-out, two-run single in the fifth inning. "They waited until the last minute to tell us who the starter would be and I didn't even realize it until the night before when [USA and former Red Wings manager] Davey Johnson told me I had the ball."

The story of how Duensing won the gold medal that vaulted Team USA into the 2008 Beijing Olympics is important, but how he got there is just as interesting.

While with the University of Nebraska, Duensing suffered an elbow injury on his throwing arm in March 2003, while pitching in 34-degree weather against Wisconsin-Milwaukee. An MRI test showed that he had partially torn his left UCL but he decided not to have surgery. A year later, in March of 2004, he had to have Tommy John surgery because the ligament deteriorated. At the age of 21, his baseball career could've been over.

"When they said I had to have Tommy John surgery I was nervous then because I knew that if it didn't work that I was done playing," Duensing said. "I really didn't feel like I was ready to stop playing just then."

It certainly didn't stop him.

Duensing was 8-0 with a 3.00 ERA in his senior season for Nebraska, was drafted by the Minnesota Twins in the third round of the 2005 draft and has climbed through five levels of their minor league system in just two years. In 2007, he spent time with both the New Britain Rock Cats and the Wings. With Rochester, he posted an 11-5 mark with a 3.05 ERA, the third-best in the International League.

At the end of the season, Duensing expected to join some of his teammates in the Arizona Fall League (AFL) but instead he got a different type of call.

"I got a call from [Twins minor league coordinator] Jim Rantz and it really kind of scared me because I thought I was in trouble and I started to panic," he said. "When he told me the U.S. wanted me to play for them I was ecstatic. I never would've thought I would be playing for Team USA."

In preparation for World Cup, USA played six exhibition games against AFL teams. Duensing pitched in two games; one was a relief appearance against the Phoenix Desert Dogs, the Twins' AFL affiliate.

Duensing recalled pitching against Wings teammate Matt Macri in that game.

"I specifically remember throwing him two fastballs out and he pulled the second one [near the shortstop]," he said. "I just started laughing because I told him, 'You're not supposed to pull that ball.' He said that he had been doing that all off-season."

"The whole experience of that game was fun and I was just glad I got to see all those guys [from the Red Wings.]"

After its exhibition games in Arizona, Team USA went to Taiwan for the World Cup. His first start of the tournament was a five-inning gem against Japan, the eventual Bronze medallists, in which he allowed just three hits and won his first game. Eight days later, Duensing helped win the decisive game against Cuba to get the gold medal.

But Duensing might not get a chance to end what he helped begin. When Team USA chooses its Olympic team this summer, Duensing will not be eligible if he's on the Twins' 25-man roster. Despite that, he's enjoyed the run, even if it does come to an end.

"There's not many people who can say they've won a gold medal for Team USA so I feel incredibly fortunate," he said. "I feel like I really accomplished something that I can be proud of and I just hope that I can go to the Olympics as well."