

Hall of Fame



COURTESY OF THE SAN DIEGO PADRES

Chris Denorfia drives a long ball during a game against the Rockies on July 30, 2011.

Charting his own path

Chris Denorfia took an unlikely route to the pros

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

Chances are pretty slim that Chris Denorfia will ever be called upon to chart a blue print for reaching the major leagues. In fact, the best advice he could probably give would be to study his own choices and do the complete opposite.

Denorfia shrugged off the spotlight of CIAC sports to focus on his academic life and prep school athletics. In the summers he chose to play with his varsity teammates on a start-up legion team instead of on Southington's established squad. Even in college, Denorfia took the long road, playing at a tiny, floundering program instead of a bigger scholarship team that could showcase his talents.

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It didn't matter. A low draft pick didn't scare him. A release from his minor league contract didn't faze him. Nothing seemed to stop the Southington native, and Denorfia seemed to will himself into the majors.

"I really thought that it didn't matter where I went," he said. "For some reason, I went to some good academic schools, but I always knew that I was going to be a baseball player. Maybe that worked to my advantage a little bit to have that sort of mentality, but I look back at it now as being pretty naïve with the odds stacked up against me like they were."

Denorfia played because he loved the game. He started out in the town's Little League, playing for his father on a field that was destined to become a dog park. He continued onto the Northern Little League's major league division and advanced into the senior leagues at Memorial Park. It seemed he was destined to play for the Blue Knights, but Denorfia had other plans. He chose academics and enrolled himself at Choate-Rosemary Hall in Wallingford.

"I think it says a lot about him," said Choate's former assistant coach Doug James, "I think he's a kid that had a plan from the beginning. He's clearly well-rounded. He's articulate, and he's certainly an honorable, terrific character. I think that he just knew that he didn't need to worry too much about local trophies or accolades. There

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“ ”
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San Diego sports writer

was something about him that always seemed to project far into the future."

Denorfia seemed to embrace the challenge like all of the rest—with hard work. High school coaches weren't impressed by his size, but he worked his way into the varsity lineup. He carved out a role as a speedy infielder by the end of his junior year, but that wasn't enough. In his senior season, Denorfia showcased his power, collecting 10 homeruns during Choate's shorter season.

"I do take pride in the fact that I wasn't given the five tools," said Denorfia. "I'm not a huge guy. I'm very average size-wise and strength-wise. I try to separate myself by just working hard and playing the game the right way and having fun."

Despite his strong senior season, college coaches didn't flock to the up-and-comer. Wesleyan University showed interest. Other schools showed interest. Once again, Denorfia had other plans. Wheaton baseball coach Eric Podbelski showed so much support throughout Denorfia's high school career that he followed him to a tiny division three school in Norton, MA that was an all-women's school just one decade earlier. It turned out to be a great decision.

"It was a young coach trying to create some sort of juggernaut at a small, division three school," said former Choate coach Tom Yankus. "He used to keep showing up at our games. I don't know how he found the time to coach his own team because he would show up at Taft or Hotchkiss School just to see Chris and let him know that he was still interested. That turned Chris' head. If that guy wanted me this much, maybe that's where I should go."

Over the next four years, Denorfia dominated the diamond at Wheaton College. He still holds school records for stolen bases (73), runs (182), hits (264), and at bats (655). He's still ranked in Wheaton's top 5 in 15 hitting categories. He was all-region three times and was named to the first team ABCA all-American roster in 2002.

"I was a very late bloomer," he said. "I wasn't really recruited out of high school at all, but my first really good year was probably my senior year in high school. I was lucky enough to go to a college program that had an unbelievable coaching staff, and it was such a good fit for me. I can't say enough for what they did for me there."

It was enough to earn him the attention of major league scouts, and Denorfia was drafted by the Cincinnati Reds in the 19th round of the 2002 amateur draft. Over the next seven seasons Denorfia would battle his way to short stints at the major league level, but he was released by Oakland after the 2009 season.

"It's a ride, and it's not as glamorous as it's made out to be," he said. "The minor leagues are a tough way to live your life. You're on the road all the time. You're traveling on buses. You're not making any money, and the odds are stacked heavily against you even if you've got your foot in the door. With that being said, it was a lot of fun. Had I not made it to the majors, I couldn't think of a better way to have spent my 20s"

Denorfia said that being cut by Oakland was a turning point. He had a few offers, but signed a minor league free agent contract with the Padres. He was slated for their triple-A roster, but Denorfia turned heads in spring training. He was called up in May and has



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Inside the Numbers

Choate-Rosemary Hall

- Graduated in 1998
- Received 5 Special Awards meant to praise and poke fun: Most Improved, Mumbler and Moaners, Best Range in Infield, Earned Stars on Defense, and Alibi Man.
- 1997—Batted .380 with 6 triples, 11 doubles, and 1 HR.
- 1998—Batted .450 with 10 homeruns.

