My Heart Belongs to Baseball

JEFF BAGWELL ’89 A TEAM PLAYER ON AND OFF THE FIELD

BY MICHAEL REARDON

At the 2004 Hot Stove Dinner here on campus, Jeff Bagwell ’89 said, “I wouldn’t be where I am today without the University of Hartford.”

At that time, Bagwell was near the end of an outstanding career with the Houston Astros that some day may land him in the National Baseball Hall of Fame. In December 2006 the 38-year-old first baseman acknowledged that his arthritic right shoulder had forced him to retire after 16 seasons with the Astros.

“I wish I could continue to play and try to win a World Series in Houston,” Bagwell said in making the announcement. “But I’m not physically able to do that anymore. This is a day that I knew was coming.”

One of Houston’s best-loved athletes, Bagwell’s enormous popularity with the fans helped triple attendance in the 1990s, and his playing helped lift the team from mediocrity to the World Series.

Astros owner Drayton McLane acknowledged Bagwell’s importance, saying, “Jeff has really been the heartbeat of the Houston Astros.” Bagwell will continue with the Astros organization in the player development department, working with hitters and making public appearances.

A third baseman at the University of Hartford from 1987 to 1989 for former major leaguer Bill Denehy, Bagwell set a record all-time batting average (.413) that still stands today. His batting average also set a New England collegiate record. In 1988 and 1989, Bagwell was an American Baseball Coaches Association (ABCA) All-American and Eastern College Athletic Conference New England Player of the Year. In 1997 he was inducted into the University of Hartford Alumni Athletics Hall of Fame.

A Red Sox fan, Bagwell saw his childhood dream come true when Boston drafted him in the fourth round in 1989. He played two seasons in the Red Sox farm system before being traded to the Astros in August 1990 for relief pitcher Larry Anderson.

Although Anderson played a significant role in Boston’s 1990 drive to the playoffs, Red Sox fans have lamented that trade ever since. In 1991, Bagwell burst on the scene, earning National League Rookie of the Year honors. In 1994 he was voted National League Most Valuable Player.

Between 1996 and 2001, Bagwell became only the fourth player in baseball history to post six straight, 30-home-run, 100 RBI seasons. The others in this group include Hall of Famers Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and Jimmie Foxx. Bagwell also joined immortals Joe DiMaggio, Hank Aaron, Frank Robinson, and Ted Williams as the only players to hit 300 homers, knock in 1,000 RBIs, and score 1,000 runs in their first 10 years of major league baseball. Bagwell walked away as the team’s all-time leader in home runs (449), runs batted in (1,529), and extra-base hits (969). He also finished with a .297 career batting average.

“Jeff Bagwell is an outstanding model for University of Hartford student-athletes,” said President Walter Harrison in commenting on Bagwell’s retirement. “As a player, he was hard-working, self-effacing, and humble. He never forgot the most gratifying part of playing a team sport is being a member of that team. And he has brought that same spirit to the University, making a very generous gift to the Home Field Advantage project that helped us reach our goal. When we most needed him, he was there.”
A Fabulous Foursome

MEN’S GOLF TEAM WELCOMES OUTSTANDING FRESHMEN

Most college golf teams look to their seasoned upperclassmen for leadership and stellar performance, but the Hawks’ men’s golf team now has an additional weapon. Actually, four of them.

Following an outstanding recruiting season, four freshmen joined the team and are already making a big difference. In fact, two of the four, Nick MacDonald from Lebanon, N.H., and Maki Kobayashi of Newington, Conn., were top performers in the fall.

“Nick leads the country in rounds played and is sixth in the country in birdies,” Head coach Bill Poutre ’88 said. “That’s pretty impressive for a freshman.” Poutre called Kobayashi, who was the 2006 Connecticut High School Player of the Year, “the best player to come out of Connecticut since Tim Petrovic.” (Petrovic ’88, a Hawks Hall of Famer, joined the PGA Tour in 2002.)

The other freshmen, Nick Pokora of Agawam, Mass., and Zack Ungvarsky of Wilmington, Mass., also played important roles on the team. Pokora played 17 rounds for the Hawks last fall, three of which he finished under par. Ungvarsky, the nephew of pro golfer Joey Sindelar, improved greatly over the course of the fall season, and will “have more of a role for us in the spring,” said Poutre.

The men’s golf team welcomed freshmen (l-r) Maki Kobayashi, Zack Ungvarsky, Nick Pokora, and Nick MacDonald, who all contributed to the team’s successful season in fall 2006. The outlook for the spring is even better.

2007 Basketball Wrap-up

BOTH MEN’S AND WOMEN’S TEAMS PUT THE EMPHASIS ON TEAMWORK

Expectations were high again this year for the women’s basketball team. America East Coach of the Year Jennifer Rizzotti admits she worried that the pressure would have a negative impact on her young team, which had three sophomores in the starting line-up.

“We had growing pains,” Rizzotti said. “The wins weren’t coming as easily as they had in the past.”

Early in the season, the team’s resiliency was tested. Outstanding sophomore forward Erica Beverly was benched for the season due to a knee injury, which Rizzotti called “a big loss for us.” But the team was anchored by senior guard Ikea Witt and junior forward/center Danielle Hood, both 1,000-point scorers and America East First-Team All-Conference selections.

To top off the season, freshman forward/center Diana Delva dazzled with her play off the bench. Delva not only was named to the America East All-Rookie Team, but she also was a Third-Team All-Conference honoree.

When all was said and done, the Hawks had amassed 25 wins for the second straight year, including a 15-game winning streak near the end of the season that carried the team to its second consecutive America East regular-season title.

The Hawks made their third straight postseason appearance, defeating Bucknell in the opening round of the WNIT before dropping a second-round game at South Carolina.

While the women’s basketball team was completing its third straight 20-win season, first-year coach Dan Leibovitz began the work of rebuilding the men’s basketball program.

The men’s team got off to an inspired start, taking nationally ranked Georgetown down to the wire in the season opener. By early January the Hawks had posted a 9-7 record. The team gained a reputation for stirring comebacks, none better than a 49-47 victory over Stony Brook in the first round of the America East Tournament.

“I thought we would have ups and downs this year,” Leibovitz said. “The injury to [junior guard] Rich Baker was the thing that hurt us the most.”

While trying to win in the present, Leibovitz is also building for the future.

“The best thing we accomplished this year was to create an identity for our program,” Leibovitz said. “Our guys put their egos aside and tried to win games.”