



Grover Set to Return for One Last Season with Minnesota Crookston Baseball and Help Continue to Write The Program's Underdog Story

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 By **Shawn D. Smith, Director of Athletic Communication**

CROOKSTON, Minn. - On March 10, 2020, senior Minnesota Crookston pitcher [Justin Grover](#) was getting ready for baseball practice in Lysaker Gymnasium when the entire landscape of his senior season and college athletics, in general, began to change. Sitting on top of the world after helping the Golden Eagles to an 8-5 start, including seven wins in Florida, Grover was ready to help try to lead Minnesota Crookston back to the NSIC Tournament for the fourth time in five years. However, everything suddenly changed and Grover and his fellow seniors were uncertain of the fate of their college athletic careers.

"It was weird," Grover said. "We were just going to practice like any normal day on Thursday. Coach Cust just came into the gym and told us we all had to go to the classroom. We just knew the way that the world was going, that it wasn't a good situation. Right away, I was just thinking at that moment, is this it? At that point, we didn't know if the NCAA was going to grant us another year or not. It would have been a tough way to end. Luckily they gave us another year of eligibility. I am just looking forward to coming back next year and finishing."

Grover is just thankful to get the opportunity to help the Golden Eagles continue their underdog story one more year. Who doesn't love a good underdog story, from movies like "Rudy" to "Miracle"; our culture has gravitated toward that story where the team that isn't expected to succeed beats the powerhouse.

Grover has been watching the underdog story come to life at Minnesota Crookston beginning during his high school career down the road an hour-and-a-half in Cooperstown, N.D. The Golden Eagles had started showing signs of growth in 2015 in Head Coach [Zach Gust's](#) first season at the helm, going from one win in back-to-back seasons to 14 in Gust's first year in 2015. It was the following season that Grover began to be recruited and Gust started to tell him about his vision for what the program could be.

"Gust reached out to me," Grover said. "We talked about the program a lot. I really loved how he engaged with me and called me a bunch during the process. The small campus at Minnesota Crookston is nice. I loved the way that he talked about the program and how they were on the rise."

Grover started to see Gust's vision come to fruition during the 2016 season, as the underdog Golden Eagles who were picked to finish 14th in the NSIC Preseason Poll, started pulling off wins over programs like Winona State University, and Wayne State College. One of the biggest moments came in a 7-6 win over NSIC rival Augustana University. The Golden Eagles rode their big victories in clutch moments to their first NSIC Tournament appearance since 2001, and Grover was able to look at the program he was going to and see the vision Gust had.

"Yeah that was cool to see," Grover said in reference to seeing Cust's vision starting to come into motion. "When he is talking to me and telling me that the program is on the rise, Gust talking about it made me want to be a part of a turnaround and put Minnesota Crookston in a better place and be noticed around the NSIC."

Grover was thrust right into it as a freshman, as the 6-3 pitcher with a big, strong frame started the season out in a crucial relief role, and rose into a weekday starter role early in the NSIC season. Grover loved being able to jump right in and get his feet wet against strong competition.

"It was fun being thrown right into it," Grover stated. "Not really knowing much about college baseball, I was just free and loose and going out there and just pitching like any other game. Cody Bergman and Matt Dallas were senior pitchers that helped me out a lot. Zach Frazer, [Brett Hissale](#), all of those guys helped me become comfortable in the program. If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be where I am at today."

The Golden Eagles were able to find success in Grover's freshman season as they went 24-28 and made it back to St. Cloud, Minn., and the NSIC Baseball Tournament for a second straight year. Grover ended up appearing in 13 games during his inaugural campaign, going 1-0 with a 5.34 ERA, with three starts and 26 strikeouts to just 10 walks.

"Yeah that awesome," Grover said about making it to the NSIC Tournament as a freshman. "Just being one of the top eight teams in the conference in one of the better Division II baseball conferences in the nation. We were competing with the best and we just kept battling. At the end of the year, we lost two down in Aberdeen to Northern State. We put ourselves in a tough position but we came home and swept Minnesota Duluth. That was just awesome. I will never forget that series."

Grover was hoping for similar results as a sophomore. The Golden Eagles started out the season great as they were 10-5 coming off their road trip to the Sunshine State, having beat teams that were regionally ranked and who competed in the 2017 NCAA Tournament. Minnesota Crookston was on the highest of highs, thinking they could possibly make it far in the NSIC Tournament and maybe compete in an NCAA Tournament themselves. However, they struggled out of the gate losing their first 12 in the NSIC, including two to eventual National Champion Augustana University.