Wheaton College

- ABCA 1st team All-American (2002).
- All-Region (1999, 2001, 2002).
- ECAC All-Star Award (2001, 2002).
- NEIBA All-Star Game (2002).
- Named to D3baseball.com's 2000's All-Decade team (2010).
- Varsity player (1999, 2000, 2001, 2002).
- Ranked in the top 5 in 15 hitting categories.
- Holds the school record for stolen bases (73), runs (182), hits (264), and at bats (655).
- Ranked 2nd in doubles (56), triples (12), batting average (.403), total bases (404), slugging percentage (.617), and sacrifice flies (15).
- Ranked 3rd in homeruns (20) and on-base pct (.450).
- Ranked 4th in games played (169), RBIs (168).
- Ranked 5th in intentional walks (2).

Major League Baseball

- Drafted by the Cincinnati Reds in the 19th round of the amateur draft (2002).
- Signed with the Reds on June 6, 2002.
- Made his major league debut on Sept. 7, 2005.
- Has played for 3 major league programs (Cincinnati, Oakland, San Diego).
- Finalist for 2011 MLB Players Alumni Association (MLBPAA) Heart and Hustle Award.

MINOR LEAGUE BATTING

Year	Aff	G	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	SB	BB	BA
2002	CIN	63	40	71	11	3	0	19	18	33	.327
2003	CIN	128	60	111	10	5	4	39	20	54	.236
2004	CIN	136	82	139	28	6	17	78	15	78	.284
2005	CIN	137	90	162	29	9	20	87	12	58	.317
2006	CIN	83	46	109	19	1	7	45	15	34	.349
2008	OAK	47	35	60	13	1	2	20	5	12	.303
2009	OAK	107	62	117	18	5	9	49	15	31	.271
2010	SDP	34	17	37	10	4	2	12	7	12	.306
2011	SDP	9	1	6	2	0	0	2	0	3	.261
9 Seasons		744	433	812	140	34	61	351	107	315	.293

MAJOR LEAGUE BATTING

Year	Team	G	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	SB	BB	BA
2005	CIN	18	8	10	3	0	1	2	1	6	.263
2006	CIN	49	14	30	6	0	1	7	1	11	.283
2008	OAK	29	10	18	3	0	1	9	2	6	.290
2009	OAK	4	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	.000
2010	SDP	99	41	77	15	2	9	36	8	27	.271
2011	SDP	111	38	85	13	2	5	19	11	28	.277
6 Seasons		310	112	220	40	4	17	74	23	78	.275

become a fixture in the outfield ever since. He's averaged .275 over six major league seasons with more than 200 major league games under his belt over the last two years.

Denorfia has carved himself a position as the ultimate team player. He shifts easily from starter to role player, from pinch hitter to leadoff. His fielding has been showcased on ESPN. His approach has been championed by fans. Nick Canepa, a San Diego sports writer, praised Denorfia in an article earlier this year.

"If you don't like Chris Denorfia, shame on you," Canepa said. "Then you don't like real baseball, real apple pie, and real pasta. Every team should have a Chris Denorfia. Every team should have 25 players with Chris Denorfia's attitude."

His former high school coach echoed the statement. "I remember watching him at spring training when he was with Cincinnati. He played against the Yankees, and I

watched everybody sort of jog out to their positions," said Yankus. "All of a sudden, out of the dugout, came this rocket. I don't think he cared about what everybody else was thinking. Who's this guy that's running out? This guy just works and works and works. Nothing's at half speed with him, or even 90 percent. Everything's 100 percent."

That's why officials jumped at the chance to select Denorfia to the Southington Sports Hall of Fame. Even though his career is just getting started, he's already established himself as a central figure in local sports lore. On Wednesday, Nov. 9, Denorfia will be inducted in a ceremony at the Aqua Turf.

"It's such an honor, and it's very humbling, he said. "I'm really thankful to whoever voted me in there. It's such an honor and a testament to the great coaches in Southington baseball—my dad especially—that started my career, pointed me in the right direction, and kept my head screwed on straight."