

"I feel very strongly for my town. I've grown up there and lived there my whole life, and I'm definitely interested in the decisions that go on."

— Kent Koch, fifth-year senior at St. Cloud State and mayor of Loretto, Minn.

St. Cloud St. shortstop at the top of the order

By David Pickle

When the new mayor of Loretto, Minn., experiences an unexpected challenge this year, he'll be ready. Kent Koch has already learned to handle the occasional odd bounce.

That's because Koch, who was elected mayor Nov. 2, plays shortstop for the St. Cloud State baseball team. He's not an alumnus or even a recent graduate. Instead, he's a 23-year-old, cap-wearing, glove-toting, bat-wielding student-athlete.

Koch is a fifth-year senior who faced a light academic load for his final semester this spring. After considerable thought, he decided to complete his finance major with a management course — and to serve as mayor of Loretto if elected.

"I thought I'd get a little bored with only one class to go," Koch said.

The pursuit of the position was hardly a lark for Koch, a lifelong resident of Loretto (population 609), about 20 miles west of Minneapolis.

"I'm planning on returning home after I graduate and trying to get a job around the cities," he said. "I was planning on living at home. It's a two-year term. So I figured everything just kind of lined up and I'd give it a shot. I know we've got to work a lot with budgets and things like that. Being a finance major, I felt like I could contribute positively along that aspect.

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Getting the job turned out to be a bit more of a challenge than Koch expected. Nobody else filed to run for mayor, so Koch was cruising toward every politician's dream: an uncontested election. Then came a surprise.

"A week and half before the election, one of the town members came up in the paper with running a write-in campaign against me," Koch said.

The new candidate wasn't just any citizen. It was the former mayor.

"He had already been the mayor previously

for 10 years," Koch said. "He's been in town for a while, so it was like, oh, gee, I've got to campaign and get as many votes as I can. So I went door-to-door for a few nights and talked to different people. It was a good time, and it was nice meeting some of the town members that I hadn't met before."

Fortunately for Koch, door-to-door campaigning in Loretto was possible on short notice since the town is only one-half mile square. On election night, he got the news that he had won with 61 percent of about 300 votes cast.

Koch took office in January, and he knows that the first five months will be difficult as he completes his management class, plays baseball and makes frequent 45-mile commutes from St. Cloud to Loretto. To prepare, he has already laid the political groundwork by reaching out to the other four Loretto council members. He also plans to rely on the town's small but effective paid staff.

Coach Pat Dolan has faith in his shortstop — and no regrets about giving him the green light to run for public office, no matter how seriously the Huskies take their baseball (they finished just one win short of the Division II College World Series last year).

"Kent has been our team's SAAC representative and has done a considerable amount of community-service work during his time at St. Cloud State," Dolan said. "I know that Kent is very excited about the challenge of being mayor of Loretto, and he is the type of guy who makes the time to meet his commitments."

The new mayor plans to do just that.

"I got a few jeers from people — like why would you want to do this?" Koch said. "I just told them straight up it's something I feel strongly about. I'm interested in the town and the direction that the town goes. I'm not really sure at this point if it's going to involve going up for re-election, or if it's going to be one-and-done or how it's going to go. But it's going to be a learning experience for sure."

Winning election as mayor of his hometown took a bit of footwork for St. Cloud State shortstop Kent Koch. The 23-year-old went door-to-door in tiny Loretto, Minn., after the former mayor waged a write-in campaign just before the election.

