

## **A's News Clips, Monday, January 25, 2010**

### **A's prospect Grant Desme retiring from baseball to become a priest**

Oakland Tribune staff and wire report 1/23/2010

Grant Desme, one of the Oakland A's top prospects, has retired from baseball in order to enter the priesthood.

The A's confirmed what FOXSports.com first reported Friday morning and will make Desme available to the media later Friday afternoon.

"We respect Grant's decision and wish him nothing but the best in his future endeavors," said A's general manager Billy Beane.

Desme, 23, established himself as a potential big-league standout by batting .288 with 31 home runs, 89 RBI and 40 stolen bases in a combined 131 games over two levels of minor-league play this season. He was minor league baseball's only 30-30 man.

Desme capped off his season by dominating the Arizona Fall League, where many of the game's top prospects compete in each season. Desme was named the league's Most Valuable Player.

Baseball America recently named Desme as the A's 8th-best prospect. Other publications had the outfielder ranked among the Top 5 of Oakland's prospects.

Desme was a second-round draft choice by the A's out of Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo in 2008.

### **Oakland prospect to enter seminary**

Susan Slusser, Chronicle Staff Writer 1/23/2010

A few months ago, Grant Desme was named the Most Valuable Player in the elite-prospect Arizona Fall League. Next month, he was supposed to head to big-league camp for the first time.

Instead, the 23-year-old outfielder is giving up his near-can't-miss shot at a major-league career in order to study for the priesthood. Desme told reporters Friday that in August he will enter St. Michael's Abbey in Orange County as a Catholic seminarian.

"Baseball is a good thing, but that felt selfish of me when I felt that God was calling me more," Desme said on a conference call. "It took a while to trust that and open up to it and aim full-steam toward him.

"I love the game, but I'm going to aspire to higher things."

The decision was entirely unexpected. Desme said A's general manager Billy Beane was shocked, and assistant GM David Forst made sure director of player development Keith Lieppman was sitting down before relaying the news.

"He was right on the verge of fame and fortune and glamour, and he's denying all that," Lieppman said. "He's going in a totally different direction. Grant said it was a very powerful call, and that's much more important."

Desme thanked the A's for supporting his decision. He was a valuable investment, receiving a \$432,000 signing bonus as a second-round pick in 2007, after being named the Big West Player of the Year at Cal Poly. The team expected him to

rise quickly through the system. Lieppman said the A's projected him to be a starting big-league outfielder, though scouts for other teams said he might have been more of a fourth-outfielder type.

Injuries slowed Desme in 2008, and he said Friday that that led him to do some soul searching. He had been considering becoming a priest for about a year and a half, but decided to play in 2009 - almost as a test - and wound up hitting .288 with 31 home runs, 89 RBIs and 40 steals in 131 games at Single A Kane County and Stockton.

The success, though, did not change his desire to become a priest, which told Desme a lot. Once he had informed Beane, Desme said, he "was able to experience a great deal of peace."

Donnie Moore, the A's team chaplain, said that that makes sense. "Peace is always the umpire when you make a decision like that. If you don't have peace in your heart, you're not going to be fulfilled by playing baseball."

Desme's choice, though unusual, is not unprecedented. Ed Cipot, once a top Mets prospect, retired in 1982 to become a priest, although he was on the downside of his minor-league career at the time. And many teams have had minor-league players go on Mormon missions, though most return to baseball.

Joe McIlvaine, a member of the Twins' front office, spent four years at St. Charles Seminary while playing semi-pro baseball, but left in order to play for the Tigers. He spent four years in the big leagues and has not left baseball, but McIlvaine said Friday he understands Desme's decision.

"I'm very impressed," said McIlvaine, noting that priestly vows of celibacy and poverty are almost the direct opposite of the pro sports world. "I was the reverse: I went from the seminary to baseball, and I know what is ahead for him.

"This boy probably had a major-league future, and he's giving up something he's strived for for a long time, which says a lot about how strongly he feels. He feels that this is more important to him, and there is nothing negative about that. It's a wonderful calling."

Asked if he had considered joining the seminary while continuing to play pro baseball in the summer, Desme said, "No. I want to give my life completely to God out of love because of everything he's done for me."

