

Rockies pitcher makes appearance at local deaf school

By STEPHEN KNAPP
For the Courier

If a good school assembly is supposed to be enjoyable, inspirational and educational, then Colorado Rockies relief pitcher Jason Grilli's visit to the Rocky Mountain Deaf School on Sept. 4 was a three-run homer.

Ask any one of the Jefferson County charter school's 45 wee scholars, and they'll tell you that getting up-close-and-personal with a real-life sports hero beats language arts and long division any day of the week. With a staff member translating from American Sign Language, 31-year-old Grilli kicked off the event with a spirited Q-and-A session.

"Have you ever been to the Baseball Hall of Fame?" signed a young sports fan.

"Many times," answered Grilli. "My dad's hat is there. He was the losing pitcher in the longest game ever played."

"How fast can you pitch?" one pink-sweatered little girl wanted to know.

"The fastest I've been clocked at is 90 mph, but my normal pitch is a little less than that."

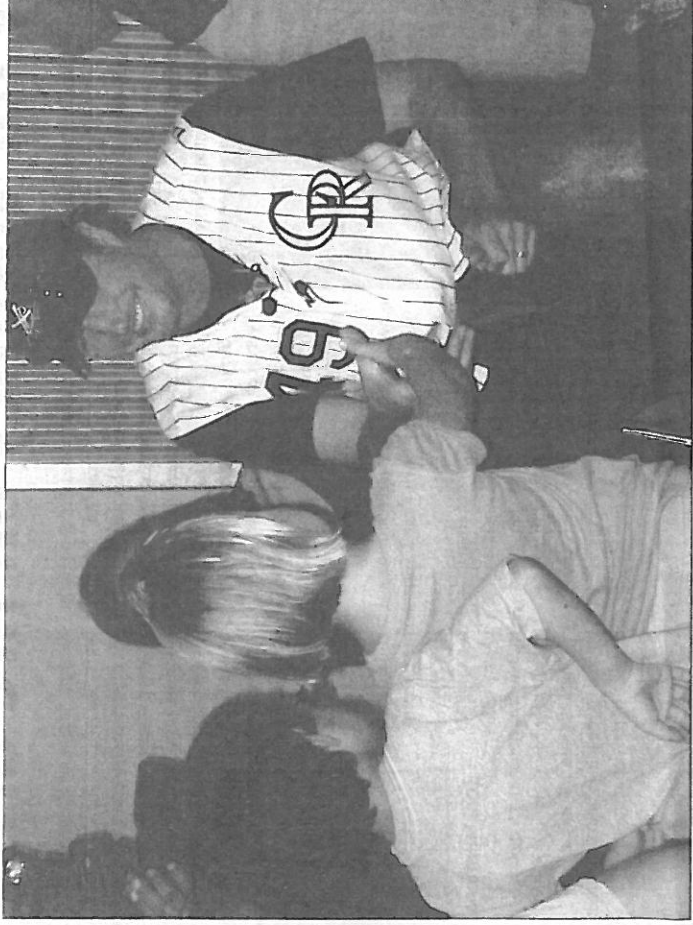
"Why did you pick the Rockies?"

"Unfortunately, I don't get to choose," smiled Grilli, who started his major league career with the Detroit Tigers. "It was just my good luck that I got traded to Colorado. We're the property of the team, and they do what they want with us."

His rapt audience stumbled for a moment, tripped up by that strange concept, but quickly recovered.

"How did you get so good at baseball?" asked one little fan.

"It's like anything else you want to be good at — practice, practice, practice," said Grilli. Then he paused a moment, scanning the rows of expectant faces. "Don't let



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—Jason Grilli, Colorado Rockies relief pitcher

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Good advice is nice, of course, but gifts are nifty, too. Folding his sturdy 6-foot-5-inch frame into a munchkin-sized plastic chair, Grilli spent the next half-hour meeting each child individually and autographing new Rockies caps.

He might have gone home right then, taking with him the school's sincere gratitude and leaving a lot of happy kids behind, but Grilli's game plan included an extra inning with the grown-ups. He'd come, that bright Thursday morning, to demonstrate a handy device that's helped him feel close to his

existence since its founding 11 years ago, and that it's long been the dream of the school's supporters to build it a new, permanent home.

To that end, the school is sponsoring a motorcycle rally on the afternoon of Saturday, Sept. 13, from Invesco Field to The Barn at Evergreen Memorial Park in Marshdale, followed by a splendid party and silent auction.

To ensure plenty of bid-ables, the school's most energetic mom, Kay Bohan of Evergreen, started hitting up Colorado's sporting classes for autographed memorabilia. One of her letters turned up in the hands of Jason Grilli, who was cooling his heels in a distant hotel room.

"I'd just got done talking with my wife and son on the video phone," he recalls. "I know the value of seeing my son while we're on the phone, and I thought that this was something that could be useful in the deaf community."

ROCKIES RELIEF PITCHER

JASON GRILLI spent last Thursday morning signing hats for students at the Rocky Mountain Deaf School in Lakewood and pitching a video telephone technology that could make communication easier between deaf students and their families.

Photo by STEPHEN KNAPP | For the Courier

"He called me from his hotel and said he had a demo unit he could send me if I was interested," says Bohan. "I got it the next week, and couldn't believe I'd never heard of it."

True, similar technology is already used by the deaf and hearing-impaired, but it's out of reach of many pocketbooks, and federal assistance is available only to deaf individuals. With friends and relatives out of the video loop, a user's calling circle can be limited, indeed. The highly portable Globalinx unit, by contrast, costs about \$200 plus a service fee starting at \$25 a month, and connects with anyone, anywhere.

"One of the nice things is that, because it uses the Internet, it'll work wherever you are," Grilli says. "And it's really simple. You use it just like a regular phone."

Best of all, the device's 5-inch screen clearly conveys every smile, every nod and, most importantly, every gesture. To prove it, Grilli dialed up his sister in Syracuse, N.Y.

"Say 'hi' to my sister, Stephanie," he announced.

On her end, Stephanie (a trained ASL interpreter, as it happens) could easily see the television cameras pointed at her famous brother.

"Is this going to be on TV?" she

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asked, grinning playfully.

"I mean, 'My younger, beautiful sister, Stephanie," he said, making the save.

Either way, his point was well-made and well-taken.

"This is perfect for the hearing families of deaf children," Bohan says. "We've got one at home, one at daddy's office, and we're going to get more for other family members. It's an accessible way for deaf people to communicate with each other and their families. Other systems are only for the deaf. This is for everyone."

For his part, Grilli seems content that he was able to introduce a useful product to an underserved market.

"I'm just using my platform as a ballplayer to get these into the hands of people that can really use them," he says. "It kind of gave me a chill the first time I thought that something I use all the time could make life better for a lot of people."

To learn more about the Rocky Mountain Deaf School's Benefit and Motorcycle Ride, visit www.itakesanation.com, or call Lee Edgerly at 303-887-4697 or Ruth Copeland at 303-994-3991.