

## Jakson Reetz: The Road Back to the Bigs

By: Thomas Zinzarella

Growing up, every kid has the same dream of one day suiting up for their favorite Major League team. But getting there is usually a long, winding, and arduous journey. Currently, there are less than 23,000 players who have ever stepped foot on a Major League field. You can find one of those players right here in Biloxi playing for the Shuckers.

Jakson Reetz was born in Hickman, Nebraska, and grew up just south of Lincoln. Growing up in the Reetz family, sports were an integral part of his upbringing at a young age. His dad was a former linebacker under Tom Osborne's juggernaut Nebraska program, and his mom was a standout volleyball player at Nebraska Wesleyan.

His passion for playing baseball, basketball and football blossomed as he entered high school, where he participated in all three sports at the varsity level. But it wasn't baseball that first caught his eye. "Basketball was my favorite sport growing up, but I'm only six-foot, so playing the four-man wasn't always the easiest in high school as I was guarding guys 6'7 and 6'8," Reetz recalled with a smile. "The reason why I loved to play basketball was that I just love to compete. That's why I played all three sports growing up." It's the same theme that fellow teammate Sal Frelick shared, who was also a three-sport star in high school. Compared to Sal, it was a much simpler decision for Jakson to pursue his baseball career. He loved the training labor and toil that came with the game. "With baseball, I love the grind every single day. I loved hitting, I loved catching, I loved the lifting that came with it. Just every aspect that comes with baseball."

Although Reetz is often seen managing the Shuckers' pitching staff at MGM Park, it wasn't always his first position in the field. "Actually, left field was. I hadn't played left field until this year," Reetz chuckled. "But left-field was the first position I ever played in baseball, and I don't think I had played it since I was nine years-old until this year." With the Shuckers, Reetz has made six starts in left field, compared to 32 behind home plate. The 5'11 catcher was lured to the life of a catcher from his time on the gridiron. "I loved being in that leadership mentality" Reetz said. "That's why I played quarterback, it was to become a better catcher as well but I just liked being involved in every single play, you can't take any play off."

On the baseball diamond in high school, Reetz would play six innings behind home plate before he would be tasked to record the final three outs out as his team's closer, an experience he says that still aids him to this day. "I think it helps our relievers just because I know the situations they're in," he added. "I know their tendencies, what they're going through and how the situation develops. I think it helps me in that aspect where 'hey, I know how they are feeling.'"

The grind and determination paid off for Reetz, who was beginning to garner local and national attention in high school. For starters, the Norris High School product was the first-ever player from Nebraska to participate in the prestigious Perfect Game All-American Classic at Petco Park. Not only did he receive the opportunity to play in the event, but he swept up the MVP honors as well, capped off by Hall of Fame closer Trevor Hoffman congratulating him with the trophy after the game.

But there was still an item on his bucket list that he had to check off. “I had two goals growing up. One was to become a Major League baseball player, and two, I wanted to be a USA baseball player and play for Team USA,” he revealed. “The first [Team USA] tryout I went to, I didn’t make it, but it was very eye-opening for me to see all of these players coming from around the country and how good some of these guys were.” That goal was finally accomplished when Reetz was a part of the USA Baseball 18U National Team that captured a gold medal at the IBAF World Cup in Taiwan in 2013. With a gold medal around his neck, his attention turned to accomplishing his first goal of playing in the Major Leagues.

After he was selected in the 3rd round of the 2014 MLB Draft by the Washington Nationals, the Nebraska native opted to jumpstart his professional baseball career and forgo his scholarship to the University of Nebraska. After grinding his way through the Minor Leagues for seven years, Reetz finally got the call he had been waiting for his entire life.

“When I got called up from Double-A, I was only in Triple-A for three days. Me and my fiancé were at a restaurant, our game had been canceled because of rain,” Reetz recalled. “We’re sitting there watching the Nationals game and my fiancé had joked to me because Yan Gomes came out of the game. She goes ‘Hey I think you’re going to the big leagues.’ I started laughing and said, ‘Ah I don’t think so.’ Five minutes later, I got the call from my manager, Matt LeCroy, and he said ‘You’re going to San Francisco.’”

Reetz quickly packed his bags and hopped on the first available flight from Rochester, NY, to San Francisco, CA. The newly-promoted catcher didn’t arrive at Oracle Park until the fourth inning, where he quickly signed his contract and joined the team.

“As soon as I got there, they told me to be ready. I got a tap on my shoulder in about the seventh inning saying, ‘You may want to go take a couple swings, you might pinch hit,’” Reetz reminisced. “I took a couple swings in the cage, but I hadn’t eaten anything, and I was so tired from the night before from flying all day and I wasn’t really thinking, I just walked up to the plate, not really understanding what was going on.”

None of that mattered though. Reetz lined a bullet into triples alley at Oracle Park, and he cruised into second base with his first Major League hit. “I took off towards first base, and I

could not feel my legs. I ended up hitting a double, and I was running the whole time,” Reetz laughed. “I got to second, and one of my good buddies was playing first base, Darin Ruf, who I work out with in the offseason. I didn’t even know he was on the field, and he came up to me and goes, ‘I want to be the first to congratulate you.’”

Reetz would later come in to score on a Josh Harrison groundout later in the inning. Still, it’s a Major League debut he will never forget. “The next day, my family was able to make it out and that was one of the most special moments I’ve ever had in my entire life.” Although Reetz was optioned back down to the Minor Leagues, it’s the small appetizing taste of the big leagues that keeps him coming back.

After signing with the Milwaukee Brewers as a free agent in the offseason, the former three-sport star was assigned to Double-A Biloxi. In the last series of the first half of the 2022 season, Reetz homered in back-to-back nights to break his career-high home run total that he set back in 2019. The Shuckers' catcher is ranked top-10 in the Southern League in several offensive categories and at one point, was first in all of Minor League baseball in slugging percentage. “I think just the biggest thing in baseball is you’re going to have good seasons, you’re going to have bad seasons and every season you need to reflect and find something to get better at,” he added. “I definitely needed to get better at hitting this year; I worked every day this offseason to get better.”

Shuckers’ Development Coach JJ Reimer, who has worked closely with Reetz all season long, has praised him for his work ethic on the field and says he has one goal on his mind.

“Jakson’s work ethic is an endless pursuit to be the best baseball player he can be,” Reimer noted. “It’s not an endless pursuit to go to the big leagues, to be an everyday big-league player; it’s for him to be the best baseball player that he can be.” Both Jakson and JJ have been working in tandem throughout this season. “JJ makes sure we get everything in,” Jakson said. “He doesn’t want us to work on one thing but wants us to be good at everything and to be as polished as possible.” Defensively, Reetz has been focusing on his receiving and throwing from behind the dish. That work is already on full display in Biloxi. During the home series against the Tennessee Smokies, Jakson threw out seven of 14 attempted base stealers.

The combination of his offensive and defensive skills culminating together this season is scary for opponents around the Southern League and, soon enough, back at the Major League level as well.