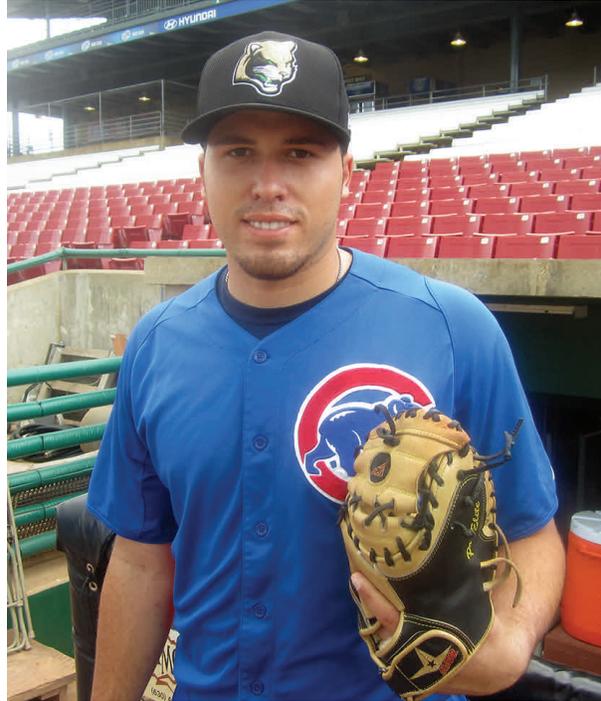




**Former Braves top prospect Victor Caratini has quickly adjusted to his new baseball life as a Kane County Cougar.**



## ***Education of a catcher in high gear at Kane County***

*By George Castle, CBM Historian and Dr. David Fletcher, CBM President  
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The education of a catcher is taking place in a hurry-up manner at Fifth Third Bank ball-park in Geneva, Ill., 40 miles west of Chicago.

With the Midwest League season wrapping up with postseason play the week after Labor Day, the likes of Kane County Cougars manager Mark Johnson, pitching coach David Rosario and hitting coach Tom Beyers are concentrating on the mechanical fundamentals and mental aspects of newcomer Victor Caratini's game.

While the Cubs' "Core Four" gets the lion's share of publicity and No. 1 draft pick Kyle Schwarber draws his fair share of attention, Caratini's future in the rebuilding organization could be just as crucial. The Cubs need to beef up their catching depth in the minors with incumbent big-league starter Wellington Castillo apparently having leveled off at his ceiling. The stark fact led Theo Epstein and Jed Hoyer to trade two capable big leaguers in outfielder-infielder Emilio Bonifacio and reliever James Russell for Caratini on July 31.



**The Cubs paid a big price for Victor Caratini: versatile Emilio Bonifacio (left) and lefty reliever James Russell (right).**

[Watch a Braves official's scouting report on Victor Caratini here...](#)



**Cougars manager Mark Johnson (left), a former Sox catcher, will handle instruction on the mechanical aspects of catching for Victor Caratini. Meanwhile, pitching coach David Rosario (right) will bring Caratini up to speed on handling pitchers.**

Caratini is a rare bird: a switch-hitting catcher comfortable from both sides of the plate at the tender age of 21. But he's also playing in his first year behind the plate. Drafted as a third baseman in the second round last year out of Miami-Dade College by the Braves, Puerto Rican native Caratini was converted to catcher coming into this season.

The scouting report out of Rome, Ga., where Caratini played for the Braves' South Atlantic League affiliate this season until the trade, states he's a hard, conscientious worker, usually first in the door each day. Caratini will need to apply such a work ethic to achieve consistency, then mastery, in the myriad tasks of a catcher.

"I have to run the game," Caratini, still not comfortable doing interviews in English, said through interpreter Rosario. "I got to be the one who leads in the field, not only with the pitcher but also the infielders. I have to make the right decisions. I have to be there for my pitcher."

### **Cram course in pitchers' styles**

Coming to a new organization more than halfway through the season, Caratini had to cram to get to know all his pitchers.

"I got to be able to learn quickly and remember what their stuff is, how they get people out," he said. "I want to be able to relate each individual so I can get to know to them individually, make right decisions and know how to deal with them in a personal way to get the best out of them. What is their pitching style?"

So far, his teachers are giving Caratini at least a B-plus, if not a higher grade. Rosario is in charge of the mental aspects of handling pitchers, while former Sox catcher Johnson focuses on the physical aspects of Caratini's game.

"The main thing is figuring out if he is physically capable of doing it, which he already has done," Johnson said. "He squats well, he moves well. He has a good left hand.

