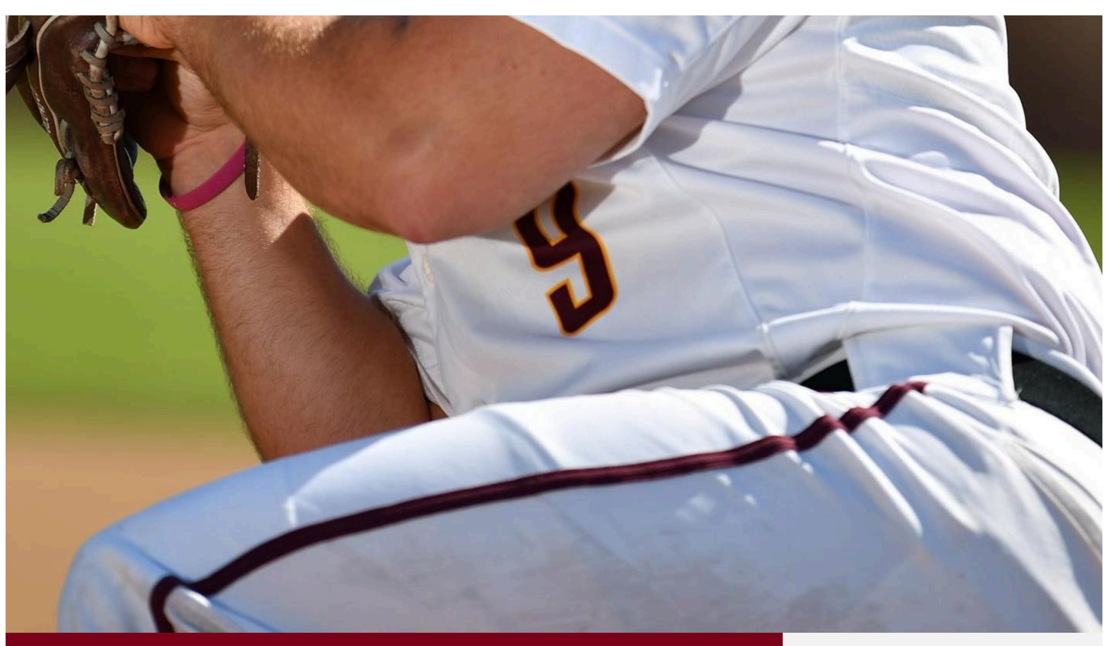

East Grand Forks-Native Peterson's Impact on Minnesota Crookston as an Unselfish Leader to be Seen For Years to Come

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By: Shawn D. Smith, Director of Athletic Communication

CROOKSTON, Minn. - In East Grand Forks, Minn., the name *Steve Gust* has been important name in baseball circles dating back to his time as a player for the Green Wave, and moving on to coaching Sacred Heart H.S., to college head coaching jobs at Northland Community and Technical College, Dakota Wesleyan University, and now just down the road at University of Minnesota Crookston. East Grand Forks players have grown up using the same signs on the base paths that he developed long ago, and several have gone to play for him. With the likes of Michael Lukasson at Dakota Wesleyan, *Reed Hjelle*, Ethan Mushitz, and Scott Mortenson at Minnesota Crookston.

One of those players that grew up hearing stories of Coach Gust was Minnesota Crookston redshirt senior *Clarke Peterson*. Peterson knew that Coach Gust loved following local baseball around Northwest Minnesota and Eastern North Dakota. Around the time Peterson was about to graduate from East Grand Forks H.S., was when Minnesota Crookston was on the rise. Coach Gust had just taken over and the Golden Eagles had increased their win total from one win to 14 wins. Peterson was excited about the opportunity that playing at the University of Minnesota Crookston and for Coach Gust presented him.

"He did a really good job of convincing me that being a part of something bigger than yourself is actually where the real fun is," Peterson said. "He did a good job of that. I came in and it was everything you could ever imagine. Having a team full of brothers and people that you can rely on at any time and people that just want to see you get better is amazing. Right away it was just the fact of the opportunity to get to play college baseball. Once I got here, there was no leaving because the people are just great."

In Peterson's first year, he was a part of something special, as he saw a program that was two years removed from back-to-back one-win seasons make their first appearance in the NSIC Tournament since 2001. It wasn't an easy year for Peterson, as he had to sit back and not play or travel since he was a redshirt. But it was a rewarding experience that made him a better man, baseball player, and leader.

