The Indians took a shot in the dark when they draft right-handed reliever Vinnie Pestano in the 20th round of the 2006 draft out of Cal-State Fullerton. As a college junior, Pestano was one of the top relief prospects in the country going into the 2006 Draft, but a serious elbow injury early in the season sidelined him and put his professional baseball career in jeopardy. Now the closer in Lake County, Pestano is off to a fast start. And Tony had a chance to speak with him this past weekend.

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Pestano hurt his elbow pitching in the ninth inning of a game against USC in early May of 2006.

After throwing a pitch, his arm popped and felt numb, but he proceeded to throw one more pitch before he realized and trainer should come out and look at it and he was promptly removed from the game.

"It was just one pitch," recalls Pestano who is now a closer with the Indians Single-A Lake County affiliate. "I had never had elbow problems before. I was just in the middle of a save situation and threw one pitch and it just popped.

That was pretty much it.

I spent the next month trying to come back and throw with it, and maybe get used to the level of pain it would take to pitch.

I actually ended up throwing an intra-squad right before we left for Omaha.

That's what I was trying to get back for as I wanted to throw in the College World Series again."

The injury was first diagnosed as a strain by doctors, but later it was determined he had a tear of the ulnar collateral ligament in his right elbow. He underwent "Tommy John" surgery to reconstruct the elbow, and the famous Dr. Lewis Yokum performed the surgery.

Tommy John surgery is required when the ulnar collateral ligament (UCL) becomes stretched, frayed or torn from the stress of the throwing motion a pitcher uses. The ligament in the medial elbow is replaced with another ligament from elsewhere in the body, most commonly the hamstring. After the ligament is removed from the other area of the body, the ligament is woven into pre-drilled tunnels in the ulna and humerus bones that are part of the elbow joint.

Tearing the UCL in your pitching elbow and having to undergo Tommy John surgery is becoming very common, and is not nearly the career threatening injury it once was. Back in 1974, Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher Tommy John was the first professional athlete to successfully undergo the UCL construction surgery, and hence the surgery was named after him. At the time, the success rate for a complete recovery was 1%, but today is around 90%.

The procedure takes about an hour to complete, and after six months a pitcher can usually start a throwing program although 100% rehabilitation without any restrictions can take almost two years.

After the surgery, Pestano underwent a rigorous rehab at a facility in California called SMI, and today he is still working his way back to 100% health as the two year anniversary of the surgery fast approaches (July 2008).

"It is very tedious," said Pestano when asked about the rehab process. "Ten days after surgery they are in there bending your arm down and just trying to take it down inch by inch. But it is one of those things.

It is time really, and I now have a much better appreciation for the game.

I will not go back to back games much.

I am throwing pain free, but as far as recovery time it is not the same.

Before in college I could throw three days a week and take a day off and come right back and

throw long toss.

It will come.

I'm still only about 18 months out, so I am just getting to that point where I am starting to feel almost like I did right before the injury."

The Indians selected Pestano in the 20th round of the 2006 Draft and knew Pestano was injured. Pestano had the Tommy John surgery performed on July 21, 2006 and the Indians were not scared away as they eventually signed him on August 17th, 2006 to a professional contract.

The Indians liked Pestano's potential when they drafted him, and feel he may end up being a risk that pays big dividends down the road. He is a confident pitcher with good mound presence who goes after hitters, and now is saving games at Lake County.

As a closer at Cal-State Fullerton, Pestano certainly has a lot of experience in the role and it is a role where Pestano thinks he can stick.

"Yeah, that's where I want to be," said Pestano. "I think the Indians drafted me sort of in that spot as a late inning guy.

Just because I closed two years at Fullerton as a sophomore and junior year, and as a bullpen guy my freshman year.

I am really comfortable late in games and I have pitched in a lot of big games in front of a lot of people so I think that helps me."

Lake County manager Aaron Holbert agrees with the assessment, and it is a role he will be using Pestano in throughout the season.

"With the role that we are looking for him to do here, we are looking for him to close and he has done a great job with it," said Holbert. "Anytime we have called upon him to go out there and perform he has done a great job.

As long as he is comfortable in that role and the situations come about we are going to throw him out there.

So hopefully he can thrive here and open some eyes up in Cleveland to allow him to continue that role in the future."

