

## Pals Reckling, Appel square off in Rice-Stanford opener

By Joseph Duarte

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Mark Appel and Matthew Reckling have come a long way since their playing days in the Post Oak Little League.

"Honestly, we weren't the stars of the league. That's for sure," said Reckling, a senior righthander for fifth-ranked Rice.

The Post Oak alums will comprise the featured pitching duel of the weekend when the Owls begin a three-game series Friday against second-ranked Stanford in Palo Alto, Calif.

Appel, a junior righthander, is the ace of the Stanford pitching staff and the projected top pick in the baseball draft this summer.

Reckling, off to the best start of his career, was promoted to the prime Friday night starting role earlier this week.

"We always talk about pitching against each other, and now it's actually happening on a pretty big stage," Appel said.

Few could have imagined this matchup nearly a decade ago when both were playing Little League.

Reckling, a year older than Appel, was an All-Star shortstop and did not begin pitching until his junior year at Kinkaid. Appel helped Post Oak reach the 12-year-old All-Star state tournament as a pitcher and center fielder in 2003.

"I didn't mess him up too bad," Cary Gray, the manager of the Post Oak All-Star team, joked in regard to Appel. "They were both All-Stars. It was a big league, and they were (among) the 10 or 12 best players in the league."

Appel moved to California before high school, and the two friends didn't reconnect until three years ago, when Appel signed with Stanford.

"We've been great friends since," said Reckling, who is 2-0 with a 0.82 ERA in four appearances this season.

### ***Teammates in summer***

They send each other text messages throughout the week.

"How his outing went, how he's pitching and just encouraging him," said Appel, who is 2-1 with a 3.68 ERA in three starts.

They follow each other on Twitter, regularly posting Bible scriptures.

"He's a good Christian brother," Reckling said. "He's the kind of person that can keep me accountable in my faith and vice versa."

But not until last summer, with the Yarmouth-Dennis Red Sox in the prestigious Cape Cod League, did Reckling and Appel play on the same team.

With Stanford (11-1) and Rice (12-2) ranked in the top five, there's a chance the two friends could meet again later this season, perhaps at the College World Series in Omaha, Neb.

"It would be a great experience for both of us," Appel said. "It would mean a lot, especially his senior year and knowing how badly he wants to get to Omaha."

Had Appel not moved to California, there's a chance he and Reckling could have been college teammates at Rice. Appel has several family ties to the school, including his uncle John Casbarian, a faculty member in the Rice School of Architecture.

"My grandparents live in West U, about a five-minute walk from campus," Appel said. "It was always right there."

### ***Homecoming in offing?***

Then, of course, there's the intriguing prospect of another homecoming if Appel is selected by the Astros, who hold the first pick in the draft. He estimates he attended about a dozen Astros games a year as a kid.

"Some of my great memories were going to Astros games growing up," Appel said. "It couldn't wind up any better, but that doesn't mean they are going to pick me first."

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