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## The Flying Razorback

Pitcher James Gilbert sets his sights on the postseason — and the Navy

**M**y girlfriend pointed me his way. Liz's parents, too. For months they had nothing but good things to say about him — a family friend, they told me, with an amazing story to tell. I finally decided to look into it.

Turns out they were right. Of course.

At first James Gilbert does not come across as being anyone special. He shrugs plenty while explaining his accomplishments. You can see it in his eyes. From his point of view he's a regular guy, a 22-year-old senior about to graduate from the University of Arkansas, just one person among hundreds of fellow classmates preparing to receive a college diploma in the coming days.

Except he's mistaken.

In fact, it's entirely possible that you've cheered for James Gilbert from the stands at Baum Stadium without even knowing it was him. Hard-core fans are already well aware that Gilbert is a reserve pitcher for the Razorbacks. He likes to paint a picture of himself as a "junk-throwing lefty," one who describes his efforts on the mound as a game of chess with the other team's batters. "For me, I have to figure out exactly what they might be looking for in a certain count. If I guess right, it's usually a good day."

Gilbert says his best performance so far this season came March 27 at Oral Roberts. During his first start of the season, Gilbert tossed three scoreless innings and allowed one hit. And big deal that they lost that one. Going into the stretch run of the regular season the Hogs are one of the top-ranked clubs in the nation. Like many of his own team's fans, Gilbert says that he and his teammates won't be satisfied by merely appearing in the College World Series this June.

"We're fighting for a national championship this year," he told me. "It's not just get there and be, 'Hey, we got here.' It's get there and win. That's the whole concept behind this team this year."

It's amazing what all goes into the life of a student-athlete. During the fall, Gilbert and Co. are in the weight room by 5:30 a.m.. After that comes a normal school day, followed by practice that afternoon. Of course, this doesn't include a whole series of individual workouts and homework. Spring-time means playing baseball across the South, still more practices, more homework, and enough autographs to satisfy every last kid in the stands who wants one. Gilbert also finds time to be involved with Arkansas Athletes Outreach, an organization that helps Razorback athletes grow into community leaders.

Incredible though it might seem, Gilbert's grades aren't hurting in spite of his many extracurricular activities. He's twice been named to the SEC Academic Honor Roll, and to the Lon Farrell Academic Honor Roll almost as many times as I have fingers. Before Friday's game against LSU, Gilbert received the prestigious Brandon Burlesworth Scholar Ath-



JUST A  
THOUGHT

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motion. Soon he'll be waking up at 5 a.m., exercising for three hours, grabbing breakfast, doing drills, trying his hand at class work, eating lunch, doing more drills, and attending more classes. After dinner comes study time, and bedtime not long after that. Sleeping shouldn't be a problem.

Assuming he survives three months worth of OCS, the former Razorback will shove off for two years worth of flight school. Should he make it past this obstacle as well, James Gilbert of Katy, Texas, could very well find himself landing fighters on a boat in the ocean, just like he always dreamed.

He sees a future in the Navy beyond his present eight-year commitment in case you were wondering. If he keeps at it he could retire as a career man at 42. And if a long life in the Navy doesn't happen? He says he might try to get on with

as I have fingers. Before Friday's game against LSU, Gilbert received the prestigious Brandon Burlsworth Scholar-Athlete Award, one of the most notable honors a UA student can hope for. It is an amazing achievement, especially in light of the fact that Gilbert (a mechanical engineering major) hasn't exactly been taking the easiest course work available to him.

But a shrug is all you'll get if you ask him about any of this. Maybe a polite smile. Doing very well in school, and on the field, is simply what he expects of himself. He doesn't feel there's much else to say.

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"So why are you joining the Navy?" I asked. He grinned.

"I always wanted to fly for the military. Air Force, Marines, Navy — it didn't really matter. I think I was 12, and my dad took me to an air show in Houston, and I saw the Blue Angels. That was one big selling point.

"And then just flying off a boat, getting shot off a boat, just seemed amazing to me. That's one of the main reasons I picked the Navy: the chance to fly fighters off a boat. I like to think the Navy has the best-trained pilots in the country, just because they have to be the best to land on the boat. So that's pretty much why I chose the Navy."

Again, a shrug. A polite smile. What else is there to say?

He says that his parents, Van and Jo, have always known he wanted to join the military. With America waging two wars these days, that they had reservations shouldn't come as any surprise. But flying ... it's always been one of his goals. His parents — who regularly drive all the way from Houston to Fayetteville to see the Hogs play — made sure to remind their son that it was his decision, and that they would be supportive no matter what.

Safe to say, James is extremely proud of his decision.

If Gilbert thinks life is a whirlwind now, however, he's got another thing coming. Gilbert is set to report to the U.S. Navy's Officer Candidate School in Pensacola, Fla., on June 30, just five days after the wrap-up of the College World Series that Gilbert's Razorbacks pray they'll be fighting to win. James hopes he gets a couple days of rest at home in between. Then it's off to try and become an America hero.

Like Fayetteville, life in Florida will also be one of constant

he could retire as a career man at 42. And if a long life in the Navy doesn't happen? He says he might try to get on with the likes of Boeing or Lockheed Martin designing aircraft, or maybe become a commercial pilot.

Again, he shrugs his shoulders as a millionth humble smile follows. What is it with this kid? Doesn't he get a sense of how remarkable his own story is quickly becoming?

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Truth be told, Gilbert almost didn't become a Razorback in the first place. He took an official visit to Air Force, and there was a period of time when that was his No. 1 choice. Ultimately, though, both schools offered him the opportunity to play ball. Needing to make a decision, James chose to attend the school where he could improve his baseball skills, get a mechanical engineering degree and still have a shot at becoming a pilot.

Four years down the road, that's exactly what he's done.

The truly amazing thing about someone like James Gilbert isn't that he had great grades in high school, or very good scores in a university setting. It's not that he played four years of college baseball for one of the best teams in the country, striking out future major leaguers along the way. It's not even that Gilbert has the guts to join the military at a time of war, or that he wants to fly fighter jets and land them on aircraft carriers for a living. What's really impressive is that he doesn't seem to be blown away by any of this. In his mind, it's all in a day's work. No more, no less.

Graduation is this Saturday. Seven days later the Razorbacks will be putting the finishing touches on another regular season. James Gilbert's days in Fayetteville are quickly dwindling.

So — should you see No. 32 pitch before he steps foot on his last baseball diamond, tip your cap and wave him farewell. Not because he's the living embodiment of some impressive superlative, but exactly because he remains entirely unremarkable. Average, in other words.

You'll know him when you see him. He's the one acting as if what he's doing is no big thing.

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