

★ Hogan: Big comeback

Hills East star excels after wearing back brace for 9 weeks last summer

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YASTRZEMSKI AWARD

The bat speed was back. The power was back. It's hard to believe that it was only last September when Matt Hogan questioned whether he'd ever play baseball again.

This spring was a celebration of perseverance as the Half Hollow Hills East centerfielder returned to the diamond.

Hogan, who wore a back brace 23 hours a day, seven days a week, for nine weeks last summer, was back playing the game he loves.

"Dr. Luga Podesta saved my baseball career," Hogan said. "He immobilized my back, put a plan in place, and helped me believe I'd play ball again. I missed all of the summer, rehabbed through the fall and winter, and here I am pain-free."

Hogan was diagnosed with a bone stress reaction that causes inflammation in the lower back and excruciating pain. He made the most of his return in his senior year. Hogan was named the 51st recipient of the Carl Yastrzemski Award presented to Suffolk's top player at the Suffolk County Baseball Coaches Association dinner Wednesday night.

"I am grateful to everyone that helped me get through the toughest time in my life," said Hogan, who also was the Suffolk League III MVP. "I have so much to be thankful for. It was a frustrating time with my back and not knowing if I'd ever play again. It's such an extreme honor to be a finalist for the Yaz Award. And to win after all I've been through is such a blessing."

Hogan had a monster season, batting .401 with 23 hits, including eight for extra bases, 19 RBIs and 23 runs scored to lead Hills East to the postseason. He also had 18 walks, including 15 intentional.

The hard-throwing righthander with an 88-91 mph fastball, also posted a 4-1 record with one save, 49 strikeouts in 30 innings and a 1.89 ERA.

The 6-1, 192-pounder verbally committed to Vanderbilt as a sophomore, and he said the school never gave up on him.

"It would have been easy for them to find another player," Hogan said. "That's true commitment. I can't wait to play at Vanderbilt."

Half Hollow Hills East coach Tim Belz said Hogan should have sat out the previous season.

"He's a warrior and tried to play through the pain in his junior year," Belz said. "He was so uncomfortable, thus the need for the brace to immobilize his back and help him heal."

The lefthanded-hitting Hogan, a five-year varsity player, batted .355 as a freshman. He hit .380 as a sophomore, with six home runs and 26 RBIs, and was named All-Suffolk. Playing injured as a junior left him shattered.

"The toughest experience in my life," Hogan said. "But it taught me resilience and how to be strong. It showed me how much I'm loved and what a great support system I have in my family and friends, including my parents, brother and sister, coaches, teammates, my physical therapist, Ray Mattefeld, and of course Dr. Podesta."

You knew Hogan was all the way back when he drilled two two-run home runs and a triple in an 8-7 loss to first-place Smithtown East on April 20.

"He was generating so much power and I knew he was healthy because his swing was beautiful," Belz said. "He's so smooth and easy. And he worked so hard to get back out there. I have so much respect for him. He inspired everyone in our program."

Belz called Hogan the ultimate leader and role model for the Thunderbirds.

"We had only six seniors, and Matt guided the younger players," Belz said. "He was great in every regard."



Matt Hogan of Half Hollow Hills East trots around bases on two-run homer against Smithtown East.