

Where are they now: Kip Bouknight, Part I

Former South Carolina standout Kip Bouknight has been on the doorstep of Major League Baseball for two years, now he is with the Pittsburgh Pirates and feels this spring training will be the one when his dreams are realized. Bouknight's list of accolades as a Gamecock are too long to name. Most notably, he is a three-time All-SEC performer, a two-time All-American and 2000's Golden Spikes Award recipient. That same year he won five out of six National Player of the Year Awards and was named the SEC's Male Athlete of the Year. His 45 wins in a career tied Jeff Brantley's SEC record. He spent a great deal of time with DP this off-season and talked to us about USC, why he returned for his senior year and professional baseball. Enjoy Bouknight's stories in our two-part interview.

DP-What are some of your nicknames?KB-Bookie, people have trouble pronouncing my last name! DP-What is your greatest high school thrill?KB-Throwing a no-hitter against Union in the playoffs during my senior year. DP-You come from a tradition-rich high school program at Brookland-Cayce and a good coach in Charlie Assey. How did that better prepare you for college baseball?KB-Good competition breeds success. We played great teams and were well-coached. We played in the IP Classic and you are put up against some great players. It made the adjustment to Division I baseball smoother. DP-What is your greatest thrill, or two, beyond high school?KB-That whole junior season at Carolina. There were so many fun days that year. Personally, it was beating Clemson my senior year. I came in from the bullpen, they had men on base and we got out of a big jam against their big hitters that year. DP-Who are the toughest hitters you faced in high school and in college?KB-In high school, Reggie Taylor was a great hitter. Corey Jenkins, had enormous power but I fared pretty well against him. College, Monte Lee was pretty tough for me, he got me twice in the same game and then Jason Pomar later in that game. Brad Hawpe and Brad Wilkerson too. DP-Who is the biggest character that you have played with?KB-I'd have to say Trey Dyson, he was crazy. DP-Your freshman season was spectacular, did you think you could have that kind of year?KB-I'm sure it surprised a lot of people. I thought I could contribute and I knew I could pitch better than I did in the fall. In the fall I was trying to be a two-way player and did not perform well on the mound. Following my fall meeting with Coach Tanner, I realized I might be the last pitcher on the staff to get into a game. I was just trying to make the first travel squad to Charleston. I knew I could do it but at that point I would need an opportunity. I did the most with my early opportunities and things went from there. Once I began to have success, my expectations grew. Coach Meyers did a good job of keeping me focused on making my pitches and did not allow me to get caught up in what was going on. DP-Talk to us about that magical season of 2000 when you won the Golden Spikes Award:KB-What a remarkable year! We went 50-6 in the regular season and 25-5 in the SEC which is a record. I was part of a great pitching staff and we did a lot of things to make it a special season. That year did put my name on the map and exposed me to the media which has really helped me and, if I make it to the Major Leagues, should benefit me as well. I got to go to Las Vegas to accept the award, while there I got to talk with Greg Maddux and Harold Reynolds. It really didn't change me as a person. I didn't get too caught up in it all; it actually humbled me because I had a senior year to get ready for. DP-Take us through the decision-making process to return for your senior year:KB-Well, it came down to the final week before school began. The A's had actually called me in the 8th round and offered me a pre-draft deal for the 9th round and I declined. They ended up taking me in the 21st round and offered me twice the original amount. In the end, I really wanted to return to college and I knew it was in my best interest to go back. The money wasn't "life-changing" plus, if I make it to the Major Leagues, money won't matter anyway. I also new if I returned for my senior year it would cost me a lot of money. It was a tough decision. I ended up signing a year later for \$7,000. Do I have any regrets, absolutely not! I set myself up for life after baseball and I believe people in Columbia and Gamecock fans respected that. DP-Did you feel like you were under-drafted? Does that make you feel as though you have something to prove?KB-I really did feel like I was under-drafted and that does give you a little boost. I don't play to prove people wrong though. DP-What are your thoughts on helping build the USC program but not getting to play in Omaha?KB-It was bittersweet when they went the year after I left but I was happy as I could be. I still follow them and feel like a part of the team because I still workout with them in the off-season. I always follow them and pull for them. I remember what it was like to have Brett Jodie come back and work out with us, you're always a part of what goes on there. It was nice to be a small part of the success they have now. Coach Tanner's really instilled an attitude, now they expect to go to Omaha. I can recall playing number #10 Florida and that was a big deal. When I pitched and we won against #3 Alabama, he told us to get used to this, that it's what we're going to do here for a long time. We had to earn respect and realize that there is no good loss, just like losing by a touchdown doesn't impress anybody. DP-What was your most difficult adjustment (in and out of baseball) after high school?KB-Everything. Academics are tougher, time management. As a young man you have all the time in the world to do whatever you want and you have to figure out what to do with it on your own. Mom and dad aren't there to make you do what you need to do, you are on your own. DP-Sell the South Carolina baseball program to a high school player trying to decide where he wants to play:KB-I was always so comfortable with the coaching staff and still am. All of them do so much more for you than just coach you. It is a first-class operation, it's done the right way. If a player gets in trouble, it doesn't matter who you are, the punishment will be consistent and fair. Every player is given an opportunity in the fall. It doesn't matter what a player's scholarship amount is, I was on low money. With a new stadium coming it's going to be a great place to play. After my junior year I was trying to decide what I should do, sign or return. Coach Tanner had a lot to gain if I came back, it would have been real easy to advise me to decline the offer...but he didn't. He looked past the program and himself and gave me very good advice, he looked out for my best interests. I'll always be grateful for that. DP-What is the difference between high school to college ball? College ball to pro ball?KB-It's so much faster the higher you go. Even now when I go back to watch college games, younger players make the game look so much harder. Young players don't know how to make adjustments quickly. In pro ball you don't have three days to dwell on a game. You have to make adjustments from at bat to at bat. In the Big Leagues they make adjustments from pitch to pitch. I will say this, I've hit fungos to Todd Helton and he's petty good. Watching Justin Smoak (USC first baseman) over there, he might be as good

as I've ever seen. When you consider how many people start out playing this game, it's really amazing if you get the opportunity to play Division I ball, any level of college ball for that matter. Two percent of the players drafted make it to the Major Leagues, there are only 700-800 Major Leaguers in the whole world. People just don't realize how special those guys really are. Coming next week, Part II.