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Redmen Steal No-Hitter From Yale

By Dave Rosner

New Haven—The shame of it, Ron Darling decided, was not so much that he had lost the game, but rather how he had lost it. For 11 innings yesterday, the Yale righthander had been near-perfect, recording the longest no-hitter in the 35-year history of the NCAA baseball tournament. "And," he said, forcing a smile, "I felt I could have gone on like that forever."

Even after St. John's Steve Scafa broke up the no-hitter by lining an inside fastball to leftfield leading off the 12th, the Redmen did not doubt that. The feeling in the St. John's dugout was unchanged: If the Redmen wanted the opening game of the Northeast Regional, they would have to steal it. Literally. "We weren't about to wait for the hits today," said Howie Gershberg, the pitching coach who was elevated to head coach for the double-elimination tournament when Joe Russo contracted pneumonia three days ago. "We had to make something happen."

Scafa, the nation's third-leading base-stealer, did just that, stealing second and third. And when speedy Tom Covino pinch-ran for Dan Giordano, who had reached first on an infield error, Scafa sensed he would soon be homeward bound. Covino intentionally got hung up between first and second, and the catcher's throw went through to second base because Darling's hard slider had left him out of position for the prescribed cutoff. Problem was, Scafa, inching 15 feet down the line, hesitated as the ball bounced in front of second baseman Jeremy Spear ("I got very mad at myself for that," Scafa said.) But when Spear threw to first, Scafa put his head down and ran, eluding the tag to give St. John's its 1-0 margin of victory on his 38th steal in 43 tries.

Darling needed only one more strike to put the appropriate finishing touches on his masterpiece with a strikeout, his third of the inning and 16th of the game. But not even another standing ovation from the 2,500 fans at Yale Field would make him feel like someone who had just pitched the sixth no-hitter ever in an NCAA tournament. "Emotionally," he said, "I feel like I just pitched 12 innings—and lost."

"Right now," said St. John's junior Frank Viola, who pitched 11 innings and won, "I wouldn't want to be in his shoes. To pitch his best game ever . . . and lose . . . and on a fluke . . ."

Viola would need one of his best games to win, allowing seven hits and striking out eight. And reliever Eric Stampfl would need one of his best innings to save it, performing his best Ron Darling imitation by striking out

the first two batters and inducing a game-ending foul pop to first baseman Karl Komyathy. "As long as we were pitching shutout ball," Gershberg said, "I wasn't worried."

It certainly helped that Viola was almost as effective with his curveball as Darling was with his 95-MPH fastball. "He had us stymied all the way," said Darling, a sure first-round selection in next month's amateur draft,

for his bat (.330) as well as his arm. "He held us in check just as much as I held them."

Well, not quite. Viola, although he "felt in total control," left 12 runners on base, including three in the 11th, when Scafa fielded a tricky grounder to second to end the threat. "Today, giving up seven hits looks awful in the book," joked the lefthander from East Meadow, who raised his record to 10-0 while lowering his ERA to 0.87, "but I didn't give up any runs, and that's what counts."

From the fourth inning on, Gershberg repeatedly had told the Redmen that a shutout was their only chance. Darling, after all, was so overpowering that no one would even hit the ball out of the infield until the seventh inning. "I've had a better heater and a better slider," Darling said, "but I've never had better location."

Which certainly impressed the mass of scouts, five alone from the Seattle Mariners, who hold the top draft pick. Of course, the 6-3 junior, who like Viola plans to turn professional if the offer is right, is accustomed to that; he has been everybody's Darling since long before Sports Illustrated devoted six pages to him two months ago. "It's the same people, in the same polyester suits, in the same hats that I've seen 40 days in a row," he said, shrugging.

And besides, Darling, now 9-4, had more he wanted to show them. "I could come back and throw tomorrow in relief," he said. "And I might have to."

St. John's (32-2) will play Maine (30-11), a 10-2 winner over Central Michigan, today at 3 PM. Yale (24-13-1) meets Central Michigan (36-12) in the losers' game at noon.



AP Photo

Yale's Ron Darling steals second, eluding tag by St. John's Brian Miller (6)