

★ Best out West

Ller Rizzitello is rookie of year in a California baseball league

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Michael Rizzitello was working as a hitting instructor in Farmingdale last December, wondering what his next move would be.

Eleven months later, he had been named rookie of the year in the Pacific Association, a West Coast independent professional baseball league.

The Connetquot High School and Dowling College graduate enjoyed great success throughout his life in baseball, but after his final spring at Dowling, although he was determined to keep playing, he wasn't sure where his next opportunity would be.

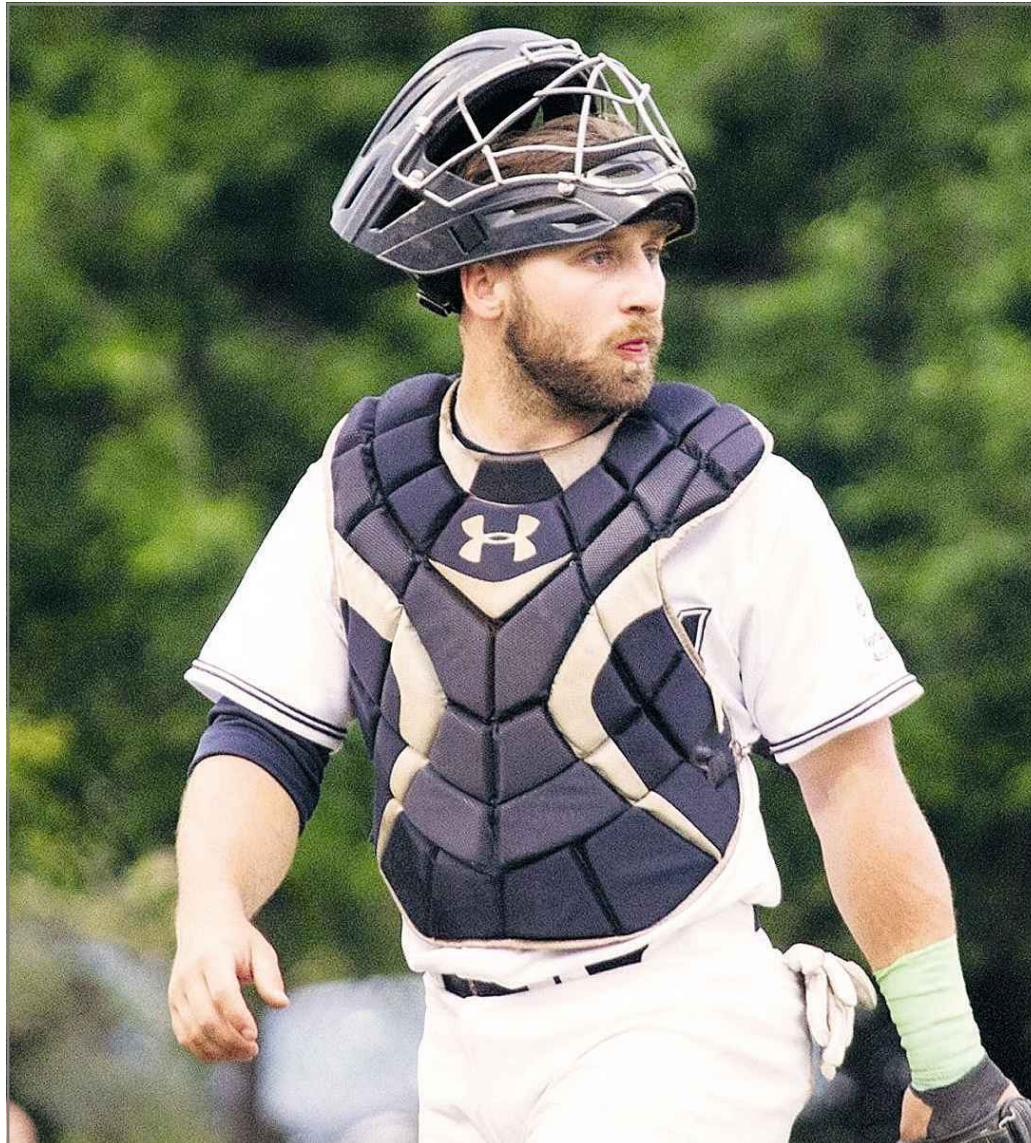
"I wasn't playing as much as I should have been," said Rizzitello, 23. "I had a thought in my head, 'What if I don't continue playing? What if I start working? What if that was it? What if I just start my life?'"