A lifelong Catholic who comes from a religious family, Desme said the process of becoming a priest will take 10 years, which he compared to re-entering the minor leagues. His family and friends are completely behind him, Desme said, and he had numerous calls from well-wishers after the news broke.

Many around baseball expressed shock that such a prospect would walk away from the game.

"For those of us who were never good enough to make it to the big leagues, this is a head-scratcher," one American League scout said. "But during this time in baseball when there's so much lying and selfishness and hypocrisy, I've got to say I think this is very refreshing. This is someone who has his priorities intact. God bless him."

## Desme retires to pursue priesthood

### A's prospect loves game, but answers to higher calling

By Jane Lee / MLB.com 1/23/2010

OAKLAND -- Grant Desme entered the 2009 season with an injury-prone past.

The A's prized prospect exited the season with a head-turning presence, accompanied by a bat that produced 31 home runs and a speedy 6-foot-2 frame that stole 40 bases in Class A ball -- making him the only player in Minor League Baseball to enjoy a 30-30 campaign.

An exceptional performance and MVP honors in the Arizona Fall League followed, so surely Desme was close to getting a call, most assumed -- if not for a trip to The Show, then at least for an invitation to Spring Training.

Yet, Desme insists he'd already received the call long before his final at-bat in the fall came and went -- the one that would take him to bigger and better places.

It just so happens it wasn't what the A's organization -- or anyone else, for that matter -- had in mind.

The call, Desme announced Friday, came in the form of priesthood in the Catholic church.

"Last year before the season started, I really had a strong feeling of a calling and a real strong desire to follow it," the 23-year-old said. "I just fought it."

Thus, Desme chose to play out the season as a test of sorts, "just hoping and praying about it."

"As the year went on," he said, "God blessed me. I had a better year than I could have imagined, but that reconfirmed my desire because I wasn't at peace with where I was at. I love the game, but I aspire to higher things.

"I thought, I'm doing well in baseball, but I really had to get down to the bottom of things -- what was good in my life, what I wanted to do with my life. And I felt that while baseball is a good thing and I love playing, I thought it was selfish of me to be doing that when I really felt that God was calling me more, which took me awhile in my life to really trust and open up to it and aim full steam toward Him."

The telling result: A phone call on Thursday to relay his life-changing choice to A's general manager Billy Beane, who chose Desme as the club's second-round pick in the 2007 First-Year Player Draft.

Beane's reaction to the news was "great," says Desme, who claimed to be even more taken aback than the team's head honcho during the conversation.

"I was surprised [Thursday] when I called Billy to inform him about my decision," Desme says. "I was interested to see how I was going to react, knowing that when that phone call was over I'd be done with baseball most likely for the rest of my life. I was able to experience a great amount of peace because of it.

"It just reconfirmed me of my decision, and it also made me realize that I had already detached myself from baseball awhile ago."

However, the numbers didn't show said feelings, and the A's were more than ready to start their No. 8 prospect -- recently deemed by Baseball America -- at Double-A Midland this season. After all, Desme's breakout year not only produced a .288 batting average and 89 RBIs, but also a clean bill of health for his ailing hamstring, wrist and shoulder.

"From a talent perspective," said Oakland's director of player personnel, Billy Owens, "it's pretty self-explanatory as for his numbers as to the type of player he is."

Adds A's scouting director Eric Kubota, who admitted to being in "disbelief" upon hearing the news: "I think people, in general, were just happy for Grant because he had an injury-free year for the first time. It really looked like, baseball-wise, he was on the fast track and going in the right direction."

He was, in fact, heading right where he needed to be -- despite not being where the baseball community wanted him to be.

"My injuries, I would say, would be the biggest blessing God's ever given me," he said. "For my entire life, baseball's been my life. I define myself as a baseball player, and when it was taken away from me, it was an eye-opener. It was a real shock that it could end. I realized that even if I played in the big leagues, it was still going to end, or it could end anytime you step on the field with an injury. I really started doing some soul searching of who I was and who I wanted to be, and this is where that's led me."

It's a place those close to Desme have come to embrace and appreciate, much to the outfielder's utmost appreciation.

