

Tourette's is no barrier for West Morris pitcher

Jane Havsy

Morristown Daily Record

USA TODAY NETWORK - NEW JERSEY

CLINTON — Sometimes, it's possible to see Connor Staine's brain working. It's a little easier if one knows what to watch for: the extra eye blink, yawn, or cleared throat, or an exaggerated shoulder shrug.

On the pitching mound, Staine might grab at his uniform belt, or stretch his arm suddenly.

Staine has Tourette syndrome, a neurological condition characterized by repetitive movements and vocalizations called tics. The 6-foot-3, 178-pound West Morris senior also has a wicked right arm, capable of two-seam fastballs inside and a strikeout-inducing change-up.

Staine expects to sign his National Letter of Intent on Wednesday, pledging to continue his baseball and academic career at Maryland. He is one of three Wolfpack baseball players planning to play at the next level, with shortstop Aidan Healy heading to Fur-

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West Morris senior Connor Staine, who has Tourette syndrome, will sign a National Letter of Intent with Maryland on Wednesday. COURTESY OF CLAUDIA HEALY

Staine

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man and centerfielder Nick Calabrese signing with Division II Angelo State in Texas.

The NLI is essentially a one-year contract in which a student promises to attend the school and remain academically eligible in exchange for athletics-based financial aid. The signing period opened Wednesday and continues until Aug. 1 for most sports, except football. Football players can ink their letters Dec. 19, 20 and 21.

"That little kid dream has stayed with me," said Staine, who said he wanted to be a baseball player in a kindergarten project.

"I'm not going to let go of that dream."

Staine verbally committed to Maryland pitching coach Corey Muscara in mid-September 2017, the start of his junior year. He had told the coaches about TS during a visit to campus, in response to a question about the biggest struggle in his life.

He already had it inked into his flesh: "Me vs. Me" in black on his left forearm. Staine also has "Relentless" tattooed inside his left upper arm in honor of West Morris alumna Cara Antonaccio, who beat brain and bone cancer. Staine got baseball stitching around the R, and the T and S are teal, the color of the Tourette Association of America.

"The coaches at Maryland think it creates more character to me, and they like how I've had to persevere through it," said Staine, 17, who has been part of a group chat with the rest of the recruiting class for a year.

"There were times when I was down, when I was younger, and even now, because it's painful. ... Would I trade it for anything? I used to say yes. But now that I'm older, I don't think I would. There's times when it's tough, and it keeps you awake or distracts you, I wouldn't change it because it's made me who I am today, and I love myself."

Me vs. Me

Staine was diagnosed with TS at age 9, because he blinked and cleared his throat frequently. Over the next few years, his tics multiplied. But as Staine got older, he stopped stifling himself quite so much.



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Staine allowed himself to tic during school, sometimes stepping out of class as the neurotransmitters flooded his body. He adopted an attitude, "My tics are my problem. They're not your problem. I'm going to do it, and if you're going to have an issue with it, it's your problem."

Staine "got his release" through athletics, as the single-minded focus caused the tics to dissipate.

But the adjustment to West Morris was difficult.

Staine shifts between his mother Cassandra Lord's home in Clinton and his father Kevin Staine's in Branchburg, neither of which is in the school district. The family chose to send Connor to West Morris, where his father teaches AP/IB Biology and is a former assistant football coach.

Coming into established friend groups was complicated enough, but Staine — already a hyped baseball player — was diagnosed with stress fractures in his back before he ever threw a pitch for the Wolfpack. Add in TS, and

Staine had to put up with a lot of drama at his new school.

"Kids telling me I was making it up" when he was unable to play only exacerbated the Tourette's symptoms.

"Going into sophomore year is when I got my first shot to impress people," said Staine, who was West Morris' Opening Day pitcher against Roxbury after being off the mound for 18 months.

"Junior year was the point to get myself out there, and feel confident in myself."

However, Kevin Staine has charted his son's tics six years, and noted the symptoms are more pronounced during times of increased emotion — like baseball season.

"Excitement and adrenaline and being nervous or scared, those types of emotions make it more agitated, and makes me do it more and more," said Connor Staine, who puts in earbuds and visualizes strikeouts or having good command of his off-speed pitches on bus rides or in the locker room before games.

"And when I myself zoned in for the game, I go from this amped-up, excited mode to, 'Let's get down to business.' I try to do as many (tics) as I can on the bus, or during the school day. It floods me out and gets my body tired, but I still have all the energy I need to go pitch a seven-inning game."

As a junior pitcher-third baseman, Staine went 7-2 with a 1.78 ERA as West Morris reached a NJSIAA North 2 Group III semifinal. He allowed 48 hits and 18 earned runs in 70½ innings, walking 16 and striking out 82.

Staine also led the Wolfpack with a .366 batting average, 10 doubles and a triple, 16 RBI, and 14 runs scored.

"He's the hardest-working kid I coached," said West Morris baseball coach Tom Reindel, who wants to manage Staine's innings this spring.

"He really understands his Tourette's and manages it. If it's an issue, he steps back, relaxes for a second, and rejoins."

Added Jim Wladyka, a private pitching coach based in Rutherford, "He can now channel something extra he has going on into what he's looking to do, being able to execute the next pitch, the next play, or the next situation that arises. ... He's a dominating high school pitcher who, probably, at any time, can control any high school game. The goal with Connor is not to be a dominating high school pitcher. It's to be a dominating college, and eventually professional pitcher."

Staine's goals are to add a few more pounds to his 6-foot-3 frame and a few more miles per hour to his fastball before he graduates, as well as making West Morris' honor roll. He also wants to break West Morris' single-season and career records for strikeouts, while helping the team defend its NJAC-National title and win NJSIAA North 1 Group III.

Staine wants to study business at Maryland, with an eye on following his mother and stepfather into marketing and advertising. American history is "something that never bores me," particularly the 1950s.

"(TS) is tiring and it's taxing, but I never see it as a negative thing," Staine said. "Going through something like that, whether it be pain physically or emotionally, is something I use to drive myself to be better. It's me versus me."

Staff writer Jane Habsy: 973-428-6682; jhabsy@gannettnj.com; www.dailyrecord.com/writer/jane/