"It was honestly probably the toughest half-year of my life. It's not fun not playing."

He confided in one of his co-instructors, Matt Connolly, who quickly told Rizzitello he had too much potential to stop playing. Rizzitello then was connected with a scout with the Tampa Bay Rays, and after sending emails and videos, he was invited to a March tryout in Arizona.

The scout was impressed but didn't have a spot for Rizzitello in the Rays' system, Rizzitello said. But they put him in touch with the San Rafael Pacifics of the Pacific Association, and his spring catapulted from there.

Rizzitello, a catcher with the ability to play first base and the outfield, was named the league's rookie of the year after hitting .280 with five home runs, 12 stolen bases and 70 hits in 65 games. His strong start to the season gave him the confidence that he belonged on the field with other professional players.



Michael Rizzitello is playing at the lower levels of pro baseball while trying to catch his big break.

MICHAEL RIZZITELLO

San Rafael Pacifics, C/1B/OF

Age: 23

High school: Connetquot

College: Dowling

■ Hit .280 with five home runs, 12 stolen bases and 70 hits in 65 games

■ Won 2017 Pacific Association Rookie of the Year Award

■ Works as a hitting instructor at Performance Factory in Farmingdale

"I get in the cage, I watch the first couple guys swing and I'm like, 'You know what? These guys aren't doing anything I can't do,'" Rizzitello said. "So it kind of gave me a

little boost of confidence."

Rizzitello's success continued throughout the season. He had his share of slumps as well, but he remained level-headed enough to put together a strong campaign. Next he'll be playing in Nebraska for the Lincoln Salt-dogs of the independent American Association.

"It's surreal to be able to do something I thought I wasn't going to be able to do and not only do it, but excel at it," Rizzitello said. "I'm thankful and I'm grateful that I had the opportunity to even be able to win rookie of the year, so the fact that I was able to win it, it means a lot to me."

Rizzitello returned home for

the winter to train and work as a hitting instructor at the Performance Factory in Farmingdale.

The 5-9 Rizzitello has dreams of playing in the major leagues, but he knows nothing is given. He plans to follow his dream but knows that even working hard won't guarantee him a shot.

"Is it going to take a lot of hard work? Yeah," he said. "Even with all that hard work and opportunity, may I still not make it? Yeah. But you know, there's also that chance that I work my butt off, I get the opportunities I need to get, and anything's possible at this point."

"Why not?" he added. "It just proves to me, 'Why not you?'"

IN BRIEF

TENNIS

Goffin stuns Federer

Belgian David Goffin rallied in the ATP semifinals Saturday to claim the biggest win of his career by beating favorite Roger Federer, 2-6, 6-3, 6-4, in London. Goffin lost all six of his previous matches against Federer. His opponent in the final Sunday will be Grigor Dimitrov after the Bulgarian defeated American Jack Sock, 4-6, 6-0, 6-3.

NBA

15 straight for Celtics

Kyrie Irving scored 30 points and Jaylen Brown added 27 as the Celtics won their 15th straight with a 110-99 victory over the host Atlanta Hawks. At 15-2, Boston leads the NBA. Irving, playing with a protective mask to protect a facial fracture, ended the game with a righthanded finger-roll layup, delighting a few thousand Boston fans who were chanting "MVP! MVP!" ... Stephen Curry scored 35 points and Kevin Durant had 27 as the defending champion Warriors overcame a 22-point halftime deficit in a 124-116 victory over host Philadelphia. The 76ers led 47-28 after the first quarter.

GOLF

Wie has share of lead

Michelle Wie is in a four-way tie for the lead going into the final round of the LPGA's CME Group Tour Championship in Naples, Florida. Wie, winless since the 2014 U.S. Women's Open, had a 6-under-par 66 and is tied with Kim Kaufman (64), Ariya Jutanugarn (67) and Suzann Pettersen (69). . . Justin Rose shot a 7-under 65 and has a one-shot lead going into the final round of the DP World Tour Championship in Dubai. He will attempt to win a third straight title on the European Tour and a second Race to Dubai crown. . . PGA Tour rookie Austin Cook shot a 4-under 66 and has a three-stroke lead in the RSM Classic in Sea Island, Georgia.

NHL

Jets roll over Devils

Patrik Laine, Jacob Trouba and Matt Hendricks scored in a 95-second span during a five-goal second period as host Winnipeg beat the Devils, 5-2. — AP