"If that's what he wants to get into, then more power to him," said Daniel Haigwood, who played with Desme at Class A Stockton. "I have strong beliefs myself, so I think that shows how devoted he is to his religion. I'm sure he thought about it long and hard, and I really respect him for it."

Said a scout who's watched Desme since high school: "It was a little bit shocking since he was knocking on the big league door, but his faith has always been important to him, so in some ways it's not that shocking. I have a lot of respect for the young man."

Desme, a lifelong Catholic who grew up with a strong religious family in Bakersfield before attending Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo, has just as much respect for the game he's walking away from -- the same game he credits with aiding in his decision.

"Whenever I was able to talk to someone about God, or help someone, that made coming to the ballpark more enjoyable," he said. "I looked forward to that."

"During my last game in the fall league, I hit a home run and proceeded to strike out twice, which was kind of ironic since that defined my career a bit. I knew there was a good chance it would be my last game, but there was no sad feeling. I figured whatever God wants is going to happen, and I'm going to pursue that."

So now, the brave Desme faces what he says is a 10-year path to becoming a priest while studying at St. Michael's Abbey in Orange County beginning in August.

"It's like I'm re-entering the Minor Leagues," he said.

And while Desme has yet to fully process his life without baseball, he's certain his future will not include regrets.

"I want to give my life completely to God out of love because of everything He's done for me," he said. "Something like this is even very little compared to what He's done for me."

## **Desme not alone in answering calling**

### **A's prospect one of several choosing faith over baseball**

By Tom Singer / MLB.com

When impressive Oakland prospect Grant Desme reached the crossroads of baseball and faith, he found himself at an intersection many others have contemplated.

But the 24-year-old chose the path few have taken, embarking on another long road leading to priesthood. Desme retired from baseball and will enter a seminary in August -- about the time another solid Minor League season could have earned him a September promotion to the big leagues.

Desme didn't care about a callup as much as about a higher calling.

John Werhas has never heard of Desme, but the former Dodgers infielder is familiar with the process that led to his decision. During two decades as a Baseball Chapel minister that took him into Major and Minor League clubhouses every Sunday morning, Werhas listened to many players struggle with a similar choice.

"They were torn by their desire to lead a more balanced life that accommodated their faith," Werhas said. "Actually, I was one of the few voices that encouraged them -- if they were good enough to play and get to the big leagues -- to stay in the game as long as they had the God-given ability to play.

"If you think about it, there aren't too many other things you could do where the two, sports and faith, better complement each other."

Desme clearly viewed the two as mutually exclusive.

"I love the game, but I aspire to higher things," he said on a conference call with reporters on Friday afternoon.

The fair-haired Californian's decision separates him from the crowd, but not the quandary he clearly faced.

For many, their faith runs deeper, is far more profound, than a simple skyward index finger when something good happens for them on the field.

Josh Fields, the infielder dealt by the White Sox to Kansas City in November, also considered retiring from baseball a couple of months after his 2007 rookie season.

The devout Fields was disenchanted with the clubhouse culture, telling the gathering at a Fellowship of Christian Athletes luncheon of the "many things going on in the clubhouse that I really questioned if professional baseball was for me."

Ultimately, Fields "prayed about it and realized there is nowhere I could have more influence right now than in that clubhouse."

Some have answered faith's calling *before* committing themselves to baseball.

Jeremy Guthrie was a first-round Draft pick in 2002 as a 23-year-old -- because he had interrupted his collegiate pitching career for a two-year Mormon mission to Spain.

Fireballing Matt Lindstrom was a Marlins rookie at 27 -- because he also had first gone on a two-year Mormon mission, to Sweden.

The first thing shortstop Jimmy Scholzen did after signing in 2005 with Tampa Bay, which had taken him in the 10th round of the 2004 First-Year Player Draft, was embark on the two-year Mormon mission.

It did not work out for Scholzen, who retired from the game after hitting .162 in 142 at-bats in the Rookie League in 2007.

Werhas' path into priesthood was not much different: He played his last game for the California Angels in 1967, when he was only 29. However, he left with a career average of .173 in 168 at-bats across three seasons.

