

Cincinnati Reds draft Bilardello

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SANTA CRUZ — It's not every day that a lifelong dream comes true, so it is probably a safe bet to say that Santa Cruzan Dann Bilardello will remember Monday for a long, long while.

On Monday, the 23-year-old Bilardello was the No.1 draft pick in the annual minor league baseball draft, held in conjunction with the winter meetings in Honolulu, Hawaii.

What that means, essentially, is that Bilardello, who played baseball at Marelo Prep and later at Cabrillo College, may well on his way to the big leagues as a catcher for the Cincinnati Reds.

"This is probably the biggest thrill of my life," said Bilardello Monday night. "I've been playing baseball since I was eight years old and that's a long time. Every kid at any age, his dream is to be a big-leaguer, no matter what kind of player he is. I thought about it then and I still think about it now."

The Reds were able to draft Bilardello out of the Los Angeles Dodgers organization, where he has played for the past four years in their minor league system. The Dodgers did not protect Bilardello from being drafted by placing him on their 40-man roster and Cincinnati was able to pick him up. Any minor leaguer, after playing three seasons, can be drafted by another club if he is not placed on a team's 40-man roster.

"We're looking for someone for the next 5-10 years and Bilardello seemed to be the only player around that was available that might fit into that category," said Reds scout Tony Robello, who recommended Bilardello to Cincinnati. Robello is a 43-year scouting veteran and has sent over 50 players to the major leagues, among them Bilardello's new teammate, former catcher Johnny Bench who now plays third base.

And, because Bilardello was officially on the Dodgers' AAA Albuquerque, N.M. minor league club, the Reds, by drafting him, must offer him a major league contract and retain him on their roster for at least 90 days once the 1983 season officially begins. If Bilardello does not make the Reds' 25-man big league roster by the end of that period, he must be offered back to the Dodgers at half his draft purchase price of \$25,000.

"He will be given every opportunity to make our major league club," said Cincinnati assistant General Manager Woody Woodward this morning from Honolulu. "Obviously, we wouldn't have picked him up if the reports had not been good. Frankly, our catchers did not have a good year and we do not have depth at the position."

"We hope to keep him on the big club," says Robello. "We want him to make it. A lot will depend on what he shows us in spring training. I think his



Dann Bilardello

chances are very good. If we didn't think so, we wouldn't have drafted him. If he shows he can swing the bat, he'll be there. He's got his foot in the door."

Major league ballclubs usually carry three catchers on their 25-man rosters. Last year Cincinnati carried five, including Bench. However, the Reds traded Joe Nolan to Baltimore in mid-season and sent down Mike O'Berry to the AAA Indianapolis club. Rookie Dave Van Gorder and five-year vet Alex Trevino shared the starting duties behind the plate last season, but neither had an outstanding season.

The only other player in the picture is Indianapolis' Steve Christmas, which means there will be five players, including Bilardello, going after the three spots on the 25-man major league roster once spring training opens in Tampa, Fla., in February.

"I'm just glad to get the opportunity," says Bilardello. "I'm not going to say I'm going up there (to spring training) to tear it up. I'm going to be confident and believe in myself. It's obvious they believe in my abilities and that I can catch in the big leagues. There's no better reason. That says it all, just what they did by drafting me."

Bilardello's professional career began in 1978 in the Pioneer (rookie) League, where he played for the Dodgers' Lethbridge, Alberta (Can.) team. Next year he moved up to the A club in Clinton, Iowa, where he injured his hand on a pitchout and missed half the season.

Despite that setback, Bilardello was promoted to the Dodgers' California League A team in Lodi in 1980 and later played in the Instructional League that winter. However, during that first season at Lodi, Bilardello experienced his darkest moment as a professional when

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he was hit in the face by a pitch thrown by Phil Syburt of Redwoods.

The ball shattered Bilardello's cheekbone and put him out of action for another half-season, but he came back again the following year to hit 21 home runs and bat .305. Those numbers impressed the Dodgers enough that they promoted him to their AA team in San Antonio, Tex., two weeks before the end of the 1981 season.

This past summer at San Antonio, Bilardello experienced his finest season ever, being named to the Texas League All-Star team after hitting 17 home runs, batting .285, and catching 96 ballgames.

"There have been a lot of crossroads in my career all the way down the line," Bilardello said. "Somehow, fate has carried me through it all. Maybe I'm destined to play in the big leagues. Whatever it is, I've got to give it the best shot I can."

Twice, Bilardello recalled, he has come close to giving up. The first time was immediately following his beaming at Lodi. The second was soon after that incident, when the Dodgers asked him to be a player-coach. Recently-married at the time, Bilardello saw more security for his family in the prospect of coaching, but when he accepted the offer a few days later, the Dodgers had changed their mind.

One thing is for certain, however, as far as Bilardello is concerned. No matter what happens, no matter how things turn out, he'll never let baseball get out of perspective.

"I'm just happy to have the support of my wife Tish, my family and friends, for everything. I really mean that. They've all backed me up and that has helped me get through some tough times along the way," he said.