

# Big League

# Oles

*Brian Sprout '02 and Mike Ludwig '03, outstanding Division III baseball players, have been signed by the L.A. Dodgers.*

*Story and photos by Le Ann Hiddleston Finger '85*

Optimism is in the air as baseball's "boys of summer" gather for their annual rites of spring. Whether it's the Cactus League in Arizona or the Grapefruit League in Florida, one thing is certain — the slate is wiped clean and every team imagines itself in the World Series come October. ⚾ For Brian Sprout '02 and Mike Ludwig '03, the dream of playing professional baseball has become a reality. And, doubly unique, they are playing for the same professional team: the Los Angeles Dodgers.

Sprout and Ludwig spent this past March in spring training at Dodgertown, a 450-acre complex in Vero Beach on the east coast of Florida, about 90 miles south of Orlando. Their days began early, with four-hour workouts and drills on one of six practice fields. After an hour break for lunch, they got in four more hours of afternoon inter-squad games. Dinner was followed by required weightlifting and conditioning exercises. Throughout spring training they played other minor-league teams with training camps in the area, including the St. Louis Cardinals, Cleveland Indians, New York Mets, Montreal Expos and Florida Marlins.

In its 57th year, Dodgertown is the only privately owned training camp in the country and represents the Dodgers' strong tradition and history. Its streets are named after Dodger icons like Tommy Lasorda and Jackie Robinson, and even the streetlights — round, white globes with red stripes — look like baseballs. The complex also has a 90-unit housing facility, swimming pool, basketball court, four all-weather tennis courts, a game room and movie theater

and the 6,500-seat Holman Stadium, where the Dodgers play their pre-season games.

"There is so much history here. It's just great to be a part of it," says Sprout, who was in his second season playing shortstop for the Fargo-Moorhead Redhawks in the Northern League when the Dodgers bought out his contract last November. Sprout helped lead the Redhawks to a championship last summer, batting .302 with 109 hits, 16 at-bats, five home runs and 46 runs batted in. He was an All-Star selection.

Sprout left St. Olaf holding nearly all of the college's hitting records as well as the Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (MIAC) records for at-bats, hits, triples and runs scored in a single season. He earned the MIAC Player of the Year

award three times and played an integral part in the Oles' MIAC Championship wins in 2000, 2001 and 2002.

In his senior year at St. Olaf, Sprout did something most players only dream of: He hit a "home-run cycle" — a solo shot, a two-run homer, a three-run homer







Brian Sprout (left) and Mike Ludwig at Dodgertown in March 2004. They hope to follow in the footsteps of legends such as Jackie Robinson.

and a grand slam — all in one game.

“Brian is the finest all-around player we have had at St. Olaf since I arrived as a student in 1985,” says Ole head baseball coach and Director of Athletics Matt McDonald ’89. “He is a great defensive player and runner who hits for both power and average.”

Ludwig began his professional baseball career just a week after graduation. The 6-foot-6-inch Ole first baseman was selected in the 37th round in major league baseball’s 2003 first-year player draft. He was subsequently signed to play first base for the Ogden Raptors, the Dodgers’ advanced rookie team for first-year players in Ogden, Utah, where he posted a .279 batting average.

***In his senior year at St. Olaf, Sprout hit a “home-run cycle” — a solo shot, a two-run homer, a three-run homer and a grand slam — all in one game.***

Ludwig was one of the top defensive first basemen in college baseball during his time at St. Olaf. “His defensive skills and ability to hit for power propelled him into professional baseball,” says McDonald.

“To get a chance to play major league baseball is a dream come true,” says Ludwig. “There are thousands of guys who imagine playing in the big leagues, so to have been at spring training is incredible.”

In early April, Ludwig and Sprout were assigned to one of the Dodgers’ six minor-league teams for the summer of 2004. Ludwig will return for another season with the Ogden Raptors. Sprout landed a spot on

the Vero Beach Dodgers, the higher of the Dodgers’ two Single-A teams. From there they hope to make the Double-A Jacksonville Suns and, ultimately, the Triple-A Las Vegas 51 team because, says Ludwig, “you can get called up to the big show anytime you’re in Triple-A baseball.”

Sprout and Ludwig have worked hard and prepared themselves well this past spring. They’re ready for another summer of baseball.

“I’ve been waiting for this all my life,” says Sprout.

Play ball!

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*Le Ann Hiddleston Finger ’85 is sports information director and the golf coach for men’s and women’s teams at St. Olaf College.*