There will always be tweaks (physically and mechanical). You have to run a staff, call a game, follow a game plan. Having the aptitude to be able to do that is the next question. He has that.

“His ceiling is up there. He has some serious upside. I think we’re in a good position with Victor.”

At least one organization’s scouting reports also have high marks for Caratini. Scouting legend Marty Miller, a lifelong Chicago North Sider now working for the Tigers, said he “likes the way he moved behind the plate and threw.”

The conversion from a middle-infield position to catcher in the minors should not be painful at all. Possessing institutional memory, Miller cites the examples of second baseman Randy Hundley and third baseman Bob Brenly converted to capable catchers during their days in the Giants’ farm system. Both Hundley and Brenly, of course, are familiar to Chicago fans.

The conversion process also won’t necessarily require Caratini’s entire journey upward through the farm system, to high-A at Daytona, Double-A at Tennessee and Triple-A at Iowa.

“He already is physically smooth and pretty talented,” Johnson said. “I think it will come pretty quick physically. On the mental side, every game is getting better. I don’t think he’s a guy who will take a whole heck of a time to develop. He’s definitely ahead of the curve.”

### **Dad made him a switch hitter**

Caratini comes from good baseball bloodlines. His father, Victor Caratini, Sr., was his coach in Puerto Rico. The elder Caratini was a pitcher on the commonwealth’s national team. Father-and-son did not hesitate to make a big change when Victor, Jr., a natural left-handed hitter, began having troubles with southpaws at 15.

“I started practicing right-handed,” he said of his father’s prompting. Caratini rates himself a better overall hitter left-handed, but possessing more power right-handed. He doesn’t have to do any special maintenance to keep his right-handed swing in tune like some switch hitters.

“Everything I do left-handed I do right-handed. Do the same routines,” Caratini said.

He does not stand out with his stance. But Caratini does seem to possess a good line-drive swing left-handed. He does not appear adverse to working the count, a plus in the Epstein-Hoyer hitting philosophy.

Building his numbers will be a process. Caratini had 12 RBIs (but no homers) in his first 11 games as a Cougar, after batting .279 with 5 homers and 42 RBIs in 322 at-bats for Rome.

If Caratini has to work even harder to perfect both parts of his game figuring in the switch-hitting, it would be part of his baseball personality, according to the scouting report from Rome Braves general manager Mike Dunn.

## **‘Great work ethic’ shown to Braves**

“Phenomenal,” said Dunn. “He’s a baseball player. Great work ethic. He’ll be a special player. A good person. A really good athlete.”

“He was at the ballpark early every day, in a routine every day. From a switch-hitting perspective, you have to work on twice as many things in your repertoire. He was diligent.

“His work ethic was unbelievable.”

Going back to the Paul Snyder scouting days of the 1980s and 1990s, the Braves have been firm in drafting players with good character, sometimes at the expense of raw talent or tools. No bad apples are allowed in the Atlanta clubhouse.

“He represents himself, his family, the organization, certainly from the Braves standpoint represented them very well,” said Dunn. “I’m sure he’ll do very fine for the Cubs.”

Minor leaguers can find few more motivating places to hone their skills than Kane County. While Caratini stayed in an apartment in Rome, he bunks with a nearby host family as a Cougar as part of a long-running team program. The comforts of home ease the typical stress of spartan living conditions for minor leaguers subsisting on modest pay.

The Fifth Third Bank ballpark atmosphere is joyous nightly. In one of his first home games, several dozen canines took over the lawn area adjoining right field in Dog Night. In business since 1991, the Cougars have been one of minor-league baseball’s success stories, one the Cubs endeavored to join when Epstein took over baseball operations. Cubs farmhands have the additional motivation of knowing front-office types frequently come out to watch them, their travel time just an hour from Wrigley Field.



**Rome Braves GM Mike Dunn was impressed with Victor Caratini’s work ethic before he was traded to the Cubs.**



**Victor Caratini is competing in a fun atmosphere at Fifth Third Bank ballpark. Here, the male-female combo of Great Pyrenees are Samson (left) at 140 pounds and Casey at 100 pounds cavorting with their human family during Dog Night at the ballpark.**

Caratini has the additional knowledge he was wanted by Epstein and Co. long before the trade.

“They always scout me,” he said. “They couldn’t get me in the draft, they always were looking forward to getting me. The opportunity came out and I feel privileged to be in an organization where they might have an opening in the future.”

If he’s not pumped up already by his positive personality, then being a Class-A player traded for two established big leaguers is the final spur.

“It’s the motivation of all those hopes and beliefs in me,” Caratini said. “I have to do everything I can to be the best player I can possibly be.”