

San Mateo Patch

Elite Peninsula Players' Tough Call: MLB Contract or College Scholarship

By [Gideon Rubin](#)

July 5, 2011

Recent draftee and St. Francis grad Goeddel set to choose between Tampa Bay Rays and UCLA; former prep stars Diekroeger (Stanford) and Tuivailala (St. Louis Cardinals) made opposite choices.

As problems go, choosing between a seven-figure professional signing bonus and a full ride at an elite college baseball program is a pretty nice one to have.

But that doesn't make the decision any easier for those fortunate enough to have to choose between the two.

Ever since risk-averse sabermetricians began infiltrating major league front offices about 15 years ago or so, they've changed the landscape of the draft, steering teams towards the selection of college draftees who tend to be more predictable and advance to the big leagues faster than their prep counterparts.

But when a high school player is faced with the decision to sign a professional contract or join the collegiate ranks, the decision becomes more a matter of personal choice than statistical analysis, a point underscored by the decisions of two recent Peninsula standouts who took different paths.

Kenny Diekroeger (Menlo School) and Sam Tuivailala (Aragon) were both offered lucrative signing bonuses after being selected in the early rounds of the 2009 and 2010 drafts, respectively.

Diekroeger, a Tampa Bay Rays first-round supplemental pick, chose to forgo a lucrative signing bonus and play for the Stanford Cardinal.

Tuivailala decided to forgo his Fresno State scholarship, signing with the St. Louis Cardinals, who selected him in the third round last year.

Neither player regrets his decision.

Diekroeger, a two-time All Pac-10 infielder and the Pac-10 Freshman Player of the Year in 2010, admits turning down a likely seven-figure signing bonus was no easy task. But he said his decision ultimately came down to following his lifelong passion to attend one of the nation's most prestigious academic institutions, which also happens to be both of his parents' alma mater.

"For me it came down to what I wanted to do, what I felt was the best decision for me in terms of just how I was going to spend the next three or four years," he said.

"I decided college was the best option for me."

Tuivailala, an infielder/outfielder who is in his second year of pro ball playing in the Gulf Coast League in Florida, admits his primary reason for signing with Fresno State was to pursue sports. The former three-sport prep standout (he also excelled at Aragon in football and basketball) said he'd probably have gone the collegiate route if he was drafted much below the 10th round, but that his decision became a no-brainer when the Cardinals scooped him up earlier than expected in last year's draft.

He signed for \$300,000, according to thebaseballcube.com.

"If it's a kid's dream to play pro ball, I'm pretty sure he's going to hop on it, and that was what was behind my decision," Tuivailala said.

This year, Hillsborough resident and recent St. Francis grad Tyler Goeddel faces the same tough choice.

Goeddel, a UCLA signee, was the 41st overall pick in last month's draft, selected by the Rays in the supplemental round. He has until the August

15th signing deadline to decide whether to accept a projected seven-figure bonus.

Diekroeger said during his decision-making process he factored in a Baseball Prospectus analysis showing that collegians selected in the MLB draft have a significantly higher success rate of making it to the big leagues.

He said competing in the pitching-rich Pac-10 has enhanced his development as much if not more than had he started in the lower level minor leagues.

"People say playing in Pac-10 is almost the equivalent to Double-A ball," Diekroeger said. "We faced incredible competition, so I can't really say I took a step back by going to college."

UCLA's Gerrit Cole and Trevor Bauer, selected first and third overall in last month's draft, headlined one of the most prospect-rich pitching conferences in recent memory.

"All these pitchers are incredible and will make really good pros, so to say that college isn't really the best option would be a little bit ridiculous," Diekroeger said.

Leaving aside how much a draftee values a college education, choosing between high school and college purely from a baseball development standpoint varies greatly between pitchers and hitters, former Serra coach Pete Jensen said.

Collegiate pitchers, Jensen said, come out of college with more maturity and greater endurance.

"For pitchers, staying in school and gaining more experience better prepares them to play at the major league level," Jensen said, noting that coaching at the college level has improved exponentially over the last few decades.

Position players, however, develop quicker in the minors, he said.

"Pro guys feel it's a better situation for guys to be hitting at the pro level with (wooden) bats in their hands," Jensen said, noting that hitters also benefit from a development standpoint facing much deeper pitching staffs in the minors than in college.

But baseball development is only one part of the decision, and especially for players who aren't offered life-changing money, the opportunity to

complete a college degree can enhance earning power over the course of a lifetime more than even first-round bonus money.

And even though professional contracts typically include educational provisions, they are too often left on the table.

"Have you heard of many guys who've taken advantage of it?" Jensen said. "You really can't go back to school until you're done playing. There really is no time."

When asked about his decision to turn down Tampa Bay's offer, Diekroeger cited a comment Duke basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski made that recently aired on ESPN in which he and his wife "never made a big decision based on money."

"I felt that really applied to me," Diekroeger said.

So what would Diekroeger advise a high school recruit with a seven-figure bonus offer?

"Acknowledge the fact that you're getting the money, but don't make the decision solely off of that," he said.

"I would say they should base (the decision) on what they want to do, and whether or not they want to go to college. It's hard to put a money value on that."