



## For the love of the game

Chris Coste persisted -- and lived out his major league dreams

By Mike Chiappetta

NBCSports.com

Posted: Nov.23, 2006, 1:38 am EST

How long would you chase a dream?

When you went to a high school that didn't even have a varsity baseball team; when you weren't offered a scholarship to college; when you played baseball in a Division III conference that hasn't produced a major leaguer in 40 years; when your first pro team goes bankrupt after 30 days, and the hometown minor league team signs you with the caveat that they don't really want you, but you're a local guy that can help sell tickets, how long would you chase the dream?



GEORGE WIDMAN/AP

Chris Coste was one of the great surprises of the baseball season. The 33-year-old rookie hit .328 for the Phillies.

If you were Chris Coste, you would chase it so long that you would forget it's a dream, so long that you simply decided that you should just do what you're best at doing, for as long as you can.

If you were Chris Coste, you would chase it farther than anyone who's ever had the dream. You would chase it on every mode of transportation, from nearly every position on the field, anywhere a game was being played with a bat and ball. You would chase it for 12 years.

You think you've heard of persistence in the world of sports? Maybe you're saying, "I've seen *Rudy*. I've seen *Invincible*. I've seen *The Rookie*." With all due respect to those men, they had it easy compared to Chris Coste. Rudy Ruettinger took four years to crack the Notre Dame lineup. Vince Papale took a shortcut to the Philadelphia Eagles. Jim Morris caught lightning in a bottle when the Tampa Bay Devil Rays signed him.

Chris Coste earned his ticket to the major leagues. He earned the locker with his name on it, and the Philadelphia Phillies jersey hanging inside. On every bus ride, car trip and plane flight. With every holiday he was away from his family. Always overlooked and often unlucky, Coste's journey took him through every part of the

Americas, from Brainerd, Minn., to Brandon, Manitoba, Canada, to Fort Myers, Fla., to Panama City, Panama.

He had come so close before. In 2002, he had been leading the International League in hitting for most of the year. At least he would deserve a September call-up to the Indians, right? Of course he would, until he broke his hand in the second to last game of the season. In 2003 with the Red Sox, he was the last man sent back from spring training. And in spring training last year, he hit .467 with three home runs and 11 RBIs. He was the Phillies' best hitter not named Ryan Howard. The roster deadline freeze was fast approaching, and as far as he knew, he would start the season a Phillie.

There was only thing that could stop his dream. The Phillies would have to make a trade before midnight on Saturday April 3. As the hours ticked down and no move was announced, he thought he had made it. He went to bed believing he was a major leaguer. But when he woke up the next morning and turned on ESPN, there it was, a short and cruel newsbrief scrolling across the bottom of the screen, changing his life. It only announced that the Phillies had acquired David Dellucci, but he knew that there was more to it than that, that there were ripple effects.

"I knew exactly what that meant, and it wasn't good for me."

Chris Coste, career minor leaguer, was going back to the minors.

Even though he had come so close, now he felt like the dream was not only distant, but over. The only position he was going to play in Triple-A was first base, and the Phillies had a pretty fair player manning the position at the major league level, a guy that didn't expect to need too many days off. If they needed a catcher, prospect Carlos Ruiz would likely be the choice, and if they needed an outfielder, Chris Roberson would get the nod. If they needed an infielder it would be Danny Sandoval, who'd won the International League batting title in 2005.

He had gone from being a shoo-in for the roster to having a logjam in front of him, and couldn't see a situation that would allow for his elevation to the big leagues. He began to tell friends and family that this might be his last year playing, that maybe his ticket to the majors was as a manager.

He returned to Scranton, and for the first time in years, struggled as a hitter. He'd hit over .300 in seven of his professional seasons, and exactly .300 over his minor league career, but now, back in Triple-A, nothing was falling. Thirty-nine games into the season, he was hitting .177.

Generally speaking, 33-year-old career minor-league catchers don't get called up to the majors. Thirty-three-year-olds hitting .177 aren't supposed to stand a chance.

So perhaps it would make perfect sense that this is exactly when Chris Coste would finally receive the break he needed.

It all came to its Hollywood ending on Sunday, May 21, 2006.

The Phillies were scheduled to host the Boston Red Sox in the last of a three-game set at 1:30 pm. In a strange stroke of fortune, Phillies' backup infielder Alex S. Gonzalez walked into general manager Pat Gillick's office early that morning and announced he was retiring.

With regular catcher Mike Lieberthal on the disabled list with a knee injury and regular backup Sal Fasano hobbled after getting hit with a foul tip, Coste's versatility was about to pay off.

He got the call.

The Phillies wanted 33-year-old rookie Chris Coste to replace 33-year-old retired Alex Gonzalez on the roster.

Coste excitedly called home to relay the news. In a happy coincidence, most of his family was gathered together at a hotel in Fargo, N.D., preparing to send off his wife and daughter for another summer of watching Chris play ball.

They were expecting to meet him in Scranton. They were expecting to meet him in the minor leagues.

