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VIRGINIA BASEBALL

## Riding the 'rollercoaster': Paul Kosanovich's journey from Division II tight end to Virginia pitcher

**Greg Madia**

May 5, 2022



Virginia pitcher Paul Kosanovich used to be a tight end at New Mexico.

ERIN EDGERTON, THE DAILY PROGRESS

Greg Madia

**H**is most familiar contribution best represents the jovial, youthful demeanor he brings to the ballpark every day.

Paul Kosanovich's Virginia teammates know to look for him as they return toward the dugout after crossing the plate on their home runs. Kosanovich is usually lurking near the on-deck circle and ready to greet whoever smacked the longball with a leaping, celebrating chest-bump.

"I'm sure it felt good for my guy Pauly over here," Cavaliers sophomore slugger Jake Gelof said with a chuckle last month as Kosanovich flanked him during a postgame interview. Gelof, who leads the Hoos currently with 17 round-trippers, had homered that day against Georgia Tech to snap a stretch of six games without one.

"Paul hasn't been able to jump with anyone in a while," Gelof said with an ear-to-ear grin, "so he might've been feeling a little lonely."

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There are reasons, though, why Kosanovich is eager and enthusiastic about the success of his fellow Cavaliers and his own triumphs, too. The 6-foot-4 right-handed reliever is in the midst of the sixth and final year of his college sports career – one spanning three schools in three states across three time zones and that included playing a pair of sports – and squeezing every last minute out of it. And even Kosanovich admits, when the career started, he could've never dreamed of it ending where it will whenever UVa wraps up its current season depending on how deep into the postseason the Hoos last.

“We had a team share in the fall,” Kosanovich said, “and one of the things I told the guys was my attitude and energy every day is not fake. That’s legitimate excitement and the same giddiness I get, one, because I still get to play the game I love and then two, the fact that I get to do it at a place like this. Everything else goes out the window when I walk through the locker room doors and the kid in me comes out. That’s where all the excitement comes from. Nothing is fake and that’s who I am.”

## Good on the gridiron

His mom, Anne, doesn’t hesitate to point out that her son was always a natural baseball player first from when he began playing during his childhood, even though his path to UVa took an unlikely detour late in high school as Kosanovich initially decided he’d rather play football in college.

Kosanovich was the quarterback at Temple City High School outside Los Angeles, a stone’s throw from the Rose Bowl. He played flag football in his middle school years, but Anne and Paul’s dad, Norman Kosanovich, didn’t let Paul play tackle football until he grew into an adult-sized body.

“I was always worried about the injury,” Anne, a librarian at the high school Paul attended, said. “Not concussions, but the arm or back, and my husband — he’s one of four brothers — was the only one who didn’t play football for their high school. So, he even wasn’t keen on him playing. I said, ‘Let Paul play freshman year and he’ll get hit a few times and then he’ll realize he doesn’t want to play.’ Well, he liked getting hit and all of that.”

On Norman’s side of the family, there was a strong lineage of football. Paul’s grandfather, Bronco Kosanovich, played center at Penn State and later for the Pittsburgh Steelers, and Paul has other cousins that played football in college as well.

And Anne said Paul started getting serious about the sport during the leadup to the 50th anniversary of the Super Bowl in 2015. The NFL sent a former pro to the school as part of the outreach the league was doing in California ahead of the big game being held in Santa Clara.

“Then, the last high school football coach he had saw in him something and helped him get recruited,” Anne said.

Paul said he was directed during April of his junior year to go to a last-chance camp where football coaches from Division II, III and NAIA schools would attend to scout under-the-radar and lightly-recruited prospects who still wanted to make a run at continuing their playing days into college. Kosanovich at that point, he said, switched to tight end since he didn't have the longtime quarterback training many of his peers at his natural position had.

“I did really well and pretty much after every other play in 7-on-7,” Kosanovich said, “there was a new coach coming up to me, so I thought, ‘Maybe football is the way to go.’”

Anne said with a laugh: “He came home with a dozen or more cards from different colleges, so I was beside myself.”

Kosanovich gained the reassurance he needed from college football coaches that he was making the right decision. And meanwhile as a high school baseball player, he said, he wasn't hitting well enough to continue on or getting the opportunities he wanted on the mound. So, his pursuit of football officially commenced, and he took visits to lower-level programs in the Midwest and southwest, and on every trip to a different school Anne had the same question for the football coach.

“She was the one asking, ‘What do you guys think about two-sport athletes?’” Paul said.

“It's my love for baseball,” said Anne, who grew up in Baltimore going to Orioles games with her dad, “and I'm going to all Paul's games, and I'm sitting there once and there are three guys with radar guns. I know not to talk to them because they are college coaches and they were recruiting and they weren't there for Paul, but I always knew he had something. One of them kept saying, ‘I'm telling you now, he's got

something.' ... And I don't tell my kid these things because I don't want to get his head bigger, but I always knew he was better at baseball than football, at least to me, and I didn't want to have his head crushed."

