

# *Shrewsbury's Nick Martin is ready for Bravehearts' stretch run*

By Rich Garven

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WESTFIELD — After an 11-day layoff due to a high-ankle sprain and bone bruise, Nick Martin was obviously eager, excited and energized to be back in the lineup for the Worcester Bravehearts.

The 2017 Shrewsbury High graduate instantly returned to his impactful ways Tuesday, going 1 for 3 with a walk and scoring twice while making a leaping catch in left field in the nightcap as the Bravehearts swept a doubleheader from the Westfield Starfires.

“I feel great, and I felt good last night,” Martin said a day later. “I felt comfortable in the box, which was probably the biggest concern, just seeing the ball well, which I did. So it’s something to build off of for the last (seven) games and then into the championship.”

The two-time defending Futures Collegiate Baseball League champions have seven games remaining after hosting Westfield on Wednesday night at Doyle Field. The top two teams in the league, currently the Bravehearts and Nashua, will advance to a best-of-three championship later this month.

While the braced right ankle is still a bit balky, the attitude remains 100 percent healthy for Martin, a rising junior at Division 3 Westfield State by way of Quinsigamond Community College.

“My approach this year has just been to play as hard as I can every single day, which is basically my approach every single day that I’ve played baseball,” he said. “Because I’m playing with a lot of D1, D2 kids, sometimes people might overlook me. But if I’m the hardest-working player out there, people will see that and respect that.”

The 5-foot-9, 175-pound Martin made the Shrewsbury High varsity as the backup catcher as a freshman. He soon stepped in when the starter got hurt and never relinquished the job, helping the Colonials go 57-32 and earn four Central Mass. Division 1 Tournament berths.

The Colonials reached the CMass final his sophomore and junior seasons, losing to St. Peter-Marian and current Bravehearts teammate P.J. Barry both times.

“They had a really good team, too, so sometimes you have to tip your cap,” said Martin, who was selected to the T&G Super Team after leading Mid-Wach A with a .422 average as a senior and went on that summer to help Shrewsbury Post 397 reach the American Legion World Series.

Initially interested in attending Suffolk University in Boston, Martin plotted a different course after discovering during an orientation session that the nearest batting cages were a 25-minute train ride away.

That, combined with the realization his academic transcript could use a boost, led him to Quinsigamond, where he was reunited with Wyverns baseball coach John McLaughlin.

McLaughlin coached Martin in AAU ball and as a Shrewsbury assistant before taking over at Quinsig in 2016. The reunion paid dividends beyond helping the Wyverns reach the Division 3 National Junior College Athletic Association Region 21 final during Martin’s one season in Worcester.

“He was a great mentor for me and taught me how to really play hard from the get-to,” Martin said. “He really helped me become the player I am, so he deserves a lot of credit for what he’s done over there.”

With his grades in order, Martin matriculated to Westfield State in the fall of 2018. The Owls won the MASCAC championship and advanced to the NCAA regionals as he batted .331 with 20 RBIs, 33 runs and 17 stolen bases in 43 games last season.

Martin was hitting .455 this spring before the season was canceled after six games due to the coronavirus pandemic. So he’s grateful to be back playing baseball for

the second straight summer with the Bravehearts, while also interning for Worcester County District Attorney Joseph D. Early Jr.

Martin, who is majoring in political science with a concentration in law, and his four fellow interns recently helped the Opioid Task Force complete a 40-page study on ways to better help mitigate the crisis in Worcester County.

“He’s a great role model for all of us to strive to be,” Martin said of Early. “Baseball isn’t going to last forever, so it’s important to have a path to go on in case something doesn’t happen down the line.”

Martin brings productivity and versatility — which he credits to his dad and Little League coach, Kevin, for developing — to the Bravehearts.

He was batting .288 with 5 extra-base hits, 6 RBIs, 8 runs, and 5 stolen bases in 18 games entering Wednesday’s game. And although he has only played left field this season, he has experience at both corner outfield spots, third base and, of course, catcher.

Martin has always displayed good awareness of the strike zone, having fanned at the otherworldly rate of 11 percent while playing for Quinsigamond, Westfield and the Bravehearts. He credits that to God-gifted 20-10 vision and a simple two-strike approach that emphasizes putting the ball in play, believing good things will come of that.

“He’s a good mix of being ultra-aggressive, but understanding of the strike zone,” Bravehearts manager Alex Dion said. “So he doesn’t get himself out a lot, and he’s a guy for us at the top of the lineup who is kind of a spark plug and just gets things going. So, yeah, it’s going to be nice to have him back here at the end.”