Back when Kinston Indians right-handed pitcher Josh Tomlin was a freshman in high school, he made a decision that would forever change his life. Josh was also a gifted basketball player that was already playing with the varsity team in just his first year in high school. He decided to give up the sport to concentrate on baseball. And now, eight years later, it looks as if Josh made the right choice. Tony had a chance to talk with the Indians pitching prospect last week.

Back when Kinston Indians right-handed pitcher Josh Tomlin was a freshman in high school, he made a decision that would forever change his life.

You see, that year he was playing on both the varsity basketball and varsity baseball team at his high school in Whitehouse, TX. As basketball season ended and baseball season started, the two sports became a conflict as they overlapped one another.

Tomlin was a gifted athlete who not only played basketball and baseball, but was also a safety on the football team.

But his talents could only be spread so thin, and after he missed some games in basketball at the end of his freshman season to play in a baseball tournament, his basketball coach gave him an ultimatum that helped forge his baseball career and set him on the path he is on today as a young up-and-coming baseball prospect in the minor leagues.

"My basketball coach made me choose between basketball and baseball because I was called up to the varsity for a baseball tournament and I played on the varsity during basketball season," said Tomlin in an interview in Frederick, MD last weekend. "So, I got in trouble with that. I ended up having to quit basketball after that year."

Seeing that Tomlin is now in the professional ranks as a baseball player, and one who is starting to get noticed and build some steam toward a promising baseball career, it is safe to say he made the right choice.

Since becoming a professional, all Tomlin does is win and put up great numbers. Coming into the season he had a career record of 19-6 with a 2.89 ERA in 47 games (35 starts).

Tomlin has great stats, but his questionable role, average tools, and so much depth in the system have often pushed him aside.

Not anymore.

Overall it has been a very good year so far for Tomlin. He really impressed in the first half of the season and improved his standing in the organization and how he is viewed by scouts.

In 23 appearances (9 starts) this year, the 23-year old righty is 7-4 with a 3.45 ERA.

Last year at Lake County and Kinston, Tomlin bounced around between starter and reliever and was reliable in both roles.

He started this season pitching out of the bullpen in Kinston, but after a few injuries and callups he recently found himself back in the starting rotation.

His versatility to pitch in any role has only enhanced his value, and he is happy to pitch wherever the Indians need him.

"It is going good this year," said Tomlin. "At first the transition [back to starting] was kind of tough. Stretching me out to five or six innings kind of took a toll on me at first, but I worked it out.

I liked the adrenaline and pressure being in a close game late and to come in there and try to kill an inning or hold it so our closer can come in.

But, as long as I am getting the ball and logging innings, [any role] is fine with me."

Tomlin has a three pitch mix of a fastball, slider, and changeup, and his fastball coming into the season consistently clocked in around 87-89 MPH and sometimes touched 90 MPH. But, one of the more interesting developments with Tomlin this year has been his increased fastball velocity.
The Indians were surprised when he pitched out of the bullpen earlier in the season and was popping in on the radar gun around 92-93 MPH which was a few ticks above his normal velocity.

"In the bullpen early in the year I was pitching every two or three days, and when I became the setup man I was pitching three or four times a week," said Tomlin. "My arm felt great, and when I came in for that one inning late in a game the adrenaline was rushing

with runners on base and I would get it up to 92-93 MPH.

I think it is back down to 88-91 MPH since I have been starting.

I gotta pace myself now."

The Indians have been very impressed with Tomlin's work ethic and how quickly he has made adjustments. It is a tribute to Tomlin's athleticism since he is a converted shortstop, but also mostly to due to his great makeup and upbeat attitude. There are always improvements to be made, and Tomlin has worked diligently with Kinston pitching coach Greg Hibbard on improving his slider command and velocity.

"Right now me and Hibby kind of made a few minor adjustments to my slider to get a little more depth to it and speed it up a little bit," said Tomlin. "My curveball and slider were kind of similar velocity-wise at 75-78 MPH, so we kind of got the slider back up to 83-84 MPH. I am also trying to stay taller to get a more downhill plane towards home plate.

It is a lot tougher for hitters to hit a ball that is going down rather than going flat."

Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins recently commented about Tomlin's improved slider and ability to make adjustments.

