

## Ford Built Tough - Gritty two-sport standout helps Cornell football reach new heights

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*Author: Bill Palka Contributing writer*

Fresh off of his afternoon workout, Nathan Ford holds a water bottle in one hand, a PowerBar in the other, his hoodie drenched in sweat. In his final season as a dual-sport athlete, the senior Cornell quarterback continues his hectic schedule, but feels stronger than ever.

It's because he finally took some time off.

Last summer, Ford broke his routine of playing catcher for his summer baseball team and studied in London for 5½ weeks. Throwing a football in the park with his roommate was hardly the usual wear and tear his legs take from squatting behind the plate.

"I think that's made a big difference on my body," Ford said. "I feel the best I have all four years so far."

Ford has led the Big Red football squad to a 3-1 start — its best since 1999 — coming off a rare summer of rest. In four games, he has passed for 998 yards and five touchdowns, sparking Cornell's pass-oriented offense. The 6-foot-1, 207-pound passer has also shown a flair for the dramatic, engineering a pair of last-second wins over Bucknell and Lehigh.

As a third baseman/catcher for the Cornell baseball team, Ford has a career .358 average in three seasons and was an All-Ivy first-team selection last season after hitting a school-record 17 doubles.

When the football season is over, Ford will be able to completely focus on baseball, hoping to remain healthy for his final collegiate season on the diamond.

At the end of his junior football season, Ford suffered a chipped bone in his left ankle, an injury that left him on crutches and in a protective boot. Training for baseball was difficult, but he continued to play, much to the surprise of Cornell's training staff.

"Fighting injuries at the beginning of baseball season has been kind of tough," Ford said. "Baseball is so finesse, any false movement will just kill your swing. Getting ready for that you have to train all winter and then getting over an injury at the same time, that's been the biggest challenge."

Ford is a rare breed in today's world of college athletics. Division I programs in both football and baseball recruited him, but each school wanted him to play one sport exclusively. The allure of playing both sports, and doing so at one of the top industrial engineering schools, was enough to send Ford across the country from his home in Palo Alto, Calif.

The toll two sports has taken on Ford's body hasn't been enough to deter him. Once football season is over, Ford will take swings in the batting cage, giving his throwing arm a rest. It's the transition from throwing a football to a baseball that gives Ford some trouble.

"The throwing motions are completely different," Ford said. "So I can't just come from throwing a football and think my arm is in shape. If I throw right away, my arm will be aching for a while so it's really just like starting all over."

Once he gets his arm into baseball shape, Ford must revert back to football when spring practice comes calling. Over the last four years, the offense has progressed from a run-first approach into a pass-focused attack, which head coach Jim Knowles said best fits Ford's abilities. The passing offense has kept the hits on Ford to a minimum, but there is no keeping him off the field even when he does take a hit.

"He'll hobble on one leg if he has to," Knowles said.

Current head baseball coach Bill Walkenbach helped recruit Ford when he was an assistant at Cornell. Walkenbach took a head coaching position at Franklin & Marshall before Ford's freshman season and has yet to see him play on the collegiate level. Walkenbach returns this year and has watched the big guys in pads hit his third baseman/catcher, something he's had to become comfortable with.

"I could worry myself sick over him being out there," Walkenbach said. "It's a waste of energy, it's completely out of my control. You've just got to roll with the punches."

Cornell's associate baseball coach, Tom Ford, has served as head coach for Nathan Ford's first three years. He's seen his player lack velocity on his throws because of separated shoulders from football and had to pay special attention to his bumps and bruises. But Nathan Ford just kept going about his business.

"He's such a tough competitor and a tough person," Tom Ford said. "He's the type of guy whether he's hurt or not, it's not going to affect his performance. He just doesn't allow that to happen."

What comes next for Cornell's version of Bo Jackson or Deion Sanders is still up in the air. A Cornell engineering degree is certainly a cure for any more injuries that knock Ford off his athletic path. But baseball may also be in his future.

"He's got a couple of tools that can play at the next level," Walkenbach said. "If he can work a little more and fine tune his skills behind the plate, he's got a chance to play as a catcher at the next level."

All it will take is a little more sweat.

Rivalry renewed Colgate (4-2) at Cornell (3-1) When: 1 p.m. Saturday Where: Schoellkopf Field, Ithaca Radio: WKXZ 94-FM (Norwich), WHCU 870-AM (Ithaca)  
**Caption:** PHOTO Photos courtesy of Cornell University AS A QUARTERBACK, Nathan Ford has led the Cornell football team to a 3-1 start this season, passing for 998 yards and five TDs. As a catcher and third baseman, Ford batted a team-high .410 last spring with a school-record 17 doubles for the Big Red.

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