

# How pitcher Frank Spirito became latest Bristol Central athlete bound for UConn: 'Hard working kid'

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Bristol Central junior pitcher Frank Spirito is committed to play at UConn.

Noam Watt / For Hearst Connecticut Media

**BRISTOL** — Frank Spirito could fit right in as a coach at a Bristol Central baseball practice.

After a fielding drill ends, he leaps over the first base line and beelines to the L-screen stationed by the first base dugout. He lugs it out in front of the mound, setting up the next drill before coach Buntly Ray offers any instructions.

The junior pitcher is committed to play baseball at UConn, but you would have no idea he's a Division I-bound player from the way he carries himself on the practice field.

"I'm quiet, I get a little energy sometimes, and I just try to put everything I've got into it all the time," said Spirito, a captain for the Rams.

Said Ray, "He's just a hard working kid. To me, that's the best compliment you can give a player."

That hard work has paid off so far for Spirito, who said going to UConn has been one of his dreams since he was a little kid. He'll have the opportunity to play under Jim Penders after his days at Bristol Central are over.

Ray knows Spirito can have success at UConn: "He's electric. The potential there is off the charts, I've been coaching for 22 years, he's definitely got D1 ability."

Spirito has blossomed at the high school level. He already has 25 strikeouts while allowing just six hits in 11⅓ innings this season. His fastball sits in the mid-to-high 80s range, and has been clocked at 90 mph. He also throws a slider and a changeup.

Last season, he had 24 strikeouts in 13 innings, and batters managed a meager .102 average against him.

Spirito said he models his game after Nolan Ryan, who holds the all-time record in Major League Baseball with 5,714 strikeouts. Spirito's highest

strikeout total was "18 or 19," when he was 14.

He also enjoys watching Gerrit Cole of the New York Yankees and Tyler Glasnow of the Tampa Bay Rays. "Cole throws a lot of pitches, and he can throw them all for strikes. I also like Glasnow, he throws hard, he's got a wipeout curveball," Spirito said.

While he's been dominant at the high school level, there's still work to be done as Spirito prepares to transition to college baseball. "Frank's biggest thing is learning how to pitch at the next level by commanding all his pitches," Ray said.

From Spirito's perspective, playing under the tutelage of Ray has him ready to play for Penders.

"My coach is a pretty tough guy," he said. "I love him, and he's been preparing us for the next level."

In the middle of a different drill at a recent practice, Ray stopped the team after an error and had them sprint down to the right field foul pole. After they made it back to the infield, Ray raised his voice, saying "cool plays don't win games, tough plays do."

Ray realizes his coaching style is similar to what Spirito will see at the next level, "I'm a little more old school just like Coach Penders is. There's a smooth transition from where we are to what he's going to be able to do up there [at UConn]."

Spirito receives the coaching well. "Whenever I talk to him, he's on the same page. You don't have to hold any punches with Frank, you can push him, you can drive him," Ray said.

That coachable mindset bodes well for Spirito when he arrives in Storrs,

where he'll be joined by a couple of other Bristol Central standouts.

Seniors Donovan Clingan, a 7-foot-2, four-star basketball prospect, and Victor Rosa, the Connecticut Gatorade Player of the Year in football, are both headed to Storrs this fall.

Spirito is friendly with Clingan and Rosa. They all played Little League together and were on the freshman baseball team as well before Clingan and Rosa turned their focus to basketball and football.

"I don't think people realize the type of athlete that's walking the hallways at Bristol Central right now. This doesn't happen. You don't just have Division I kids walking around, sometimes you have to wait years," said Ray.

Ray, a social studies teacher at Bristol Central has Clingan in class this year. He also loved having Donovan in the baseball program as a freshman.

"When he was a freshman, we didn't need a ladder, he could just walk around and zip tie the tops of the tarps to the fence for us," Ray said. "That's what I miss most about Donovan. He's a great kid."

Spirito, Clingan, and Rosa will each carve out their next legacy at UConn. For now, they're leaving their mark at Bristol Central.

This spring, Spirito will be racking up more saves for the Rams as their closer. He recently notched the save in Ray's 200th career win as head coach.

For Spirito, wherever he is playing, the mindset is the same.

"I like to win a lot, and help the team as much as I can," he said.