"It is the coolest thing in the world to see, to be honest," Peterson said of being part of the first team to make the NSIC Tournament since 2001. "I am not going to sugar coat it, redshirting is the hardest thing in the world to do. You get to have something that you absolutely love and you get to watch other people do it while you are kind of a part of it. If you pay attention when you redshirt, you learn everything that you need to learn. I couldn't have been the leader that I was for our program if it wasn't for watching Colt (Haight) and Haggy (Ryan Haggstrom) and Jarad Nelson and Nolan Wahlberg go about their business. Those guys, they did everything that they needed to do and they set an example. That is the best thing that they could have done. They may not have been the most vocal leaders or the best leaders for getting better at baseball, but they knew how to go about their business. If you paid attention to doing that it made you better, as well. It was just great to come into a class that had real, true people and a class that just wanted to get better. Not because they were good at baseball but because they weren't. You have to work for what you get and they really showed that."

Observing the seniors during his redshirt season helped mold Peterson into the captain that he would become for the team in his later years for the Golden Eagles. He learned that is more than just about baseball. It is about a brotherhood. It is about hard work on and off the field and about setting a good example for the younger classes to help mold them into leaders for the next group.

"As captains what we would try to do is make sure that everyone on the team knew that this is a brotherhood and it is not anything else," Peterson stated. "Yes we are here to play baseball, but that is just what we do. That is what people see us do but we are here to make sure we can mature and we get good grades and we understand that the classroom is the most important thing. That is what those guys in front of me and *Reed Hjelle*, that is what they did to understand that this is more than just baseball. That is what we as captains, that is what our goal really is. It is to make sure that these kids succeed in the classroom, to make sure they are working hard in the weight room and to make sure that they come to practice and stay late. When you get one person to follow you it becomes it much easier because then two and three follow. It is just about doing things the Golden Eagle way."

Peterson wasn't able to make as big of an impact on the field due to injuries, but he did the things that weren't noticeable on the stat sheet. He was the guy taking bullpens as a catcher. He was the leader on the bench trying to make sure guys were doing things the right way. Or the "Golden Eagle way." When asked what he sees the Golden Eagle way as, this is what Peterson responded with,

"To start, it is a desire to win, a desire to work hard, a desire to be tough, and it is just a will to want to work hard and be the best," Peterson said. "It is not thinking you are the best and acting like it. It is going and doing all the little things every single day and covering all your bases. It is making sure you are on the right path and in the right mindset and that is when success follows. It is about being disciplined and having a desire for hard work and wanting to win."
Peterson, unable to play catcher, the position he came in to play, due to an injury to his labrum, made the transition to pitcher during his senior season. It was a step he did to try to help his team any way that he possibly could. It is true to the character that he has displayed during all five seasons at Minnesota Crookston. He was going to do whatever he could to help the program he had been a part of building.

"In the 2019 season, I caught one time against Dakota Wesleyan rightfully so because I couldn't throw the ball 120 feet," Peterson stated. "Post labrum surgery I have an enlarged shoulder socket. I have more external rotation when I go to throw. Because of this when I was healthy and my arm strength was the same and my shoulder anatomy was the same before surgery I could throw the ball very well. Now, after shoulder surgery. The doctors go in and fix your labrum and put in some screws, and now the shoulder is different. I couldn't throw the ball as hard as I could and it moved a lot. Upon finding the right arm angle with Coach Gust and *Alec DeMaria*, our pitching coach, I was able to find an arm slot that worked successfully for me through a lot of hard work and a lot of plyo balls and a weight-lifting program. I tried to do all the little things right to be able to throw again someday. We did it right. I found a way to get in the mindset to throw strikes and that is just all it was. It was finding a different mindset between being a catcher and being a pitcher."

So when it comes down to it, Peterson's legacy at Minnesota Crookston isn't about wins or losses, or about what he did on the field. It is about what he did off the field and in practice. It is about his mindset as a player. The hard work he put in to help everyone around him. It is about what he did to mold the future leaders of the program. It is about setting the program up for future successes that he can't wait to see come to fruition.

"Every day when I go to bed I think that I hope that I left a good foundation for the people behind me like *Trey Larimer* and *Ben Thoma*," Peterson said about the legacy he wants to leave for the Golden Eagle baseball program. "All I want for those guys is for those guys to be successful and for those guys to be captains and follow in my footsteps. Ben is already a captain, so in that aspect I feel like my legacy has already been solidified in the fact that someone I tried to help mold is already in that position and we will see later when Trey gets there. That is what it is about for me. It is about seeing guys that I have put in time and development with, and I really like these guys. It is every single player. It doesn't matter who gets the success, who gets the tags, who gets captain, who is named an All-NSIC player. It is just seeing these guys succeed. That is the legacy that I want to see. I want to see them win a National Championship and to know that I still helped even if it is eight of 10 years down the road."

Peterson and his fellow seniors were excited about the 2020 season. They had a lot of returning talent and some key impact players that they had added after making it to the NSIC Tournament in 2019. The Golden Eagles were coming off an 8-5 mark with key wins in the "Sunshine State", and they were ready to take on the NSIC competition. That is when everything changed due to COVID-19. It was a shock to the system that left Peterson and his teammates numb. It ultimately ended up being an abrupt ending to Peterson's career. Not the way he would have hoped to end, but with a great mindset, he is taking the positives he can from the experience to grow as a man.

