

Daniel Nava once was forced to play church softball. Trying to make the Pirates roster is nothing.

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By Elizabeth Bloom / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

BRADENTON, Fla. — Until a week and a half ago, Daniel Nava was unemployed. Again.

Nava's used to that. He didn't play college baseball until his sophomore year, had to transfer to community college his junior season, and lived off scraps in an independent league before a big-league team took notice. So while the number and quality of free agents has been the predominant story in baseball this offseason, Nava was better suited for the uncertainty than most.

Then, on Feb. 9, the Pirates signed the switch-hitting outfielder to a minor league contract. Four days later, he reported to Pirate City. His unlikely baseball career would live for another spring.



“I’ve had much more trying times than trying to figure out which team to play for,” said Nava, who turns 35 Thursday. “I’m grateful for a team to play for, no doubt. But when it was compared to playing indy ball, or getting cut from an indy ball team, things like that, it doesn’t compare to any of that sort of thing.”

Growing up in the Bay Area, Nava wasn’t on anybody’s radar. First of all, he was a late bloomer. As a freshman at Saint Francis High School in Mountain View, Calif., Nava was 4 feet 8 and 70 pounds. He made the varsity baseball team only as a junior, and even then recorded just one hit, according to a 2013 [profile](#) in the Boston Globe. By his senior year, he was a starter at Saint Francis, but he still didn’t garner much interest from college recruiters.

“Before I was just really small,” Nava said at Pirate City. “When it came to trying to compete with Division I athletes or even, say, any college athlete, I was just way behind.”

Instead, he joined the Santa Clara University baseball team — as a manager.

“He couldn’t hit the ball out of the infield, yet he did everything right,” Broncos head coach Mark O’Brien told the Globe.

His responsibilities included doing the team laundry and shagging baseballs, but he also could use the team facility, and he found his way onto the field as a sophomore.

“I physically grew, to the massive 5-foot-10 that I am now,” Nava quipped. (He’s listed at 5-foot-11, 200 pounds.) “I learned a lot when I was the team manager. College is different, clearly, than pro ball, but I learned some scouting reports, hitting and pitching and stuff like that.”

“And,” he added, “physically being able to hold the bat and not fall out of my hands, that helps, too.”

But he didn’t have a scholarship at Santa Clara, and his family couldn’t afford to keep him there. So he transferred to College of San Mateo, a community college, where he batted .400. That was good enough to earn him that much-needed scholarship, and he returned to Santa Clara with one year of eligibility left. His [senior year](#), he led the West Coast Conference with a .395 batting average and .495 on-base percentage.

The 2006 draft came and went, and Nava wasn’t picked. He even was cut from a couple of independent league teams, playing on a co-ed church softball team instead.

In 2007, he made his way onto the now-defunct Chico Outlaws of the Golden Baseball League, one of the teams that initially had passed on him. He proved his mettle again, slashing .371/.475/.625 and being named Baseball America’s top independent league prospect. The Boston Red Sox, looking to expand their scouting into the independent leagues, bought his contract for \$1 from the Outlaws, who would get \$1,499 if Nava cracked the minors, according to the Globe.



He did that — and much more. Nava, who still isn't much of a power hitter, famously hit a grand slam off the first pitch he faced in the big leagues in 2010. He was a 27-year-old rookie. In 2013, his best season to date, he hit .303 in 134 games for the Red Sox; he also won a World Series ring.

After bouncing around to various teams in the majors and minors, in 2017 Nava joined the Philadelphia Phillies, batting .301 in 80 games. His time on the field was curbed by four stints on the disabled list for back and hamstring injuries.

Assuming he makes the big-league roster, Nava, who is David Freese's senior by two months, will be the oldest player on the Pirates. Nava likely will be a corner outfielder off the bench, filling a crucial Matt Joyce-like role that eluded the Pirates in 2017.

So yes, things were slow this winter, and yes, Nava will need to prove he deserves a place on the Pirates roster this spring. In that regard, he's more experienced than pretty much anybody.

"When it came to this free-agent offseason, I wasn't too concerned," Nava said. "That sounds confident, but I don't mean it like that. I've had bigger fish that I've been trying to fry."

Elizabeth Bloom: ebloom@post-gazette.com and Twitter @BloomPG.