The two had some arguments about it, Paul said smiling while shaking his head, but he knew, "it was because she loves me and wants what's best for me. That's where I get my hard-headedness from, so that's where we're the same. She's my rock."

Paul made up his mind fully, though, and he was headed for New Mexico Highlands, a D-II school in Las Vegas, N.M. to put on a helmet and shoulder pads for the Cowboys. He thought he could make an impact and had his sights set on becoming a touchdown-catching target at tight end.

His top challenge was adding the necessary weight to withstand hits at that level and he said he put on about 20 pounds between the time he arrived at New Mexico Highlands in July of 2016 ahead of training camp through May of 2017 when he left for the summer.

"I was all in on football," Paul said. "And I was pretty comfortable where I was at. I was comfortable with my decision because I felt like I had a pretty realistic outlook and perspective on life. I was like, 'My batting average wasn't going to suffice in college' and I was like, 'Maybe on the mound,' but I never got any offers or anything.

"I was pretty set on football," he said, "and I made friends with some of the baseball guys there and told them I had played baseball in high school. I told them I was 88-90 mph in high school and they were like 'Dude, come out and if you're throwing that hard, you'll be a valuable arm for us,' so I thought about it for a second but at the end of the day, I have really big aspirations for what I'm doing, and in my mind, if I was going to make it happen in football, I needed to have every second I can to train football-wise."

## **Bad chicken changes everything**

His plans didn't hold up in large part because of one meal.

Anne said not long after Paul came home following his freshman year at New Mexico Highlands, he ate bad chicken and was sick for about a 10-day period. Paul said all the weight he gained in order to be more competitive for the coming fall on the football field was lost.

“I was really worried about him,” Anne said.

“I had a really good spring ball and I was really excited for the season,” Paul said, “so I didn’t necessarily want to play underweight again and I really didn’t like the situation I was in at that school. So, I thought, ‘I don’t want to redshirt because if I don’t play football, I’m going to lose my mind out there.’”

Kosanovich’s task was simple.

He needed to figure out what would be next and as he began to contemplate, a few of his baseball-playing buddies who were back in Southern California for the summer invited him to play summer baseball to help him get back on his feet after being sick and dropping so much weight.

He said he never lost his love for baseball, so it was an easy choice to be around the game and his friends again. Plus, an assistant coach from East Los Angeles College was going to help coach the team and that provided Paul the chance to pitch in front of someone who had shown at least a little interest in him out of high school as a ballplayer.

“It was one of those things when I was sitting on my bed,” Paul said, “I was just watching baseball highlights because it was June and I don’t know what it was. A light clicked and turned on in the back of my head and started whispering, ‘Baseball. You miss baseball.’”

He stuck with it and pitched in the spring for East Los Angeles College, a junior college, and was thriving. Kosanovich posted a 6-4 record with a 3.58 ERA over 83 innings, and was beginning to get noticed. He was a first-team all-state choice and a second-team all-region selection.

Kosanovich said former longtime East Los Angeles College coach James Hines was a friend of former Cavaliers pitching coach Karl Kuhn, now the coach at Radford, and connected the two.

“I got a text in the beginning or middle of April of that year,” Kosanovich recalled, “and it said, ‘This is Coach Kuhn from the University of Virginia, the pitching coach’ and all of that. I kind of did a double take and thought like, ‘That has to be another Virginia and not the Virginia that just won the national championship a couple of years ago.’ Because I believed I could go D-I, but it was surreal that I was getting a text from a coach at a Division I school and a school of that caliber. It was a surreal thing that I knew I could do it, and now that it was happening it was crazy.”

Kuhn asked for all of Kosanovich’s transcripts and information and the two kept in touch, and Kuhn even hopped on a cross-country flight to see Kosanovich pitch that spring.

“You listen to the journey,” Kuhn said. “And all of a sudden, you’re connecting the dots. You think, ‘He’s a football player, so he’s got to be tough, right?’ He had to start out tough and then we started to talk to Paul and he’s like, ‘Coach, I just started realizing I didn’t want to get my brains beat in and I didn’t want to get hit that hard anymore,’ and then you realize, ‘Oh, he’s smart, too.’”

And it didn’t hurt Kosanovich’s cause that he threw a gem with Kuhn there that Kuhn can still vividly remember to this day.

“I don’t even need to go look at my notes,” Kuhn said. “He was 88-91 mph. He had a 75-mph curveball and it was a true curveball and then he had a 79-81 mph slider and I knew right away that he could pitch. He had a really, really good fastball with life and then there was a time or two in the game he got into a jam, but he grunted a couple of times and showed a lot of energy and fire coming off the mound when he got out of the jam. College baseball is full of energy and emotion and I knew he’d fit in right away.”