Coste told his wife Marcia that to meet him, she'd have to bypass the little park in Moosic, Pa., and head towards the big city. He was in the majors now.

Not surprisingly, she broke down. Tears streamed down her face. Now, that type of reaction is to be expected when the high-school sweetheart that you marry informs you that he's about to live his dream -- that you're about to live your dreams. But the rest of the family wasn't yet clued in.

"Everyone there saw her crying and got very worried. They thought somebody had died," Coste said. "So she quickly told everyone what had happened, and of course everyone was thrilled, jumping and laughing."

When the voices died down, Coste's daughter Casey spoke up. "Mom," she said, "that's what I wished for when I blew out the candles on my birthday cake. That daddy would make it to the big leagues."

Chris Coste is a tough guy. He's spent a lot of time on the road, he wears catching equipment in the hot, summer sun, he's taken more foul tips to the body than he can remember, and he's survived in the minor leagues for over a dozen years without letting it wear on him. But when he heard what his daughter had said, he couldn't help but shed a few tears.

See, every winter since his daughter was born, Coste has had to leave his family behind and head to the Caribbean to play winter ball. Not to get extra at-bats or to be seen by scouts, but to make extra money. And he's not the only one sacrificing, his family is without a father and a husband.



RUSTY KENNEDY/AP

Hitting a home run off Tom Glavine (background) was one of the highlights of Coste's season.

"I've missed so many holidays," he said. "Fortunately, I have a pretty understanding family, and even though my daughter doesn't always like it, this is the life she grew up in, so when I am gone, even though she's gets sad sometimes, she understands it."

All the sacrificing they had done as a family had paid off. Even though they were 1,350 miles apart, he could feel their pride.

His first memories after arriving at Citizens Bank Park in the bottom of the first inning were the surreal glow of the sunlight on his face as he entered the dugout, Cory Lidle striking out Manny Ramirez on a sinker, then Milt Thompson and members of the coaching staff walking over to welcome him to the team.

His wife was watching on television as the images flashed on the screen, Chris Coste being congratulated on his arrival to the majors.

The dream didn't immediately live up to the expectations. Coste went hitless in his first 13 at-bats. If you add in his minor league average for the year, he was hitting .162. But let's face it, Coste hadn't gotten this far by being negative. He knew if he continued his approach, hits would start falling. He knew it the same way he knew if he kept playing hard, he would one day wear a major league uniform.

And then it came, a single on June 16 against Tampa Bay's James Shields. A clean single up the middle, one that would be recorded in every record book and tell history that Chris Coste had made it.

"I actually smacked my hands together real quick like I'd just won the game or something," he remembered. "And I hoped no one had seen it. I remember just feeling that I had that weight off my shoulders, and it also drove in a run. So I got the

hit and was feeling great, and then I realized my average was .050 or something."

It wasn't long before they all started falling. One after the other, in bunches. By the end of June he was hitting .296. By the end of July, he was hitting .343. He would hit home runs against future Hall of Famers John Smoltz and Tom Glavine. The floodgates of good fortune seemed to open up and drown him in triumph. Even he couldn't believe how well he was playing.

"When I was in the minors, I'd sometimes dream that I was in the big leagues and hitting off Roger Clemens, and it seemed so real that I'd be telling myself that it's not a dream, but then I'd wake up and be back in my bed at Triple-A," he said. "There were many times when I was actually playing in the big leagues when I felt I was going to wake up from a dream. There was a time I had a four-hit game and raised my average to .375, and I still felt like, 'do these people know that I don't belong here?'

If he fooled them, he fooled us all, because he ended the year hitting .328 with seven homers and 32 RBIs in 65 games.

He had played so well that he had done almost all of the catching in the late-season as the Phillies fought for a playoff berth, so well that he virtually guaranteed himself a roster spot to start the 2007 season, so well that movie producers have talked about making his life into a film.

"No one appreciates my story as much as I do because I actually lived it," he said. "I appreciate the fact I'm a good story, but I really hope there comes a day where I'm not just a good story, I'm a good player."

If it seems ironic that a man who spent 12 years building a body of work only needed a couple of months to convince his doubters of his worth, it's not lost on him. Who knows if during those 12 years, Chris Coste would have been a quality major leaguer, or if that time shaped him into the player who finally made it? And does it really matter?

We all start out with dreams as children, to be writers and athletes and movie stars, but how many of us try, really try, to achieve the visions we saw for ourselves?

Chris Coste had a dream. As a child, as a teenager, as an adult sleeping in a minor-league hotel room. A literal and figurative dream.

Do you wonder what happens next? What happens after you chase your dream and get there? What happens after you get to the top?

You live there.

Chris Coste is home for the holidays. He took Casey trick-or-treating, and enjoyed Thanksgiving dinner with family. And when he goes to sleep at night, he knows that whatever he dreams won't be as good as what he's living.

*E-mail Mike Chiappetta at [michael.chiappetta@nbcuni.com](mailto:michael.chiappetta@nbcuni.com)*