It was a season full of surprises and disappointments in the Indians farm system this year, but one of the bigger surprises was that of Low-A Lake County right-handed pitcher Steve Smith. Smith, 23, had a sensational season as the Captains closer going 2-3 with 26 saves and a 2.36 ERA in 47 games. It was a solid year for the Indians 25th round pick in the 2008 Draft out of Ouachita Baptist University (AR). Tony had a chance to interview him in a recent trip out to Lake County.

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Smith, 23, had a sensational season as the Captains closer going 2-3 with 26 saves and a 2.36 ERA in 47 games. In 53.1 innings pitched he allowed 42 hits, 12 walks, and had 62 strikeouts. He finished 2nd in the South Atlantic League in saves (26), 6th in appearances (47), and 3rd in games finished (42).

Had Smith not received a promotion to High-A Kinston the last week of the season he likely would have finished as the league leader in saves. In addition to that he also missed an opportunity to break the Captains record for saves in a season held by former right-handed closer Matt Davis who had 26 in 2006, and instead settled for a tie with Davis.

It was a solid year for the Indians 25th round pick in the 2008 Draft out of Ouachita Baptist University (AR). Smith really seemed to grow into the closer's role this year and in turn may have found a niche in the Indians system.

"I enjoyed it," said Smith about closing for the first time in his career. "This was my first year in the closer's role. My senior year in college I closed a few games in the middle of the week when I was not starting on the weekends. I really liked it, and I think I have that bulldog mentality for it. It was just getting an opportunity."

Smith came in this season as an under-rated guy, and someone a lot of fans probably knew nothing about. As a lower round pick and from an obscure college his performance on the mound this year opened some eyes and helped establish him as a solid relief prospect in the Indians system.

"In spring training I didn't really know what their plan was for me," said Smith. "Whether I would be a bullpen guy here [in Lake County] or stay in extended [spring training], I don't think they really knew what to expect. I didn't get to throw a whole lot last year as I had a lot of innings coming in. I just wanted to come in, keep my head down, and keep my mouth shut and throw good baseball. As far as the year goes, yeah, I think I had a good year. I think I proved I can pitch and can have success."

The Indians in the past have not developed closers in the minor leagues, but with the success of Smith and some other relievers in the role this year, maybe that has begun to change somewhat. He finished the year 26-for-28 in save opportunities, good for an outstanding 93% success rate.

Even though he only blew two save opportunities, he learned a lot those two games. It is often said you don't know what you have in a closer until you see how he reacts to that first blown save. Only then will you truly see how mentally tough that pitcher is and if he can handle the failure that comes with the job from time to time. Smith showed a lot of mental toughness shaking off the blown saves and going right back out there the next time and getting the job done.

"You know what, I think you just have to have a short term memory," said Smith. "Regardless, the sun is going to come up the next day. Someone once told me that when Mariano Rivero - who is obviously the best closer of all time - blows a save he is thinking about his next save once he crosses the white line. It's going to happen. Closing I think has a lot to do with your mentality and not necessarily the actual stuff that you have. Plus, knowing your manager has faith in you to put you back out there in the same situation when it comes up again says a lot."

Lake County Pitching Coach Tony Arnold was delighted to work with Smith all year, and he liked what he saw from his closer this season.

"His makeup makes him be able to handle the role he is in," said Arnold. "He has come out and saved a game or blown a save, but he comes right back through that door ready to get better the next day and is focused and he doesn't get down. He has the mentality you like to see in a kid like that."

Smith doesn't have great stuff per se as a pitcher. His fastball sits around 88-90 MPH, but he complements it with a very good changeup. He has an excellent feel for his changeup, and Indians personnel believe it will be a plus pitch for him in the near future. His best qualities though are his outstanding makeup and mental toughness, which is so important when pitching in the late innings of a close game.

"Steve is a kid who is not real big, but he will still touch 90 MPH with his fastball," said Arnold. "His changeup is probably an average to plus pitch right now. I mean, he has a great feel for it and it is almost Doug Jones-ish. That is who he reminds me of, I mean Jones was a little bit bigger than Steve is now, but Doug pitched with his changeup and that is predominantly what Smitty [did] here. His changeup is what makes him who he is."

For Smith to become a better relief prospect he knows he needs to sharpen up his fastball command and develop another pitch. Guts and guile can only take you so far. If you lack put away stuff, you need to be a surgeon out there on the mound hitting your spots and throwing consistent, quality strikes. This is something he worked with Arnold on all season, and is something he will continue to hone in on in the offseason.

"My changeup has always been my pitch, but I had kind of lacked a little bit of fastball command and this year that is what I focused on more," said Smith. "I know I can get guys out with my changeup, but to be able to move up [in the system] I need to be able to develop my fastball command better because I don't throw hard. The changeup is only good when hitters have that threat of the fastball. It's about just being able to put it where I want to. Also, late in the season Tony and I [worked] on a cutter. That's really coming along well. So I just want to hone in on the cutter and be able to put it down and away from righties and down and in on lefties, and spot my fastball and put it exactly where I want to."

Unearthing a player like Smith from a school out in the middle of nowhere is scouting at its best. Indians Area Scout Steve Abney covers the mid-west states of Arkansas, Kansas, Iowa, Missouri and Nebraska and has recently unearthed some good late round talent with the likes of Smith, Greg Folgia (40th round 2009), and Vidal Nuno (48th round 2009). He used a connection he had with former pitching coach Dirk Kinney at Ouachita Baptist University to find Smith.

"We are a Division II school," said Smith. "We had a good year, and had a 102 wins in two seasons and we went to the World Series. Steve Abney is my scout, and he was good friends with my pitching coach Dirk Kinney, so I think that probably helped me a little bit. But I like to think the cream rises to the top wherever you are at."

Coming out of high school Smith was primarily a first baseman, so he was not heavily recruited and he rarely pitched. But baseball is unique as there is talent to be found in even the smallest of schools, and sometimes a player can be a late bloomer. Players are not only drafted out of the big Division 1 programs, but also out of every high school imaginable and any college that has a baseball program. No matter how small the school may be, if you have talent word will get around and scouts will find you.

"I didn't even pitch in high school," recalled Smith. "I was the #3 or #4 guy and mostly played first base, but I wanted to pitch and felt like I could pitch. My college coach saw me get to throw in games over the summer, and going to a smaller school I got the opportunity to do that. I started in college and was a starter all four years."

Smith had the opportunity to go to Liberty University - another Christian college

and a Division 1 school in Virginia - and also the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, but they wanted him to attend and play baseball at junior college first before going to school there. So Smith chose to go to Ouachita Baptist University.

"I'm a spiritual guy and I wanted to go to a place where I would have some spiritual surroundings to keep me strong," said Smith. "Obviously I falter and I am not perfect. I am not claiming to be an angel. But I believe God has a plan for all of us. Everybody told me if you sign to go there then you are giving up any chance to play pro ball. I just refused to believe that because like I said, if you go in there and perform and you put yourself in a situation to be seen, then all it takes is one opportunity."

Making the most of his opportunity is what Smith did this season, and he looks poised to crack the High-A Kinston bullpen to start the year next year. His performance and makeup led to a very successful season, one the Indians surely noticed.

"I think a lot of guys go into spring training trying to make teams," said Smith. "I just want to go in [next year] with a good attitude, throw strikes, keep my mouth shut, and just prove to them I can pitch at that level no matter what. I think just showing a lot of mental maturity helps because I am not a big guy and I don't have overpowering stuff, so I don't stand out and I understand that. But I still know how to get guys out, and that is what I really want them to see."