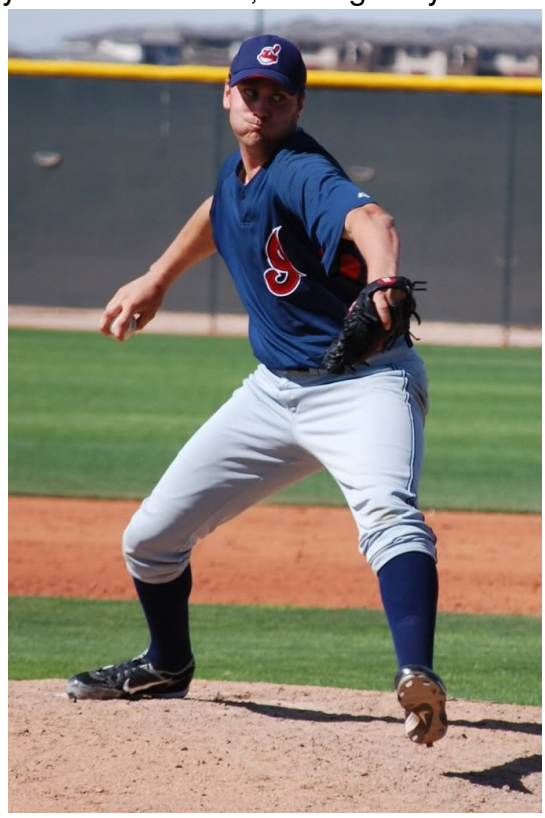
The 2009 Arizona Fall League (AFL) season wrapped up last week, and of the ten total players the Indians sent to the AFL the one player who really made a name for himself and stood out was right-handed reliever Josh Judy. Judy was coming off a breakout season in 2009, and has used his time out in the AFL to vault himself into the upper echelon of relief pitching prospects not only with the Indians, but arguably in all of baseball. Tony had a chance to talk with him this week.



The 2009 Arizona Fall League (AFL) season wrapped up last week, and of the ten total players the Indians sent to the AFL the one player who really made a name for himself and stood out was right-handed reliever Josh Judy.

Yes, the versatile Matt McBride certainly had a great AFL campaign hitting .378 with a 1.159 OPS in 22 games, but he has always been one of the Indians better position player prospects. His performance in the AFL was more just the cherry on the sundae of what was a great comeback season for him.

Judy on the other hand had a breakout season in 2009, and has used his time out in the AFL to vault himself into the upper echelon of relief pitching prospects not only with the Indians, but arguably in all of baseball.

Armed with a fastball that tops out in the mid-90s and a wicked slider, the 6'4" 200-pound Judy went 4-3 with a 2.83 ERA and 14 saves in 41 combined appearances between High-A Kinston and Double-A Akron this past season. He held opposing hitters to a .201 batting average, and in 54.0 innings struck out 70 while walking just 18. He has carried his success from the 2009

regular season into the 2009 offseason as in AFL he went 2-2 with a 1.59 ERA in 11 appearances, allowing 13 hits, 8 walks, and recording 20 strikeouts in 17.0 innings of work.

Judy's 2009 season was a continuation of the strong showing he had in 2008 for Low-A Lake County and Kinston where in 42 combined appearances he went 12-1 with a 3.26 ERA and in 88.1 innings allowed 72 hits, 26 walks, and had 97 strikeouts. In all, in three seasons in the Indians minor league system in 96 total games and 167.2 total innings he has some pretty impressive numbers: 2.69 ERA, 6.9 H/9, 0.4 HR/9, 3.0 BB/9, 10.1 K/9, and 1.10 WHIP.

For the 23-year old out of Fort Wayne, Indiana, those are numbers that have put Judy on the fast track to the big leagues. He opened the 2009 season in Kinston, but after just four appearances there he was moved up to Akron where he remained and settled in nicely for the rest of the season. When right-handed closer Vinnie Pestano went down with an elbow injury in July, Judy assumed the closer's role and flourished.

