

Hansen has sights on a big season

By RICH RADFORD, The Virginian-Pilot

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PORT ST. LUCIE, Fla. — Jed Hansen has a few unique ways in which he signs a baseball. Below his name, he'll often add a Biblical reference.

"Matthew 6:33, Romans 10:9, Galatians 2:20, John 1:12. There are a few others I'll write below my signature, but those are the most common ones I use," said Hansen, who is likely to start at third base for the Triple-A Norfolk Tides when they open their season at Scranton/Wilkes-Barre on Thursday. "Sometimes, people will come up to me later and say they liked the passage, others don't know what it is I'm putting on their baseball."

While Hansen will take time with fans to spread the word, here's the word on Hansen: He's not the same player Tides fans saw five years ago at Harbor Park.

Back in 2000, Hansen struggled mightily, hitting .146 in 39 games for the Tides. It was easily his worst season as a professional. He began that year with Las Vegas, where he hit .208. He ended it in Louisville, where he batted .176.

A .262 career hitter in the minors, the 2000 season just didn't add up.

So Hansen has spent the last few years adding to his arsenal. He's thicker and stronger, stretching 210 pounds around his 6-foot-1 frame.

He also sees the game better, having employed the help of an eye specialist.

Once a hot-shot prospect with the Kansas City Royals — he was a second-round pick in the 1994 draft — the 32-year-old Hansen ran into Dr. Bill Harrison when he was in the Royals' spring training camp nearly 10 years ago. Harrison specializes in vision training.

"He was making more of a cattle call, talking to a lot of players about the importance of strengthening your eyesight and working on it," Hansen said. "I didn't give it a lot of thought."

"Then a couple of years ago I was talking about it with Brady Clark when we were both with the Brewers organization," Hansen said. "Brady says to me, 'I've got Harrison's number if you want to call him.'"

He gave Harrison a call, then in the offseason traveled from Tacoma, Wash., to Laguna Beach, Calif., to see the doctor.

Harrison fitted Hansen with contacts, and a career that was wallowing seemed to find direction. Last season, while with Triple-A Omaha in the Pacific Coast League, Hansen hit .272, had 27 home runs and drove in 82 runs.

It was the most productive year he'd ever had.

"It was the turning point in my career," said Hansen, who professes to have 20/20 vision without the contacts.

"It wasn't so much my eyesight as it was what was happening with my eyes," Hansen said. "While I was crushing fastballs, my eyes tended to cross when someone threw me a changeup or a curveball. It's all about visual acuity. The doctor gave me a real slight prescription for contacts and prescribed a couple of exercises. The eyes are just like any muscle: You can strengthen them with exercise."

Hansen works out his eyes on a Web site Harrison directed him to.

"The way this game has evolved, you have to maximize your chances to advance," Hansen said. "I want to get back to the major leagues. Dr. Harrison also worked with mental visualization with me. He stressed that I should vividly remember when at-bats go well and try to have that feeling with every at-bat."

For three straight seasons beginning in 1997, Hansen made it to the majors for brief stays. But he hasn't been on the big stage again since 1999. Now he's set to play third base in an organization that has a future star, 22-year-old David Wright, at that position.

"I can play other positions," Hansen said. "And teams have a way of finding positions for players who can hit."

Notes: The Tides will have a practice open to the public at 7 tonight at Harbor Park. ... The Tides will play an exhibition game against Old Dominion at Harbor Park at 7:15 p.m. Tuesday. Norfolk will provide pitching for both teams during the seven-inning exhibition. Tickets are \$5 for adults and \$3 for children, with proceeds benefiting ODU's scholarship fund for baseball.

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