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Douglas Vines, left, rings up a batter on strikes while working a minor league game in Rome earlier this year. Since graduating from umpiring school at the top of his class in 2007, the former Woodstock High School three-sport standout is working his way through the minor leagues in hopes reaching the Major League level in the upcoming years.

Major League Aspirations

by Brandon Michea | Ledger-News

“Come on Dougy! Where was that?”

“You’re just showing off for the camera.”

Not even the constant ribbing of Augusta Green Jackets pitching coach Steve Klein throughout his team’s Sunday afternoon bill in Rome early this spring could phase the man behind the plate. Instead, all Klein got was the occasional glance with a smile. For Douglas Vines, it was just another day at the ballpark for an umpire.

“It’s definitely part of it,” Vines said of the chatter coming from coaches and players. “As an umpire, you realize that everybody is going to have their point of view. It just comes with the territory. “Whatever call you make, there’s going to be somebody that’s not going to be happy. It just takes some getting used to ... if you can’t take it, you’re in the wrong profession.” And Vines has had plenty of opportunities to make the adjustment since becoming a professional umpire a little more than two years ago.

After graduating top of his class from the Harry Wendelstedt Umpire School in February of 2007, Vines is shooting up the minor league ranks, calling Rookie level ball in 2007, moving up to the Short Season New York-Penn league in ’08, and starting this spring in the Low Class A South Atlantic League before recently earning another promotion to the High Class A Carolina League this month.

“I was reflecting with my girlfriend recently about how far my career has come ,” Vines said. “I can think back to my very first game in Melbourne, Fla., working behind the plate of a Dodgers/Nationals rookie level game. I was so intimidated thinking about how they were professional ball players, and there I was, a first-year umpire wondering what I was going to do. And here I am now. I’ve gotten better, but, by all means, I still have tons of growth still to go through; but I’m slowly but surely starting to find out who I am as an umpire.”

However, this wasn’t how Vines pictured his ascent through the minor leagues, at least, not as a kid. He was supposed to be the one digging into the batters box, making diving plays in the outfield and gunning down runners at the plate.

But that wasn’t the path the baseball gods chose for the 27-year-old Cherokee County native, despite his success on both the prep and collegiate levels. As a junior at Woodstock High, Vines was the Cherokee Ledger-News All-County Baseball Offensive Player of the Year, batting .519 with eight home runs, 30 RBI and 13 stolen bases while playing in one of the toughest regions Georgia high school baseball had to offer. He earned Ledger all-county honors in football, basketball and baseball in his sophomore through senior seasons.

After not getting the type of collegiate offers he was hoping for following graduation in 2000, Vines decided to walk-on at Kennesaw State University with one goal in mind. “I was a little upset about not signing with a big D-I school and I wanted to go (to KSU) and immediately assert myself,” he said. “But after being told by the coach that the upperclassmen were going to be the priority in terms of playing time, I decided that was not the situation I wanted to be in and took my redshirt year.”

That led Vines to Auburn University, where he signed and played for the next two seasons. But after losing playing time to younger player on a full scholarship during his second year, he elected to transfer to Georgia Southwestern University, a National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) institution in Americus.

At GSW, Vines ran across a new obstacle. “My heart rate kept going really high, and I was diagnosed with a hyperactive thyroid,” recalled Vines. “I sat out 2004, then played my senior season and had some opportunities to sign as a free agent.” But in talking with GSW head coach Bryant McClain, Vines and his coach felt like he would be able to receive a medical redshirt for his missed 2004 campaign and come back in the spring of 2006 to better his chances of being drafted. The NAIA thought otherwise, denying Vines the medical redshirt request, a decision he did not receive until November of 2006.

Feeling short-changed, he walked away from the game – ignoring pleas from McClain to stay on as a graduate assistant and try to work his way into a Major League organization through tryouts. Vines was done. “I was really bitter and bitter with the game,” he said. “So, I decided to just move back home (to Woodstock) and started looking for work.”

Back home, Vines found he still carried a love for the game, so he returned to a line of work he had a little back-ground in – umpiring. With the help of Dan Carmichael, Vines began umpiring as a teen, working games for the Cherokee Reds travel baseball program based out of Barnett Park in Canton – eventually rolling over into an assistant coaching position for Carmichael’s Reds squad. “Coach Dan got me into it my senior year of high school and it allowed me to make some pocket change,” recalled Vines. “It really wasn’t anything serious then.” “I pointed him in the direction of umpiring because it was a way he could be around the game and make some money,” said Carmichael, who Vines said has been a “father figure” to him over the years. “I told him that you never know where it could lead.”