"He is a converted shortstop, and has a lot of athleticism," said Atkins. "When a pitcher is extremely athletic the ability to make adjustments is quicker. We have seen the depth of his slider improve much faster than most of our pitchers. We have seen his command improve much faster than most of our pitchers. I think that is a tribute to his athleticism and fortitude obviously. He has been up to 92 MPH this year, and we did not expect that."

The Indians rewarded Tomlin with a spot start in Triple-A Buffalo on June 3rd, and Tomlin responded by going seven strong innings and allowed just three runs on six hits and one walk while striking out three.

He looked cool and composed in throwing an efficient 79 pitches in his seven innings of work, with 50 of them going for strikes.

He had good command of his fastball to both sides of the plate, and even though his heart was racing when he took the mound at the start of the game he maintained a calmness on the mound all night which impressed Indians officials.

"It was great [to pitch in Buffalo]," said Tomlin. "The experience was good. I met Scott Radinsky (Buffalo pitching coach) and Torey Lovullo (Buffalo manager) up there and they talked to me awhile and kind of calmed me down.

I had Wyatt Toregas (catcher) who I heard a lot of good things about, so I kind of went on what he called.

He did a great job behind the plate.

It was weird trying to read the hitters as they are more patient and hitting with two strikes does not matter to them.

Other than that baseball is baseball.

As long as you throw strikes things are okay.

I settled down and all the pressure was gone, but I definitely had a lot of jitters though."

As an inexperienced player moving from the small town parks in Single-A ball to the quasi-major league atmosphere found in Triple-A ballparks, Tomlin was treated to an entirely different environment in his callup to Buffalo. He also was now a boy amongst men, as the Buffalo roster is littered with players 30 or older. While he was essentially only there for a day, everything was foreign to him.

He relied on some advice he received earlier in the year in spring training from a few players who have spent time in Buffalo this season.

"I really did not get a chance to sit down and talk to anybody while I was in Buffalo," said Tomlin. "I met a guy this past spring, Jeff Harris, when I was backing up big league games with Bubbie Buzchero a few times. We sat down with him and Rick Bauer and talked for awhile and they told us what to expect.

It was good hearing it from guys who experienced that level before and have been there as well as up and down in the big leagues.

They know how to pitch and get people out at the [Triple-A level], so it was a good experience to get a chance to talk to those guys."

Tomlin primarily played shortstop in high school up through his senior year and rarely pitched because of two players a year ahead of him who were high profile pitchers being scouted for the major league baseball draft. Tomlin pitched here and there his senior season in high school, and went to Angelina (TX) Junior College and began his career as a shortstop.

It was not until a few games into his college career that he made the transition to pitching full time.

"In high school there were two guys in front of me that ended up getting drafted that pitched every Tuesday and Friday, so they were the guys who pitched and I did not pitch in high school until my senior year when they left," said Tomlin. "I would pitch occasionally then. Then I went to junior college and played nothing but shortstop and was actually drafted by the Padres [in 2005] as a shortstop. I played 20 or

30 innings [at Angelina] as a shortstop, but have been pitching ever since."

Tomlin is sort of the poster boy when it comes to assessing the risk a baseball player faces coming out of high school or as a non-senior college player. Players drafted out of high school or as a non-college senior have leverage in contract talks because they have the option of turning down an offer and going to or back to college and then re-entering the draft the next season. But, sometimes such a decision can come with a price.

Tomlin was drafted in the 11th round of the 2005 Draft by the San Diego Padres. As a junior college player, he could be drafted after his sophomore season but the Padres and Tomlin could never agree to a deal so Tomlin decided to go back to college for his junior season and enrolled at Texas Tech.

A sprained ulnar collateral ligament in his pitching elbow that season sidelined him for six weeks and ultimately hurt his status for the 2006 Draft where he slid to the 19th round to the Indians.

While he was disappointed with the results of the draft, he signed with the Indians quickly since he would have no leverage if he went back for a senior season and battled injuries again. This is one of the things draft picks agonize over every year, and why a lot of players opt for the money and a chance to get their professional career going early rather than play out the full four years in college.

"I have a buddy from Oklahoma State, Ty Wright, who was taken in the 7th round by the Cubs and was offered a dollar and that is pretty much what he got," said Tomlin. "He had no leverage as a college senior and couldn't go back to school and play another year."

Tomlin's professional career is surely on the rise. He has hit some rough patches along the way, but so far everything has worked out.
Whether deciding between basketball or baseball as a young high school player, or with signing or going back to school as a college player, Tomlin has made all the right decisions to date.

Photo courtesy of Carl Kline