

## ► College baseball

# Orlando's baseball odyssey proved fruitful

By MIKE GRENIER  
STAFF WRITER

BEVERLY — If baseball player Joe Orlando ever met Obi-Wan Kenobi and heard the famous line from the final installment of the original "Star Wars" trilogy, "Return of the Jedi," he'd probably be tempted to mutter something under his breath.

"May 'The Force' be with you," Obi-Wan would say to Orlando.

"Oh, really?" Orlando might reply. "What planet are you on, buddy?"

Orlando is a 22-year-old catcher/short-stop/outfielder from Gloucester who flourished in his last two years at Endicott College, hitting .344 as a junior and .309 this past season (despite a hamstring injury that forced him to miss 11 games).

On the surface, it was a sweet ride. The truth is that it was a long, zig-zagging and occasionally discouraging path-finding mission for Orlando over the last eight years.

The Force wasn't with him at St. John's Prep, where a once promising career was derailed by two broken vertebrae in his back. The Force was also missing when he was at Virginia Wesleyan College, a Division 3 powerhouse where Orlando couldn't even get an at bat.

At times, The Force even deserted his attitude. He was so fed up with the way things were going early in his college career that Orlando strongly considered giving up the game he loved.

But then he had a sit-down with his father, Joe, an attorney in Gloucester. That conversation turned out to be one of the best reality checks Orlando ever had — and lit a fire under him at a crucial time.

"I was just miserable after what happened at Virginia Wesleyan," said Orlando. "It's a great baseball school and I'd been recruited to play down there, but in my first year I ran into a returning all-conference catcher who was a senior. There were also two freshmen catchers who were bigger, stronger and faster than I was. It was like, 'What am I doing here?' I was on their roster, but my job was to be the bullpen catcher.

"When I came home, it reached a point



Courtesy photo

Nearly quitting college baseball after a difficult freshman year at Virginia Wesleyan, Joe Orlando found a new lease on his baseball life under coach Larry Hiser at Endicott College. Orlando hit .344 as a junior and .309 in his season season despite a hamstring injury that led to 11 missed games.

where I didn't want to play anymore. I was so close to quitting, you wouldn't believe it. But my father said to me, 'Do you still love baseball? You've always played the game, so keep playing it.' It really hit home, because my father went to Boston College and didn't even have the opportunity to play ball because he worked a couple of jobs just to get through school.

"I really have to thank my father for what he did to get me back into it," Orlando added. "I felt like the luckiest kid in America."

## "A great move for me"

It wouldn't be easy to start from scratch at another school, but Orlando had already done it successfully in high school, transferring from St. John's Prep to Gloucester High for his senior year.

He justified his high hopes at St. John's Prep by hitting close to .600 for the freshman team, as he recalled. He was a gung-ho football player for the Eagles, too, before breaking the two bones in his back. He can't pinpoint when or how the injury occurred, but he was in a back brace for six months.

The bottom line was that Orlando fell way behind the athletes who were making a natural progression in their sports at the Prep.

"There's always great competition for playing time at the Prep," said Orlando. "They get the cream of the crop. By the time I was a junior, I was healthy enough to play, but I had no groove on offense. I couldn't show the baseball coach (Pat Yanchus) what I could do, and he couldn't wait for me because he already had great players.

"When I was there, Matt Antonelli (who

eventually became a San Diego Padres first round draft choice) was the shortstop and Larry Day (who went on to play at UConn and was drafted by the Yankees) was the catcher. I loved my time at the Prep; they have the best athletes and the best academics, and I was lucky to go there. But I just wanted to enjoy my senior year. I was healthy to play baseball again and I didn't want to spend the season on the bench. Going to Gloucester was a great move for me."

He hit .340 for the Fishermen in what was his only shot at varsity baseball, leading to the interest from Virginia Wesleyan. When he discovered he would never be a good fit there and was searching for another school, he had a chance encounter with Endicott head coach Larry Hiser when both of them played a summer

## MEET JOE ORLANDO

Age: 22

Height, weight: 6-1, 200

Year in school: Endicott College Class of 2007 graduate

Hitting stats: .344 as a junior, .309 as a senior

Schools attended: St. John's Prep, Gloucester High, Virginia Wesleyan, Endicott

Pro tryouts: Atlanta Braves, Cleveland Indians

Quotable: "It's been quite a journey. If you saw some of the routes I've taken, you'd think I was Magellan."

league game for the Manchester Mariners of the Inter-Town League. Hiser was the pitcher and Orlando was his catcher.

"We got our signals crossed on a pitch, and Joe still handled it pretty easily," said Hiser. "I was really impressed with his hands. He told me he wanted to keep playing college ball, but we didn't talk too much about it because he still needed to get his release at Virginia Wesleyan."

## Grateful for a chance

To Hiser, the talented Orlando is a classic example of a kid who fell through the cracks. He had to wait a long time for an opportunity and wasn't bitter over the circumstances. Once he seized the right field job at Endicott, he wasn't going to let go and he eventually became an all-conference player in the Commonwealth Coast Conference.

"Joe showed a lot of patience," said Hiser. "His sophomore year, we were in the ECAC tournament and something happened to one of our guys, so Joe jumped right in there and played really well. He proved our evaluation wrong that year (2005) and went on two have big years for us. He distinguished himself as a hitter and emerged into a leadership role for us."

Orlando is grateful that Hiser left the door open for him and that he was able to develop into a productive player.

"If you told me at the beginning of my career that I would be an all-conference player, I would've laughed at you," he said.