But it was not until the Fall of 2006, while umpiring for East Cobb Baseball, that Vines revisited the opportunity. “I came into contact with a guy working games at the East Cobb Complex by the name of Jim Stros, Director of the National Umpires Association and he directed me to professional umpiring school,” Vines said. “So, I did some research and off I went.” Just months later, Vines graduated No. 1 out of class of nearly 125 umpires, but his success did not stop there.

In 2008, he ranked No. 1 in the NY-Penn League and No. 5 out of 40 short season umpires, working both the league all-star game and postseason. In his short time in Low Class-A, Vines worked second base in the South Atlantic League All-Star game in June. Before the professional baseball season, Vines calls games as a part of the Southern Collegiate Umpires Association, which primarily covers Clemson, Auburn, Georgia and Georgia Tech. Vines said that opportunity pays big dividends in his overall performance.

“(SCUA) is one of the best umpiring associations in the country,” he said. “I worked 55 games with them this year and did 35 with them in 2008. To get that much ball under my belt before going to spring training, I feel like it just makes me that much better. The more pitches you see, the better off you’re going to be.” And for Vines, improving as an umpire is about more than just earning a living, it’s about a second chance, and one he plans to make the most of.

“I feel like, as a player, I came up short,” Vines said. “So, reflecting back on the times I used to take for granted playing the game when I was a young kid, to growing up and finding myself as a person ... I refuse to not leave it all out on the field every night I umpire. I didn’t accomplish what I wanted to as a player, so each night I work now, it’s like I’m out there with vengeance, trying to get back for what I didn’t accomplish before.” That includes hitting the weight room to stay in shape, studying the rules and even standing in front of a mirror in his hotel rooms working on his mechanics. “I try to perfect my mechanics,” he said, “because they’re a big deal as far as umpires go. If you have good, crisp mechanics, you’ll earn the respect of the players and coaches, and they’ll believe in your calls when you’re firm with them. If you’re lackadaisical with your calls, it gives them a chance to think you’re being lazy out there.”

On the field, Vines has to work even harder. “You have to be tuned in every pitch,” he said. “There are no pitches off. It doesn’t matter if it’s a pitchout, an intentional walk or whatever, you have to be on top of it with your reaction. “The more you get caught relaxing, the more things are going to blow up on you.” Despite his own warnings, though, Vines admits it’s easy to get caught up in the action – at least between pitches. “It’s tough not to get caught up watching sometimes, especially when working the bases,” he said. “Even now, I have a few players that I enjoy watching because I appreciate the way they play the game ... at times, I find myself caught up watching the different types of swings they’re taking or just their approach to the game. There are also times working the bases where I’ve found myself being caught up in the moment, and, as a former player, wondering what I would do in the situation. That’s all part of the fun I get out of it.”

The difference between that former player and the umpire today, however, is drastic. “If someone would have told me 10 years ago that I would be a professional umpire and not a player, I would have laughed at them and told them they were crazy, because umpires were not my favorite back then,” Vines said. “I think back and realize the punk I used to be to some umpires, and now, to have someone be the way I was in those situations, I wouldn’t tolerate it at all. But I feel very blessed and fortunate to be where I am now. I honestly appreciate what I do. I think if I had made it as a player, I wouldn’t appreciate the game the way I do now, and my commitment level to umpiring has changed tremendously from when I first started. I’m an umpire and that’s what my life is. I do each and every thing I can do every day to better myself as an umpire, because it’s such a great job.. and it’s taught me so much and made me a better person.” For Carmichael, who’s been there every step of the way, seeing Vines’ success is rewarding. “It really makes you proud,” he said. “I’ve been through things with him in life, and it’s good to see him overcoming the obstacles. “He’s like a son to me ... I always knew that once he figured out what he wanted to do, he would dedicate himself to doing what needed to be done to get there – and for him, that’s umpiring in the Majors. He’s deserving of anything good that comes his way, and there’s no doubt that I will always be keeping up with everything he accomplishes throughout his career.”



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Douglas Vines jumps out of the way while Rome Braves catcher Braeden Schlehuber breaks to the backstop for a passed ball. Weeks after calling the Low Class A South Atlantic League All-Star Game in June, Vines, who also worked the New York-Penn League All-Star Game in 2008, earned a promotion to High Class A Carolina League earlier this month.

THE VINES FILE

Since starting his journey as a professional umpire, Douglas Vines is quickly climbing the minor league baseball ranks:

February 2007: Graduated top of his class from Harry Wendelstedt Umpire School

Summer '07: Called games for Rookie Level Gulf Coast League (Fla.)

Spring '08: Promoted to Short Season NY-Penn League, earning No. 1 ranking among NYPL umpires, while ranking No. 5 overall out of 40 Short Season umps

Spring '09: Promoted to Low Class-A South Atlantic League

July '09: Promoted to High Class-A Carolina League

