



All Work and Some Play

Rio Americano grad John Bowker hones his major-league baseball skills in the off-season

By Duffy Kelly

Take a spin down American River Drive around 3:30 any day of the week, pull up alongside Rio American High School's grassy field, and you'll be in for a rare treat in baseball. And if you get hit in the head by a home run ball that sails into the school parking lot, grab that ball and hold onto it for a souvenir.

That's because San Francisco Giants first baseman and centerfielder John Bowker, an Arden Park resident raised on Arden Park Little League's hotdogs, practices at Rio's field during the week in the off-season. With his ever-faithful uncle and off-season trainer, Jeff Carmichael, Bowker fields grounders and smacks pitches day in, day out, being careful not to let any grass grow under his feet during the winter.

"It's a lot of hard work," he says. "It's pretty much year round, during the off-season. I work out every day and practice hitting and fielding and all that, But I love every bit of it."

A 6-foot-2 leftie, Bowker completed his rookie season in the majors after being drafted by the Giants in 2004 and playing in the minors for three years. He was called up the first week of last season and started about 100 of the 162 season games, batting .255.

"It's a dream come true," he says. "I grew up rooting for the Giants and it's cool to get drafted by them. There are 30 teams in the majors and I was lucky to get drafted by the Giants. To play in front of all my friends and family, it's a pretty fun experience."



San Francisco Giants first baseman and centerfielder John Bowker practices his swing on Rio Americano High School's baseball field

The son of Arden Park residents Brite and Chris Bowker, John played baseball as a youngster for the Arden Park team his dad coached. He attended Mariemont Elementary, Arden Middle and Rio Americano High schools. At Rio, he played baseball, football and basketball.

"It wasn't until his sophomore year that he decided baseball was what he wanted to pursue and he pursued it

in a big-hearted way," Brite Bowker says.

Despite not being recruited to a college team, John held fast to his dream of playing in the majors. Dreams die hard for the passionate.

"I wasn't recruited out of high school to go play," he says. "So basically I went to Long Beach State because it was the only school that offered me something and even then it was only books. So I went there

as a walk-on and I had to prove myself. From there I got drafted by the Giants. I had a couple of seasons when I struggled, but I just had to tell myself I was good enough to make it."

Bowker remembers many times people told him he wasn't good enough to play in the majors. But he is a walking case-in-point that you have to swing at a lot of pitches to hit just a few home runs.

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"I think if there's a secret to success, it's just doing something that you love to do," he says. "I knew from early on that it takes a lot of hard work and perseverance. I went through so many times when people told me I'd never make it, I didn't have the talent to make it in the game. But I had to play, I had to because I love playing baseball no matter."

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"There's a lot of failure along the way," Bowker says. "You are considered a good hitter if you hit .300, which means you're failing seven out of 10 times to get those three hits. Baseball is a lot of failure, so you really have to have confidence."

"I would say, if you have a dream, don't let people say it can't happen for you. Hard work pays off and always be doing something you love because as long as you're putting in the hard work, and you don't let the failures get to you, you'll know you did your best. You have to stay confident."

His father is perhaps proudest of his son not for being a Giant, but for his giant work ethic.

"His work ethic is amazing," Brite Bowker says. "He practices four or five hours a day all winter long. How many guys are out there every day in this kind of weather? Even with the Giants, his work ethic is pretty well-known by the team."

On this wintry day, John Bowker cracks pitch after pitch, grunting a disappointed "Oh, no," when whopper high-flying shots to the outfield hit the fence instead of going over it.

His uncle, also one of his youth coaches, stations himself behind a pitching net to avoid being mowed down by one of John's mean straight shots to center field, and then it's time for fielding practice, during which Carmichael bats anything and everything at his nephew.

Bowker shags balls in the outfield and runs through the parking lot to retrieve a pile of home run balls. It seems that he feels no star is too bright to be above the dirty work. Besides, "It's how I stay in shape," he says.

With a humble nature and soft-spoken ease, you get the idea from this all-American, down-home boy that he is grateful for every moment he spends playing baseball. No job is beneath him. No workout is without purpose. No amount of time in the minors wasted.

"In the minors the travel is not very good. It's a lot of long bus rides," Bowker says. "You might play in San Jose one day and the next in Lancaster, which is seven hours away by bus. You're not really eating well. Lots of Denny's and pizza. But it's great anyway."

Now Bowker flies on charter planes and stays in nice hotels while making a healthy annual salary. But he still lives with Mom and Dad in the off-season and has as much time for his family as they can make for him.

"I am really close to my family," he says. "They taught me to be an honest hard-working person."

While Bowker works out, murmurings from the Rio dugout can be heard as the high school players gather to watch him while waiting for their own practice to begin. On

this day I ask them if Bowker is a role model for them.

"Well, yeah, kind of," they sigh. "But we don't want to work that hard. He's out here every single day. Can you believe that?"

That's one way to be a Giant.

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