Pestano throws side-arm, almost to the degree as big leaguer Jeff Nelson used to do. He actually used to throw over the top in high school, but when he got to Cal-St Fullerton he dropped to the side and experienced a lot of success with it so stuck with it.

He does not blow hitters away with his 89-90 MPH two-seam fastball, but the ball gets a lot of movement with late run and sink.

As he continues to regain health he is expected to add another couple MPH on his fastball.

He also throws a breaking ball that is more a slurve, which is a cross between a curveball and slider.

He has confidence in the pitch and really refined it his junior year in college, but since his elbow injury he still has not gotten the feel and command back for the pitch.

Pestano has also fooled around with a changeup and he got good movement on it, but it lacked deception as the velocity was not much different from his fastball and it was often hammered. Since Pestano pitches out of the bullpen the pitch was scrapped as there is really no need for a third pitch when you only pitch one inning.

As a two pitch pitcher, commanding his fastball and slurve to both sides of the plate is the key and it is something he continues to work on post-surgery.

Pestano may not have outstanding stuff or a fastball he can blow by hitters, but one of the things that make Pestano such a strong closing candidate is his exceptional makeup. He is tenacious on the mound and battles every pitch.

"It is definitely not stuff-wise as there are guys going out there throwing 95-96 where I am more an 89-90 guy," said Pestano about his closing abilities. "I think I go out there and pitch a lot with my heart and my head more than anything else.

There are just certain things some guys have and some guys don't.

I'd like to think that I can control the game a lot better than some people and not let it get out of control.

I stay within myself more where some guys go out there and they get a guy on base and things start to run a little bit and the game gets away from them."

Last year, Pestano made his professional debut with the Indians short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley affiliate. It was Pestano's first real live game action since the injury in May 2006, and while he was happy to be back on the mound pitching he was not satisfied with his overall performance.

"No, I wasn't happy with it," said Pestano when asked about his 2007 season. "I had a lot of games get away from me.

In close games I pitched really well in save situations.

But I had some games where we were up or down by five and I really was not probably into the

game as much as I should have been just because it was not a save situation and the game is not on the line.

I kind of let those games get away from me and give up runs in those games."

Pestano's struggles in non-save situations last year is nothing new. Just about any closer at any level has a hard time pitching in a game where the outcome is for the most part no longer in doubt.

"There is definitely a different feel," said Pestano. "You just kind of feel more energy out there in a save situation.

When you are pitching in a game and your team is down by eight, there is not really a whole lot of adrenaline flowing through your body.

I would like to say it is the same mentality, but it is not.

I have been trying to do that this year.

I pitched in two games where we were down by eight or up by twelve, and I tried going out there to convince myself in my head that it is a 1-0 ballgame and to go out there and execute every pitch and take it from there."

So far this season, Pestano is off to a great start. The entire Lake County bullpen and starting rotation is off to a great start with a team ERA of 2.56 which leads the South Atlantic League (SAL) and they are currently in first place at 13-6 in the SAL Northern Division.

Pestano has anchored the bullpen closing out several games for Lake County, and in seven games is 0-0 with four saves and a 1.17 ERA.

In 7.2 innings he has allowed only five hits and three walks while striking out ten.

"I'm happy with it," said Pestano about his good start at Lake County. "I've gotten a lot of strikeouts.

That's not really what I go out there and try to do.

I try to pitch to contact."

Like many bullpen pitchers, especially closers, Pestano has a routine he goes through to get himself ready for each appearance. After warming up in the bullpen, before he goes out on the mound for his warmup tosses he pauses for a moment and then sprints to the mound.

After making his warmup pitches and the catcher throws the ball down he stands behind the mound to collect himself and get mentally focused, but also quickly give homage to both of his grandfathers who passed away recently.

"I write underneath the bill of my hat a couple sayings and a couple initials for my two grandfathers who passed away, one this past offseason and the other one my freshman year," said Pestano. "I have their initials under there and just a little saying I that I don't really look at but I feel comfortable with up there."

Just like Pestano is comforted by the initials of his grandfathers on the bill of his cap, Lake County coaches and players are certainly comfortable with him in the closer's role.

Video: Pestano closes out another Lake County win .

Photo courtesy of Kenn Carr