"We had just gotten back from Florida," Peterson recalled. "We were supposed to have practice and Coach Gust called us into the maroon room. You can feel those kinds of things. When someone brings you into a room and tells you to sit down. You know it is either a breakup, a death, or something bad happening. For us it was a breakup. We weren't going to be able to play baseball that season. We were all shocked. We walked into the gym, some of the younger kids still wanted to practice. The older kids looked at each other, we didn't necessarily know what to do. Gosh, your heart just stops to be completely honest. You look into your brother's eyes and all you can see is that they are completely distraught. You don't know what to do either. I just remember I looked at the guys and brought them all together and said 'well I know this isn't how we wanted this to go and there is nothing that we can physically do about it, but we just need to remember that we are all going to be stronger because of this. We are all going to be better baseball players because of this. We are all going to be better men. It is just going to take us doing the right thing to get through this.' And that was it. We were just done. We walked out of the gym and grabbed our stuff out of the locker room and that was it."

Since that point Peterson has had his struggles. It still isn't quite real and he doesn't always know what to do with himself. But he has begun to focus on a career in coaching and helping to give back to the baseball community in Northwest Minnesota. Next fall, he will serve as an assistant at Northland Community and Technical College, the place where Gust started his collegiate head coaching journey.

"It still hasn't fully hit me to be completely honest," Peterson said of the last two months. "It is the weirdest time of my life. I've spent a lot of time learning. Studying things that aren't necessarily relative to my degree but relative to baseball. I have been watching a lot of foreign baseball. I have been brushing up on my Spanish and get more fluent to speak that better. In the fall I will be coaching at Northland as an assistant coach. I didn't realize the science of baseball before college. I understood how to play the game, what the rules were, and all of that good stuff. I didn't understand the mechanics of baseball and how to develop a strength and conditioning program. College baseball, the academic part of it gives you everything you need. If you put yourself in a situation and get smarter and get a degree that you need you can't fail in my eyes to be completely honest. Now that I have a good science degree and had a good internship because I had to take one to graduate. You are put in the situation that it is kind of tough to fail."

So while Peterson's baseball journey is over at Minnesota Crookston, he is very grateful for the experience he had as a Golden Eagle over his five years in the Maroon and Gold. The brotherhood that he formed with his teammates, and the lessons he has learned at Minnesota Crookston. In his view, the education and experience he has received at UMN Crookston is irreplaceable.

"I'm going to bring every single lesson that I have learned from this school with me everywhere I go," Peterson said. "What you learn from the University of Minnesota Crookston is absolutely irreplaceable. The degree, the social aspect, the hard work with Coach Gust. The discipline that you have to exert on a small campus to make sure that you do things right because everyone knows what you do. It is unmatched. The lessons are unparalleled. You can't beat a school like this. I'm beyond excited to be at a local school. First off, because I am excited to recruit local kids just like Coach Gust and show that his successful formula isn't just conducive to him. Other people can do it too. I am excited to watch all of my teammates progress. I am excited to watch Richie (*Conner Richardson*) pitch. I am excited to watch (Brock) Reller hit home runs. I am excited for all of these things. I am also really excited, I started an amateur baseball team in East Grand Forks, and I am excited to see some of these guys that we have had play for us play college baseball. When they get to come play summer ball, that is their chance to get better. So guys like *Jake Osowski*, and *Trey Larimer*, and *Parker Stroh*. This is their chance to play good, high-level baseball because we are playing in Class B and to have someone watching them that knows what Coach Gust wants to see. I want to help them get better. Minnesota Crookston baseball is going to be in a really good spot in the next couple of years with everything going on. As long as these guys stay tough through what is going on right now, this program is going to be scary."

So while Peterson's journey at Minnesota Crookston didn't end the way he may have hoped, the legacy he leaves is still intact. It isn't about your batting average, or your earned runs average. It is about the hard work you put in to make your team and others around you better. And that is exactly what *Clarke Peterson* did. He put in the work day in and day out, even though he could have easily packed it in after hurting his labrum. He could have just finished out his degree and called it good. But he didn't. He tried to give back to his program what he got from the older classes when he was a redshirt freshman. Young men like Clark Peterson is what Minnesota Crookston baseball is about. It is about a brotherhood. It is about the success of the team above everything else. Hopefully *Clarke Peterson* can come back in the next 8-10 years or maybe more, or maybe less, and see conference championships and possibly a National Championship. It is because of him and the guys before him, and the brotherhood that follows him that this could be possible. We are glad that the East Grand Forks pipeline to *Steve Gust* led him to Minnesota Crookston five years ago. Thank you Clarke for the work you put in to make Minnesota Crookston baseball better for those who follow you.

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