Kosanovich earned an offer from UVa, and the only thing left to do, according to Kuhn, was get Kosanovich to Charlottesville for a visit and to meet Cavaliers skipper Brian O'Connor.

Kosanovich said after that game others like TCU, Tulane, Cal State-Fullerton and Cal State-San Luis Obispo had reached out, but he had already valued his relationship with Kuhn and the Hoos so much that he was going to go to UVa.

“Coach Hines had told me after he committed to us that some other schools had called,” Kuhn said, “but that really speaks volumes about the family and the kind of young man Paul is in the way that he was raised that you give somebody your word and you don't look back or think about that the pasture is greener somewhere else.”

Said Anne: “That night after he pitched, he got a text from Coach Kuhn, ‘I'm at the airport and I'm leaving, but I want to get you out to Virginia,’ and sometimes my gut tells me stuff ahead of time and I was like, ‘Wow. He's going to Virginia. That's so awesome.’”

Kuhn said the only bad part about the trip was taking the red-eye flight home and getting back in time just to be in the dugout for a loss in the opener of a series with Clemson at Disharoon Park.

## **Ups, downs and finishing strong at UVa**

The strong mix of pitches and skills Kosanovich showed off at East Los Angeles College translated well to UVa and to the Atlantic Coast Conference.

In 2019, he became the first reliever for the Cavaliers to reach four wins that season, picking up victories against Villanova, Duke, Connecticut and Pittsburgh in the first month of the year. He racked up multiple strikeouts in outings against TCU, Villanova and Georgia Tech and was beginning to take on the responsibility of recording significant outs for the Hoos.



But he missed the next month because of appendicitis, Anne said, only to continue pitching well through the rest of the spring once he returned. He finished 4-0 with a 4.85 ERA in his first year with the Cavaliers.

The 2020 season started promising, too, for Kosanovich, who allowed only two earned runs over 8.1 innings, but it was cut short for everyone because of the coronavirus.

“Then last year, I watched his arm fail,” Anne said.

Kosanovich said he had a stress fracture and it impeded how he could pitch, so he was shut down in early April and had to root on UVa from the bench during its College World Series run. And finally, he had to decide whether or not he'd return to the Cavaliers for this season while taking advantage of the extra year of eligibility the NCAA afforded all athletes because of the pandemic.

O'Connor welcomed Kosanovich back, which Anne said she's so thankful for.

Kosanovich opted to stay and start on a master's degree, and said he's carried all he's absorbed — through success, failures, the experiences at various schools and battling injury — during his career to help himself and his teammates in this final go-around at UVa.

“I feel like nothing can bring me down at this point,” Kosanovich said, “and I'm kind of the leader of my life and my choices. I feel like I bring a lot of perspective, especially with a lot of the younger guys if they're struggling. I can help them and talk to them and kind of put things in perspective and it's not necessarily telling them what I went through, but I can use examples of mindsets to have to help them get out of a funk.”

There are plenty of lesser-experienced pitchers the Cavaliers have counted on, too, like reliever Jay Woolfolk, a freshman two-sport athlete who also plays football like Kosanovich used to. Another freshman in the bullpen is Matthew Buchanan and first-year transfer relievers like Dylan Bowers and Will Geerdes have been relied on, too.

“It’s the mindset and confidence level,” Kosanovich said. “If you’re going through something bad, as long as your confidence level stays up, you’re going to get out of it pretty quickly.”

He’s pitching well also, which adds to the credibility.

After throwing three scoreless innings in Wednesday’s win over VCU, Kosanovich improved to 3-0. He has one save and a 2.20 ERA over 18.1 innings. He’s struck out 14 hitters, and has produced a scoreless appearance in nine of his 11 outings.

Kosanovich said throughout his career he’s learned how to navigate pitching with runners on base and bouncing back after giving up a hit or a run, and it’s helped him this season.

“Paul, unlike those other guys has been in big moments,” current UVa pitching coach Drew Dickinson said, “and has had success in 2020 and early in the ‘21 season before he went down with that injury. He was that guy and if it’s the seventh or eighth inning and you’re up by one run and there are runners on base, you give the ball to Pauly. He’s old, right, so he gives you age and experience, and nothing beats age and experience in the game of baseball.”

Kosanovich said he’s happy with the way he’s pitching now and is thrilled to be flourishing in his last season as a college athlete.

“Every time I look back at it and think about everything that’s gone on,” he said, “the one word is rollercoaster.”

With a smile through the phone, Anne said: “We’re so proud of him.”

**By Greg Madia**

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