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After a Homecoming meeting, two fraternity brothers, 20 years apart, meet again on a field of dreams.

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Home

Two alumni, 20 years apart, find their field of dreams in the business of baseball

By Amy Clingensmith '96

Ryan Shirk grew up a Detroit Pistons fan. So when he met a dozen Epsilon Pi alumni at Homecoming 2003 and heard that David Auker '83 once worked for the team, he could hardly stay in his seat.

Shirk '04 and Auker talked at the Pi Homecoming event where one was celebrating his senior year while the other was marking a 20-year reunion. They talked about the importance of finding a job and, more importantly, finding a job to feel passionate about.

It just so happened that Auker and Shirk had a few passions in common – namely, sports and business.

Both sports fans are from Ohio – Auker from North Canton and Shirk from Toledo – both were business majors and both were Grove City grads from the same fraternity. And thanks to a friendship and that Homecoming meeting, both are working for the Tampa Bay Devil Rays in sunny Florida, perhaps one of the most promising franchises in Major League Baseball.

Auker has served as senior vice president of business operations for the Rays since Dec. 1. It's his second stint with the club, having worked with the expansion team for two years beginning in 1996, getting ready for the inaugural season of '98.

Fresh out of Grove City in '83, Auker landed a job with the Pistons, but it came after a slew of rejections from a host of major league teams.

"I sent resumes to every team in every league and every sports-related field I could think of, from Nike to Reebok," he remembers with a smile.

He also remembers getting some "really cool rejection letters" on letterhead with team logos from around the country.

The steady stream of rejections became

somewhat of a joke with his friends at the Grove. In fact, they crowded around his mailbox next to the Gedunk, boxing him out and routinely getting to the stack of letters first. But that wasn't the end of it. They began a Wall of Shame of sorts on the closet door of his Hopeman residence hall room. And, true to Grover style, they were pretty calculating and creative about it.

On that closet door, Auker's "supporters" starting posting the letters, not only by league but also division. They made an addition to the NHL section with a "no" from the Quebec Nordiques; another, a "thanks but no thanks" from the Green Bay Packers. And The Wall grew.

But, one day, Auker got the last laugh.

It was "back in the day" when there was just one phone in the hallway of Hopeman, which happened to be right across from Auker's room. On one providential ring, his friends picked up the phone and yelled, "Auker, the Detroit Pistons are on the phone!"

Used to his friends' ribbing, Auker laughed and waved them off. But this time it was no joke. He had gotten a job as an account executive and stayed with the NBA team until 1990 during one of the most exciting times in Pistons' history. During that seven-year period, the Pistons built a new arena – The Palace –

started the huge sports conglomerate Palace Sports & Entertainment and brought home two championship titles.

Twenty years later, Auker got to give similar good news to Ryan Shirk.

It came during Homecoming last year. Shirk sat with his fraternity brothers and listened to the introductions of each of his Epsilon Pi predecessors. Auker was the last to be introduced and when Shirk heard he had worked as the vice president of player operations for one of his favorite teams – the Pistons – he



OPPOSITE PAGE: DAVID AUKER '83 AND RYAN SHIRK '04 AT THE TAMPA BAY DEVIL RAYS' TROPICANA FIELD. ABOVE: AUKER AND SHIRK SHARE A LAUGH IN THE DUGOUT. / Photos by Skip Milos

couldn't have been more excited, both as a fan and as prospective job hunter.

Auker and Shirk started up a conversation and found many commonalities between them. Auker was impressed by Shirk's energy and passion for the field and said he'd do whatever he could to help him break into the very competitive sports job market.

They kept in touch, and a few months after Homecoming, Shirk got a call from Auker's wife, Louise, who told the senior

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that her husband had recently taken a job with the Tampa Bay Devil Rays in Florida and wanted Ryan to call him. With his past connections, Auker was able to get Shirk an interview with the Pistons, a job Shirk didn't get.

"Fortunately for us," Auker says, "the job didn't work out for him."

By April, Shirk was still jobless, but then got another encouraging e-mail from Auker: "Ryan, call me Monday morning ASAP. I think I've figured out something."

Auker had figured out that the Rays had an opening for an account executive. Shirk had a phone interview with the assistant director of ticket sales on May 1 and found out a few days later that he had the job. From there, he admits that studying for finals and focusing on graduation was a difficult task.

Soon after Commencement on May 15, Shirk took a vacation with his fraternity brothers, spent four days at home with his family in Toledo and then moved to the Tampa area. After staying with friends until he got settled, Shirk

can either sit inside and stay on the phone all day or get out there, face to face, and make connections with people."

Shirk has discovered that he loves the business of sports, especially the sales aspect. And he's encouraged by the many different routes this job will afford him: corporate sales, management, sponsorship. After all, look where David Auker ended up after starting out as an account executive for the Pistons.