"I got settled in pretty well," said Judy in a recent interview about his quick promotion to Akron earlier in the year. "It was a quick move up at the beginning of the year throwing only four innings in Kinston and [going] straight to Akron. You hate to lose a guy like Vinnie who was so dominant the first part of the season before he got hurt. I just wanted to step in and do my part."

The Indians typically do not develop closers in the minor leagues, focusing more on a set routine where their relievers go every two or three days and for one or two innings. It is very rare for any reliever to pitch on back-to-back nights, for when it does happen it is almost always because of necessity (over-worked bullpen, starter did not last long, extra innings, etc). Because of this, it is hard to have a defined closer to pitch every save situation. One pitcher in particular may be used in the role, but the role is often shared. The Indians prefer to have their more important relief prospects get regular work in the 7th and 8th inning rather than wait to use them in the 9th inning because you never know when an opportunity will arise to use them.

After so many struggles in the bullpen at the major league level three of the last four years, the Indians appeared to make some changes this past season with how they handle the development of relievers. One of them was identifying much earlier the starting pitchers who project more as relievers and moving them into a

bullpen role much quicker. Also, it appears that they are now open to the idea of exposing their high priority relievers in roles in the minors that they think they project in at the major league level. That means a reliever like Judy who in the past was pitching mostly in the 7th and 8th inning based on a set plan to ensure work may now find himself pitching almost exclusively for one inning or in the 8th and 9th innings only.

The closer's role was new for Judy the second half of the season, but you would never know it as he was dominant going 0-0 with 9 saves and a 1.47 ERA in 16 appearances after assuming the role in early July. The Indians moved him to a backend bullpen role because they like his approach on the mound. He is aggressive going right after hitters, displays very good composure, and is a bulldog in tight situations.

For Judy, the transition to the closer's role was nothing new and in the end your job is still to get outs.

"I kind of just see it as going out there and just getting guys out and trying to get better everyday," said Judy. "The whole mental preparation for that was just getting ready for one inning, three guys, and that the first out is the most important."

Judy had the unusual benefit of having the same pitching coach at Double-A Akron this past season as he had at Low-A Lake County in 2008. That's because pitching coach Ruben Niebla was his pitching coach in Lake County in 2008, and was promoted to Akron for the 2009 season where he continued his role as pitching coach. It was a unique situation for Judy where he got a chance to work with someone who knew him well and probably the most of any pitcher Niebla worked with the past two seasons.

"Without a doubt he has probably progressed the most out of [all the relievers here]," said Niebla in an interview back in September. "He got off to a little bit of a rough start at the beginning just adjusting to the level more than anything. I knew the stuff was there as I saw him in Lake County and I knew the fastball and the ability to spin the ball was there. So once he got adjusted and got his feet under him he has run away with putting together a very good year."

Niebla and Judy worked together over the course of the season and made some

changes to his delivery which Judy thinks helped him take off about halfway through the season.

"[We worked] on my mechanics, most definitely," said Judy. "For most of [2008] and the beginning of this year they wanted me to have a high leg kick and be in more of a load position in the stretch being able to deliver to the plate. That wasn't working when I got [to Akron earlier this year]. So they tightened up my delivery to make it very quick and subtle and it panned out. [My slider] definitely improved with the mechanical adjustment [to my delivery]. It is a lot tighter, sharper, and I am able to get more swing and misses with it."

Judy got engaged last offseason, and will get married next offseason on December 18th. In between now and then there is a lot more on his mind than just wedding plans. If things fall his way there is a great chance that this time next year not only will he be celebrating the beginning of his new life with his fiancé Vivian, but the beginning of a career in the Major Leagues.

"I think one guy that has been one of the more encouraging stories for us [this year] in Player Development has been Josh Judy," said Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins in a season ending interview. "With just how consistent he has been with having consistently above average stuff as a relief pitcher. He has an above average ability to put the ball on the ground and an above average fastball. So he is someone I think could potentially impact the team next year in 2010."