



PHOTO: MATTHEW CALDWELL

THE (RE)CREATION OF HURSTON WALDREP

HURSTON WALDREP WENT HOME AND TRANSFORMED HIS LIFE AND BASEBALL CAREER IN THREE MONTHS. THEN HE BROUGHT HIS HOMETOWN WITH HIM TO THE SUMMIT OF HIS DREAMS.

BY JACK JOHNSON

Inside the Gwinnett Stripers' clubhouse, a mural is plastered on the cinderblock wall bordering the path toward the field tunnel, depicting Atlanta Braves' icons like John Smoltz, Hank Aaron, and Bobby Cox.

Stamped in the middle of that mural is a quote written in bold, white lettering from John Schuerholz, the former Braves' General Manager and the architect of their '90's success.

"WINNERS MAKE COMMITMENTS. LOSERS MAKE EXCUSES."

Just below that message of organizational ethos, in a wide polyester club chair, sits 22-year-old Hurston Waldrep. The Braves' current No. 3 prospect is the first player in the clubhouse, and will be for some time. Amidst the distinctive sort of quiet that fills a space known for its conversation and congregation, he holds a paperback book in his hands.

The book is called *Win* by Dr. James Dinicolantonio. A 557-page manual on the dynamics behind peak athletic

performance.

"It talks about being able to maximize who you are physically," Waldrep explains a short while later. "That's a big part of who I am, is being able to take care of myself, so when I step on the field, I want to make sure I've done everything to prepare myself for that."

That Waldrep is the first one in and enjoying this moment of solitude is unsurprising, that is how he has always been. That he is doing so with a book in hand, though, is not as surprising as it is novel, and a representation of his reinvention.

The Awakening

Hurston Waldrep was searching. He was at home, on the 11,000-acre quail farm in Thomasville, Georgia - Population: 18,460 - that always brought him solace, so it was strange to have this sensation in this location.

It was summertime 2021, just after the conclusion of his freshman season at Southern Mississippi, and the still-teenage Waldrep was seeking answers.

His first year of college had been trying in many ways. He had committed to Southern Miss to pitch, but rarely got to do so, relegated to just 11 relief appearances and 16.2 innings.

Waldrep had faced adversity in sports many times before, but this felt like he was flying on one wing, miles away from a tight-knit family and strong support group in Thomasville that had always been the wind beneath those wings.

"When he was at Southern Miss, he really struggled," said Chris Buckhalter, who was Hurston's longtime baseball coach in Thomasville. "Because when he played at Thomasville, he was the alpha, he was the big fish in a small pond. Now he's at Southern Miss, and he's a small fish in a very big pond. He really struggled with relationships and talking to people."

Buckhalter, who had known Waldrep since he was six years old, was concerned. Not as much about Waldrep's performance on the mound - he had seen Waldrep pitch enough

to know he would be just fine - but more about the personal side.

He worried how the kid that had defined his character with humility and a level-head was struggling to mesh with teammates, coaches, or classmates.

That was until Waldrep called Buckhalter during his freshman year and told him what he was doing to fix that. It was different, but also entirely on-brand.

"Coach, I'm reading a book on how to talk to people," Waldrep said.

That caught Buckhalter off guard. "Really?" was the only reply he could find.

"Yes sir," Waldrep responded. "I feel this book is really important on how to talk to people."

Reading for Waldrep was new. He never liked reading, despite his mother, Debbie, working as a schoolteacher. He liked the outdoors and baseball, preferring to learn by practice rather than page by page.

But this act, emblematic of his

incessant quest to improve, especially in areas he felt deficient in, was quintessential Hurston Waldrep.

When he left Southern Miss and returned home that summer, he was more determined and serious than ever about his goals. He wanted to pitch professionally, and it was there that his search began.

He was not searching because he felt lost. Rather, he was searching to find the summit of his potential.

"I had a recreation moment," Waldrep said. "I was going to redo my arsenal, redo my mechanics, redo how I eat, redo my workouts. I created my own mobility routine. It was a lot of fun."

The rhythm of his days was consistent, like waves crashing against a rocky cliff. He would rise before the first rays of sunlight reached Thomasville, work on the farm with his father, Cliff, who manages the property, and then leave in the afternoon to train and lift weights.

At night, after he returned home and darkness had blanketed

the land around him, he would resume his search. YouTube, Google - simple prompts throwing him down rabbit holes of articles, studies, and videos.

"It was piece by piece figuring it out," Waldrep said. "It was really long days of trying to figure it out and frustration."

Each night brought a new piece of information, a new cue for his pitching performance, or a new exercise to attack in the weight room.

Each day brought a chance to apply that. There were starts and stops, and moments of confusion that come with reinventing anything, exacerbated by the dense and confusing layers of the internet. And still, the waves kept crashing against the cliff.

"I don't think I realized what I was doing at the time," Waldrep said. "It was just so, fly by the seat of your pants. You just say okay, and go with it."

As the summer drew to a close, the results began to show themselves. Cracks in the cliff that guarded his true potential.



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