

Whit Hughes, The Man Behind the Mask

By Brendan Pagel (August 10th 2024)

The intricacies of baseball are a difficult concept for most to grasp, however as a catcher and a coach Whit Hughes not only understands all these intricacies, but also excels in handling them.

Whit Hughes is currently a catcher and assistant coach of the Eastside Diamond Hoppers in the United Shore Professional Baseball League.

Hughes has been in the league for three years and has really enjoyed his experience.

Hughes' journey to the league actually came from an unlikely source.

He mentioned that he was identified at a men's league game by a man named Mike Rice. Rice then made a phone call and got Hughes a workout with then Diamond Hoppers' manager Diesel and he signed Hughes immediately afterwards.

When talking about what he likes most about being in the USPBL Hughes mentioned the camaraderie.

“For me it's the camaraderie. This is my third year and there are a couple of other guys that have been here for three years and we have built some really strong relationships over the past three seasons. There are four teams in the USPBL that compete, but at the same time everybody gets along for the most part. “

Hughes then went on to mention that they all have one goal in mind. That goal is to help everyone get better and hopefully get more people signed in a MLB organization.

One of the other fascinating parts of Hughes' story is that unlike many of the other guys in the USPBL he went the Community College route attending St. Clair County Community College.

When he was asked about what was one thing he took from going the JUCO route he mentioned the grit.

“For me that would be grit. Going to a JUCO you won't get pampered like you do at some of the other D1 or Division 2 schools. So you aren't given as much and you get less than preferable conditions sometimes, so you really have to buckle down and gut through anything that is thrown at you.”

He continued saying “It can be a grind at times but that grind kind of creates stronger relationships and harder dudes and I think that JUCO dudes across the country can be easily recognized by their grit and determination to help them get through whatever.”

Being a catcher has a lot attached to it.

As a catcher there are so many things that you are responsible for on the baseball team and for many that makes it extremely difficult.

When I asked Hughes about what he considered to be the job description of a catcher he highlighted a similar sentiment.

“Giving one specific job description is tough since there is so much we have to control during the game.”

“For instance we have to control the pitchers and make sure that we are working well together. Defensive alignment is also on the catcher a lot. A manager can scream things from the dugout but the catcher is the one guy that everyone is looking at so that a lot of times comes from him as well. Directing traffic too there are so many different things you have to be worrying about. On top of that there is your own performance hitting wise so to say there is one specific job description the best way I can describe it is that you are a catcher and embrace it.”

Helping to manage and control the pitching staff is one of the things Hughes highlighted as being a significant job for catchers.

Not all pitchers act and respond the same which can make things difficult for a catcher to get a proper read on his pitching staff.

When I asked Hughes about whether he stays the same or changes how he acts when working with certain pitchers he mentioned that everybody needs something different.

“This is part of the question you asked earlier when you talked about job title and the main components of managing a staff. Each pitcher has a different personality so the big thing for me is to learn about all the different guys. I have to learn what they like, what they don't, and how their personality works.”

He continued saying “A lot of times that comes from non-game day bullpen work. Certain guys like throwing this certain pitch in this given situation some guys don't. Every pitcher has their strengths and weaknesses and it is my job to know that and call a game accordingly. It's also my job to understand what they are like personality wise so I can get them all fired up, or when I need to get them to slow down and get grounded. Lots of times they won't tell you what they need so it is my job to know them on a personal level to get that information so it's just a piece of that job description.”

Not only does Hughes need to listen to what pitchers say to learn about them, but many times he also needs to be able to read what they are thinking so he can call the best game possible for that given pitcher.

I would argue that is something that not enough people talk about when they mention the catcher position in baseball.

As the team's primary catcher, Hughes is seen in a very positive light in the eyes of his team. However he is viewed so highly that his manager on the Diamond Hoppers Ryan Kottke named Hughes the assistant manager of the team.

When I asked Hughes about how it felt to be named the assistant manager on his team he mentioned that “It means a lot.”