"Coming off Florida we were at the top," Grover said. "We were at the highest of highs. We came into conference season probably thinking we could walk into those games and win. We can never do that at Minnesota Crookston. Nothing comes easy, we always have to play like we are the underdog and work the hardest. We have to outwork other teams. We just thought we were going to walk in on teams and beat them after the way we played in Florida."

The Golden Eagles missed the NSIC Tournament, but Grover and the Golden Eagles learned a lot from that season about hard work and consistency. They put it to work starting with the next fall and were able to find their way back to the NSIC Tournament for the third time in four years. This time, Minnesota Crookston got off to a thunderous start in NSIC play, winning their first six with sweeps over Wayne State College and Concordia University-St. Paul.

"After sophomore year, we were disappointed in how we ended," Grover stated. "We wanted to get back there and play good baseball, the way we know how to play at Minnesota Crookston. Starting off the NSIC season against Wayne State and Concordia-St. Paul, we just took it to those teams. We competed with two of the better teams in the league. Even with Minnesota State, we competed with them. We just played Minnesota Crookston baseball that year. When we play the game the way we know how to play it, we are as good as any other team in the conference. That showed last year with how we made it back to the NSIC Tournament."

The sweep of Concordia-St. Paul, was especially memorable as the Golden Bears had been swept by the Golden Eagles in each of Cust's previous seasons. Grover made a major part, as he helped Minnesota Crookston to a 14-2 win over Concordia-St. Paul going six innings and allowing just two runs on two hits with four strikeouts.

"Freshman year and sophomore year, they swept us both years," Grover said. "Coach Cust had always said that he had never beat Concordia-St. Paul in his career here. Going down there, we kept the momentum we had against Wayne State and we just outplayed them and took all four from them."

After their third NSIC Tournament appearance and their 8-5 start to the 2020 season, Minnesota Crookston was feeling great about the prospects of the campaign and what it could do for their program, and a continuation for this amazing underdog story that has seen a program go from two wins in back-to-back years to NSIC Tournament appearances in three of the next four seasons.

Grover was feeling the best he ever had about the team, and about him himself. The 6-3 redhead was 2-1 with a 3.86 ERA in four starts with 20 strikeouts to just seven walks. He had set the school's career strikeout mark and had one of the program's best single-game pitching performances with a 14 strikeout shutout of Saint Anselm over eight innings.

"I felt really good about where our baseball team was at in terms of pitching and hitting," Grover said. "I loved the way that our hitters were hitting. When they just up a lot of runs, it gives the pitchers all the confidence. I felt really good. It is the best I have felt during my time at Minnesota Crookston."

Luckily, Grover's story and the story of the rise of Minnesota Crookston baseball is not over yet. Grover will take advantage of the NCAA granting another year of eligibility, as will several of his fellow classmates. He was set to graduate in May of 2020, but right now is looking to come back and possibly pick up a second major in marketing, to go with his sports and recreation management major.

"Right now I am going to have a sport and rec management major, and I have a marketing minor," Grover stated. "I just talked to my advisor and I am looking into maybe a marketing major, so I would double major. I only need eight classes to get the double major. That is probably my best possibility. I just have to look into it a little bit more."

He is also pumped to be able to toe the rubber at the Minnesota Crookston Baseball Field for one more season. Grover will be able to pitch around his second home at Minnesota Crookston, a place where he has found brothers and a welcoming environment to obtain his education.

"I am very excited about being able to come back," Grover said. "I have been in Crookston for four years now so I might as well come back for another year. It feels like another home for me. All the seniors that are coming back for another year next year, I am looking forward to playing with them. I am looking forward to meeting the next recruits, who can hopefully add to our team. The position we were in when it ended this year, I felt really good about where we were at. Hopefully we can continue that next year. With our potential we can go anywhere. As long as we play Minnesota Crookston baseball, all day, every day, we are going to do well."

The brotherhood at Minnesota Crookston and the culture Coach Cust has created is the reason that the team has found success. They go out there every game competing for one another and trying to prove the doubters that Minnesota Crookston baseball is on the map and isn't a program to take lightly.

"The guys on the team, they are your brothers," Grover stated. "You are with them nine months out of the year and they are some of the best friends I have made in college. I still talk to people from freshman and sophomore years. They are always going to be there and they will always be friends. Competing with them, morning, afternoon, night, and weekends, has been so much fun."

So for now, Grover will put his future on hold. Eventually he wants to possibly stay around the game and get into baseball operations, but for now he will continue to focus on his Minnesota Crookston brothers and being that pitcher that the Golden Eagles can count on morning, afternoon, and night. So while the Coronavirus situation caused a change in plans for Grover, we are excited to have the program's strikeout leader back for the Golden Eagles one last season. For with him and his brothers by his side, the Golden Eagles can achieve anything if they do it the Golden Eagle way. You better believe it!

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