"The truth was, I didn't have much baseball left," he said. "And I didn't really enter religion until many years later. I certainly wasn't a young man with a lot of talent, as [Desme] appears to be. So my situation was different. I was through with baseball."

Desme, in contrast, turned his back on the game just as the two of them started to get along really well. Very few baseball players have done that but, ironically, another was a highly-touted A's prospect.

Steve Stanley was a 2002 second-round Draft pick also coming off a breakthrough Double-A season when he announced his retirement early in 2006, after an offseason spent assessing a Minor League life's toll on his family.

Countless nascent baseball careers have been curtailed by injuries, but seldom by choice.

The option is more common in football, where the constant physical punishment makes alternatives more appealing. Running backs Jim Brown (30), Barry Sanders (31) and Robert Smith (28) all walked off as young men.

Vince Young also considered doing so, following his 2006 rookie season with the Tennessee Titans, for reasons that will resonate with Desme.

"I really thought long and hard about it," Young recently recalled to NFL.com. "There was so much going on with my family. All I was doing was worrying about things. My teammates helped lift me out of it. I prayed really hard. And I began to focus on God's calling for me. Play football. Be a role model."

That had been Werhas' sermon to torn ballplayers, before he took another high road and six years ago became senior pastor of The Rock, a church in Yorba Linda, Calif.

He didn't get a chance to deliver the message to Desme, whom he has not yet met. Perhaps soon their crossroads will merge at a pulpit.

## **A's top prospect trades up for priesthood**

Ben Walker, Associated Press 1/23/2010

As a top prospect for the A's, outfielder Grant Desme might've gotten the call every minor leaguer wants this spring.

Instead, he believed he had another, higher calling.

Desme announced Friday that he was leaving baseball to enter the priesthood, walking away after a breakout season in which he became MVP of the Arizona Fall League.

"I was doing well at ball. But I really had to get down to the bottom of things," the 23-year-old Desme said. "I wasn't at peace with where I was at."

A lifelong Catholic, Desme said he thought about becoming a priest for about a year and a half. He kept his path quiet within the sports world, and his plan to enter a seminary this summer startled the A's when he told them Thursday night.

General manager Billy Beane "was understanding and supportive," Desme said, but the decision "sort of knocked him off his horse." After the talk, Desme felt "a great amount of peace."

"I love the game, but I aspire to higher things," he said. "I know I have no regrets."

Athletes and the priesthood have overlapped, albeit rarely.

Al Travers, who gave up 24 runs during a one-game career for a makeshift Detroit Tigers team in 1912, became a Catholic priest.

More recently, Chase Hilgenbrinck of the New England Revolution left Major League Soccer in 2008 to enter a seminary.

Desme spoke on a conference call for about 10 minutes in a quiet, even tone, hardly sounding like many gung-ho, on-the-rise ballplayers. As for his success in the minors, he said "all of it is very undeserving."

The A's picked Desme in the second round of the 2007 amateur draft, and he was starting to blossom. He was the only player in the minor leagues with 30 home runs and 30 stolen bases last season.

Desme batted .288 with 31 homers, 89 RBIs and 40 steals in 131 games at Class-A Kane County and high Class-A Stockton last year.

He hit .315 with a league-leading 11 home runs and 27 RBIs in 27 games this fall in Arizona, in a league filled with young talent.

Desme entered the fall league championship game well aware it might be the last time he ever played. "There was no sad feeling," he said. He homered and struck out twice, which "defines my career a bit."

The Big West Player of the Year at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, Desme was ranked as Oakland's No. 8 prospect by Baseball America.

There was speculation the A's might invite Desme to spring training next month.

Rather, Desme intends to enter a seminary in Silverado in August. He said abbey members didn't seem surprised someone who would "define myself as a baseball player" was changing his life so dramatically.

Desme said he didn't consider pursuing his spiritual studies while also trying to play ball. His family backed his decision and he said the positive reaction to his future goal – the surprising news spread quickly over the Internet – was "inspiring."

"It's about a 10-year process," he said. "I desire and hope I become a priest." In a way, he added, it's like "re-entering the minor leagues."

Desme's first two years in the minors were beset by shoulder and wrist problems. He said his days off the field gave him time to think about what was most important to him, to read and study the Bible and to talk to teammates about his faith.