"I want him to be successful for a myriad of reasons," Auker says of Shirk.

And Auker can feel good about having Shirk in his organization because he knows where he came from: a good family, a Midwest upbringing, a strong work ethic and a Grove City College educational experience. And because of the latter, Auker says he feels comfortable having faith in Shirk, even at the young age of 23.

“ THE BUSINESS OF SPORTS IS MORE SOPHISTICATED THAN IT WAS EVEN FIVE YEARS AGO. ”
David Auker '83

moved into a house on Aug. 21.

Shirk is also settling well into his new job. As one of 10 account executives, he is responsible for sales, customer relations, tickets and special group events and promotions.

"It's tough," he says, "because like most businesses, it's what you make of it. You



“You almost have the inherent makeup of a person before you even know them,” Auker says.

Auker and Shirk have had fun swapping Grove City stories. They call Tropicana Field home, especially during the long hours of baseball season. The domed park, redesigned in an \$85 million project in 1996, is one of the many parks around the country that is catering to the baseball-as-business way of thinking.

Perhaps no one knows how important that is more than Auker.

“The business of sports, in my opinion, is more sophisticated than it was even five years ago,” he says.

For one, there are many more demands on fans’ time: the Internet, 100-plus television channels and multiple sports teams to follow. Back when Auker was a graduating senior, being a sports fan was different that it is today too. Fans usually followed the team in their hometowns, knew the quarterback stats from 30 years prior and didn’t tread much into new waters. Today, kids in elementary school and junior high are learning to play lacrosse and field hockey, swimming competitively at a younger age, and soccer is now as common as stickball in the street. Therefore, expansion teams like the Rays are working hard to create their own history and fan base.

True, having no grainy, black-and-white film reels and no glowing history can be a hurdle to overcome, but it can also be an opportunity.

“The nice part about an expansion team is that it’s a clean slate,” Auker says.

Floridians were screaming for a team of their own years before the Rays moved into the Bay. In fact, Tropicana Field was built in 1990, just waiting for a Major League team. The Rays’ ownership, along with several community members, finally made it happen in 1998.

Seeing a young fellow alum in the office has made Auker realize that it seems like yesterday when he moved into his freshman residence hall. During his four years at Grove City, Auker spent time with his Pi brothers, was the play-by-play announcer for the Wolverine basketball team under coach John Barr and continued dating Louise, who was a

student at Westminster College.

Even after two decades, Auker has kept in touch with at least 30 of his college friends and is now getting to know their families too. In March, Auker traveled with the Rays to Tokyo, Japan, as the team played two games against the New York Yankees and two against professional Japanese teams. There, he was able to reconnect with Ron Ellenberger ’83 and wife Carole (Kozusko ’82), who live in Japan with their children.

Auker and his wife have three daughters, Emily, 12, Allison, 9 and Cameron, 4, and live in Bradenton, Fla., about 30 minutes from Tampa. And although Auker’s focus at work is baseball, he says his favorite sport is “playing with his kids” and has also taken up kayaking with former Grove City College roommate Dave Jennings.

Auker’s career in sports leading up to his current Tampa Bay post was a varied and successful one. After seven years with the Pistons, he moved back to his home state of Ohio for a position with the Cleveland Cavaliers, who were also building a new arena. Then in 1996, he returned to what he calls “one of the finest organizations in professional sports” – Palace Sports & Entertainment in Auburn Hills, Mich., which owns the Pistons and the Detroit Shock WNBA team, among others. Auker worked for six years alongside a close friend who was the Palace CEO.

In the winter of 2003, the Rays asked Auker to return to the team for a newly created role of senior vice president of business operations, overseeing VPs in public relations, customer relations, ticketing, corporate relations, marketing and sponsorship, among other areas. It



OPPOSITE PAGE: DAVID AUKER '83 AND RYAN SHIRK '04 TAKE THE PITCHER'S MOUND AT 'THE TROP.' ABOVE: AUKER BRINGS ON THE HEAT AS SHIRK STEPS UP TO THE PLATE. / Photos by Skip Milos

was difficult to leave Palace, but even the head of Palace told Auker it was an opportunity of a lifetime.

Today, Auker and Shirk are experiencing the quintessential rookie-veteran relationship. Auker smiles at Shirk’s enthusiasm and Shirk marvels at the cool leadership Auker exudes as one of the top executives for the team.

Occasionally, they sit in the stands together, cheering on their team, loving the sport itself as much as the business of baseball. Along with way, Auker will undoubtedly flash signs to his young protégé, telling him when to lay low and bunt and when to crank it out of the park.

And maybe, one day, Shirk will hit a home run, just like his mentor.

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