



BARRY SLOAN

Mount Sinai's Sam Kessler after receiving the Paul Gibsons Award as Suffolk's outstanding pitcher.

MOUNT SINAI'S KESSLER PUT IT ALL TOGETHER

GIBSON AWARD

BY KENNY DeJOHN
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Sam Kessler thrives off the fear he instills in hitters. "I look in the batters' eyes, and I see their fear," the Mount Sinai pitcher said. "They don't know what's coming next."

Kessler used his high-octane fastball and wipeout slider to keep batters uneasy during a historic season for the Mustangs, who won the Long Island Class A title for the first time. The righthander went 8-3 with a 0.39 ERA en route to being named the 2016 Paul Gibson Award winner. The Gibson award is given each season to the most outstanding pitcher, as voted by the Suffolk County Baseball Coaches Association.

Mount Sinai coach Eric Reichenbach raved about Kessler's makeup, citing his growth before his senior season. "I knew this kid had talent when he came to me as a ninth grader, but it took him three years to make the transition from being a thrower to being a pitcher," Reichenbach said. "This is the year he put all of that together."

Despite having a low-90s fastball at his disposal, Kessler continually worked in the mid-80s to conserve energy. Then when he needed extra juice, Kessler was able to blow his fastball by hitters. "I learned that I had to conserve — it's a marathon, not a sprint," he said. "I can get away with 87 here and there and then if I have to, throw a hard fastball, so I'm not drained by the seventh inning."

Sacrificing velocity didn't slow Kessler. He still struck out 95 batters in 72 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings, thanks to a devastating slider that he can locate in the zone or throw in the dirt. "The first time I learned that pitch was when I was nine," he said. "It was never stress on my arm. Over the years, it just developed to what it is now."

Kessler's season was bookended by stretches of dominance. He didn't allow a run — earned or unearned — until his fifth start, a 1-0 loss to Bayport-Blue Point.

He then closed the campaign by allowing no earned runs in four playoff starts spanning 30 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings. "That's the best stretch I've ever seen from anyone in 20 years at Mount Sinai," Reichenbach said.

Kessler will pitch next season at West Virginia, where he might be an immediate contributor.

SWR's Morrell honored

YASTRZEMSKI AWARD

BY GREGG SARRA
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The home runs kept coming and the strikeouts continued to pile up. Shoreham-Wading River junior Brian Morrell was either setting school records by knocking balls out of the park or cruising through lineups with his 89-91 mph fastball.

"He's one of the most complete players anyone will ever have the pleasure to watch play," Shoreham-Wading River coach Kevin Willi said. "His best stuff is still ahead of him. He had a phenomenal season."

Morrell led Shoreham-Wading River to a share of the Suffolk League VII title and an exciting playoff run that ended against Class A runner-up Rocky Point.

Morrell was intimidating on the mound. He compiled a 5-1 record and struck out 94 hitters in 49 innings and posted a 1.13 ERA. Opponents hit a meek .138. When he wasn't putting the Wildcats in position to win with his right arm, he was swinging for the fences. He slammed a school-record 12 home runs, which led Long Island, and batted .405 with 17 extra-base hits, 30 runs and 28 RBIs. His slugging percentage was 1.000.

Morrell is only the fourth junior in 49 years to earn the prestigious Carl Yastrzemski Award, given to



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Shoreham-Wading River's Brian Morrell excels on mound and at bat.

Suffolk's top player. The award, voted on by the Suffolk County Baseball Coaches Association, was presented at last night's All-County banquet. He's the first junior to earn the award since Patchogue-Medford's Marcus Stroman, who pitches for the Toronto Blue Jays, in 2008.

Former Shoreham-Wading River standout Michael O'Reilly, who was drafted in the 27th round by St. Louis last week, earned the Yaz Award in 2012. Morrell, who wore O'Reilly's No. 23, is the school's third winner.

"It is an extremely humbling experience to be recognized for this award," Morrell said. "I wouldn't be

where I am without the support of my family and all the Shoreham coaches and my teammates."

Morrell drilled six home runs in a four-game span from May 5-12. His seventh-inning homer, a 400-foot blast, tied the playoff game against rival Rocky Point and forced extra innings.

"Oh boy, what was I thinking, pitching to him at all?" coach Andy Aschettino said, laughing, after Rocky Point's win. "He's an amazing young man, a truly great player. And he does it with such class."

No bat flips necessary. Morrell prefers to play hard and enjoy himself. His mom, Toni-Jo, laughs at his calm demeanor and composure. "I'm standing there nervous all the time and he's just playing a game," she said. "He makes it look easy, natural. What I'm most proud of is his character. He's a really good kid."

There's not much to worry about with Brian Morrell. The 6-foot, 190-pounder has given his verbal commitment to Notre Dame, and pro scouts have started to call.

"He's just an electric player, a game changer," Willi said. "It's fun to watch him play. Is he going to crush a pitch out of sight? Is he going to strike out 19 in a game? He's done all of that."

Morrell has his sights set on a championship and the school's career homer record. Former Texas Rangers farm hand Eric Strovink hit 25 in the late 1980s. Morrell has 20.

Grande did it all for Bulls

BY GREGG SARRA
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Nick Grande has been a fixture in the middle infield for the Smithtown West baseball program for five years. He was brought up to the varsity level in the eighth grade because he had quick feet and soft hands — a perfect combination for a middle infielder.

But Smithtown fans quickly found that he was also a pure hitter. Grande batted .300 as an eighth-grader and went from a light-hitting middle infield guy to Suffolk's best hitter in five years.

"He took the game very seriously at a very young age," said his father, Nick. "He's a bit of a perfectionist and very hard on himself. He refused to be outworked and it paid off."

The senior shortstop led Smithtown West to a share of the Suffolk League III title with crosstown neighbor Smithtown East. And he led the Bulls with a .522 batting aver-

age, 35 hits, 27 runs scored, 23 RBIs and a .641 on base percentage. He finished his high school career with 111 hits in his five-year career.

For his efforts, Grande was named the winner of the Blue Chip Prospects Silver Slugger Award last night at the Suffolk County Baseball Coaches Association banquet.

"Just to be recognized with some of the best players on Long Island is a great honor," Nick Grande said. "I've always wanted to be the best player I could be. I've put a lot of hours working on my hitting in the garage just working off the tee."

The repetition paid off for the 6-0, 180-pound shortstop, who will attend SUNY-Stony Brook on a baseball scholarship in the fall.

"I played second base in the eighth and ninth grade and then shortstop for the next three years," Nick Grande said. "It was an honor to be a part of such a

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Shortstop Nick Grande hit .522 for Smithtown West this season.

great baseball program for such a long time. I'm grateful to coach [A] Nucci for allowing me to be a part of his program since the eighth grade."

Grande also contributed on the mound where he finished with a 5-1 record and a 1.57 ERA.

"I've always considered myself a shortstop first," Grande said. "I enjoy pitching but hitting and playing shortstop is my favorite part of the game."