

Nathan Robert “Nate” Frese

Of all the players on the 1991 Norway High School baseball team, in a sense immortalized in the movie “The Final Season”, only one player - an eighth grader who played sparingly on that squad - went on to professional baseball. Nate Frese had just turned fourteen when the Tigers defeated South Clay Gillette Grove that summer, and by the time the next season started, he and his Norway teammates were students at the consolidated Benton Community High School in Van Horne. Before Frese was done playing, though, he came within a hair’s breadth of reaching the major leagues, a feat not accomplished by a Norway player since Mike Boddicker’s debut with Baltimore in 1983.

Nathan Robert Frese was born to John Earl and Linda (Volz) Frese on July 10, 1977, at Mercy Hospital in Cedar Rapids. The third, of what would ultimately be five, children, Frese was born into a successful farming family that still works ground all around Norway. His older brothers, Chris and Brian, both played on Norway championship teams under coach Jim Van Scoyoc (Brian is featured prominently in the newsreel background footage in “The Final Season”), so Nate was virtually ordained to take up both baseball and basketball at a very young age. In his case, that age was three.

By age twelve he was on the Norway school honor roll, while also playing on elite all-star teams in the Cedar Rapids area. On one particularly notable team, the District-7 All Stars at the 1989 Babe Ruth “Bambino” state tournament, he played alongside future major leaguer Wes Obermueller, one of a number of times the two took the same field before they signed pro contracts, yet another example of the caliber of baseball competition in that part of the state.

In his first year of high school eligibility (eighth grade), the 1991 season, he played for Norway, but after consolidation he finished his high school career at Benton Community. In their last years, the Tigers had played – and dominated – at the 1A level in Iowa, slotted there due to the size of the school. Following the regional consolidation, Benton Community was assigned to the 3A (of four categories) division, routinely playing against larger schools throughout the area. The size of the school, and the competition, was incidental to Frese, as he so excelled during his high school career, both on the diamond and on the court, that many of the records he set then still stand in 2011.

A gifted hitter and fielder, and also a pitcher with a 92-mile per hour fastball, Frese led the Bobcats to consecutive 36-win seasons and two state championship appearances

(runners-up in 1994 and 1995). Nate still holds school records for most doubles, RBIs, hits, and runs in both a single season and for a career, as well as the single season record for home runs and batting average. For any athlete, at any school, that litany would be enormously impressive. But Frese took it to the next level, effectively repeating that dominance on the basketball floor.

In 1994/95 the Iowa Newspaper Association named him All State (first team) in both sports, and none less than “USA Today” identified him as one of the top prep players in the state in their national pre-season prediction. Frese did not disappoint, setting single-season school records in points (453) and points-per-game (23.8) that year. By the time he graduated, through at least 2010, he was the top scorer in school history (1077 points), the all-time leading free-throw specialist, and the record holder in career field goals and three-point field goals.

In the fall of 1995, the now-6’3” righthander opted to attend the University of Iowa on a baseball scholarship (one named for Norway resident and American League All Star Mike Boddicker). During his junior year in Iowa City, he was named All-Big 10 as an infielder, and he also pitched in relief when necessary. In the summers he found time to play for a number of teams, including two seasons with the *Clarinda A’s*, a member of the M.I.N.K. (Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas) collegiate league, one in which the players use wood bats instead of the aluminum ones mandated in college. Nate posted a 9-0 record as a pitcher in 1996 on a team that included future major leaguer Kory DeHaan, and minor league players Ryan Fry and Griffin Moore, and was selected to the league All Star team after the season. The next summer, having worn out his arm the previous year with an extremely high work load, he moved to the infield full-time. The net effect of his superb play, however, was to draw the attention of major league scouts.

Chicago *Cubs* scout Mark Servais recommended the team draft Frese after his junior year at Iowa, and the *Cubs* selected him in the tenth round of the 1998 draft. Upon signing, Nate was assigned to the Williamsport *Cubs* of the Class A New York-Penn League. There, the twenty-year old hit only .218 in 54 games, but was still promoted to the Lansing *Lugnuts* (Mid-West League) in Michigan. There Frese played 107 games and raised his batting average to .265. This – in turn – garnered him another promotion, to the Daytona *Cubs* of the Class ‘A’ Florida State League (FSL).