He continued saying "It's a really good feeling to know that he has the trust and faith in me to give me that opportunity to slide into that position. At the same time the job doesn't change. I still have a job to do behind the plate as a player. On the coaching side of things I am a returner so I can help guide the younger guys a bit but my job mainly is to help him out with whatever he needs. Whether that is throwing BP, hitting fungos, whatever it is that he needs me to help him out with, that is kind of my job."

Even though Hughes loves the opportunity to be a coach on this team, he also wants to be known as one of the guys.

"I am still a teammate, still one of the guys on the field, but there is a little bit extra added to it and I try to fill in whenever I can."

One of the other common trends is that many former catchers are the guys that end up being coaches and managers.

When I asked Hughes why that may be, he mentioned that there were a few different parts to that.

"The first being because we are back there and because we are managing the game for the most part on the field the knowledge that we have to have for the game is above most. Not to say that there aren't smart center fielders or shortstops, there are, but at the same time catchers have to have that mental side of it or else they aren't going to pan out. They can be a talented player but if they don't have the mental side of it then they are never going to pan out in this game. The second part being because we have to be a good people person. We have to manage a pitching staff, we have to know these people on a personal level, we have to direct traffic with people on the field so we are good at dealing with people and we just have the head typically to make good managers."

I then asked Hughes whether he was hoping to coach after his time at the USPBL was up. He said "Yeah absolutely."

He continued "Coaching is something that is definitely in my future. I have grown to love it the past few years. I started out as an assistant coach at SC4 (St. Clair County Community College) and unfortunately due to time restrictions and what not I have not been able to do that this year. Still helping a lot of youth hitters with TPH, me and Kottke have started that and it has blown up, but yeah coaching is something that I have really grown to love... young kids, college athletes, doesn't matter. I feel like I have a skill set that really does pan out well in the coaching side of things and is something I definitely want to pursue when I am done playing."

Following that I asked Hughes to make a pitch for himself to whoever is looking for a coach.

He started saying that obviously that decision isn't up to him and that not every program may see him as a perfect fit.

He then added "But to that program one day that I will decide to coach with, I have a lot to offer. I have a lot of experience playing in the JUCO and Indy ball level so I kind of know what it is like to gut through and be gritty and persevere. Honestly I have also had the best coaches in the world with current Beavers coach Diesel who is one of the best defensive coaches I know. He really helped me out with the catching side of things. Of course Ryan Kottke the Hoppers

manager is the best hitting coach I have ever worked with and I have gained a lot of knowledge about hitting but also the game itself. So I have had a lot of work with some of the best coaches in the world which has helped me learn more about the game as a whole. “

Outside of the baseball diamond at Jimmy John’s Field, Hughes does a lot for the community around him regarding baseball.

He talked about a lot of opportunities where he has worked with young baseball players to help them improve their game.

“I work with a lot of young athletes and young hitters. Skip and I have started working with a lot of kids, and the kids are what makes me want to come back every day.”

He then went on to thank the Detroit Prospects for allowing them to work over there.

While he loves the opportunity to grow the game of baseball, Hughes made sure that it was the kids that make it all worthwhile.

“There are certain times where you see that light bulb go off in a kid's eyes and it is like the best drug in the world so it's why we do what we do. Thanks to those guys and thanks to all the kids that we work with, it makes it really great.”

I wanted to end the interview asking Hughes to tell me something that he thinks people should know about him that they don't.

However, given how outgoing he is in his position I probably should not have been surprised when he told me that there really isn't anything people should know about him that they don't if they know him personally.

“I am going to flip this a little bit on you here and say that there isn't much people don't know about me. Honestly I am a guy that wears my emotions on my sleeve and isn't afraid to show that to anybody. If you know me on a pretty good level, or even if you don't but you are just around me for a little bit here and there, you understand who I am. That doesn't really change very often. I am Whit Hughes and that's it.”

As a catcher it's Whit Hughes' job to make sure that he has the trust and support from not only his teammates, but also his coaches.

Hughes' outgoing personality and baseball IQ not only make him a great teammate, but also a great coach.

Whit Hughes has the intangibles of what every team, league, and organization looks for as they try to find their perfect catcher or coach.