Within baseball’s minor leagues, there is a hierarchy among the many rookie and Class ‘A’ leagues. At the top of that pyramid are the Carolina, the California, and the Florida State leagues, and even making it to that level identifies a player as a legitimate major league

prospect. In each of those three leagues the level of play was far better than any at which Nate had ever participated. It was in the FSL, though, that Frese enjoyed his finest professional season. Not only did he hit .296 in 117 games, but committed only thirteen errors at shortstop in that span, which gave him a .975 fielding average at the most demanding position on the diamond. Over one 47-game stretch, he batted a phenomenal .335 and enjoyed a 43-game errorless streak, and was selected to the FSL Mid-Season All Star team.

The Cubs placed Nate on their elite 40-man roster (the major league players and the most important prospects in the system), and a few months after the season “Baseball America” named him the #10 prospect in the entire Chicago organization. To top it all, the Daytona *Cubs*, under manager Richie Zisk, won the FSL crown in 2000, giving Frese his first professional championship.

In 2001, Nate was moved up to West Tennessee *Diamond Jaxx*, the Cubs AA team in Jackson (approximately one hour, by car, east of Memphis). His fielding there was, again, little short of brilliant, perhaps even taken for granted by the club as he posted a .996 fielding percentage at shortstop, making only one error (a bobbled ball in a late-April game) in 276 chances. The day following that miscue, May 1, he began an errorless streak of 49 games and broke the Southern League record for consecutive error-free games at shortstop. Despite being limited to only 72 games due to a broken thumb (fractured by a 94-mile per hour fastball in the course of an attempted bunt), in late 2001 ‘Baseball America’ listed Nate as having the “Best Tools” among all shortstops in the Southern League.

With 2001 abbreviated by injury, he and new bride Nicole (“Niki”, whom Frese wed on October 27, 2001, at St. Michael’s in Norway) returned to Jackson for the 2002 season. Unfortunately, in an echo of the previous season, he made four separate trips to the Disabled List that year, and appeared in only 70 games.

Finally healthy after 2002, the Cubs and his agent worked to get him a roster spot with the Guasave *Aldogoneros* (literally “cotton growers”), a team in Mexico’s most important winter baseball league, the Mexican-Pacific League. That was no small feat, as Frese was a shortstop in a league filled with Hispanic players, the sorts of which traditionally excel in the middle infield. The time south-of-the-border evidently helped, because the Cubs invited Nate to major league spring training in Arizona in 2003.

In his first extended exposure to big league play, Frese played well and even managed a hit

off future Hall-of-Famer Randy Johnson during a March game. At the end of spring, though, he was sent to the AAA Iowa *Cubs* in Des Moines, just hairsbreadth away from the majors. The closer proximity to Norway also made it easier for his parents to watch him play.

That year in AAA, Nate made just twelve errors in 99 games (his season again limited due to yet another injury). With bright prospects for his baseball future, Nate spent the offseason working on his father's farm alongside eldest brother Chris. One afternoon, using an all-terrain vehicle to finish his daily farm chores, he hit a combination hill and turn and was thrown from the four wheeler.

The crash left Nate with a broken leg and a dislocated ankle, and the rehabilitation caused him to miss the entire 2004 season. Although his baseball career dangled in the balance while he healed, the year was tremendous on the personal side. On July 24, 2004, Niki gave birth to their first son, Maddux, at St. Luke's Hospital in Cedar Rapids.

Not ready to walk away from baseball quite yet, Frese attempted a comeback in 2005, splitting time between West Tennessee and Des Moines. His bat returned, evidenced by his .375 average in 'AA' and .245 in AAA, and his glove was sound, but his heart was back in Norway. After 91 games, he was finished with professional baseball.

Today, at the start of the decade, the Frese family has grown to five, with son Micah arriving on February 17, 2009, and daughter Halle on February 28, 2011. Nate currently farms with his father and brother in Norway, and lives with baseball memories that few are ever fortunate enough to earn.