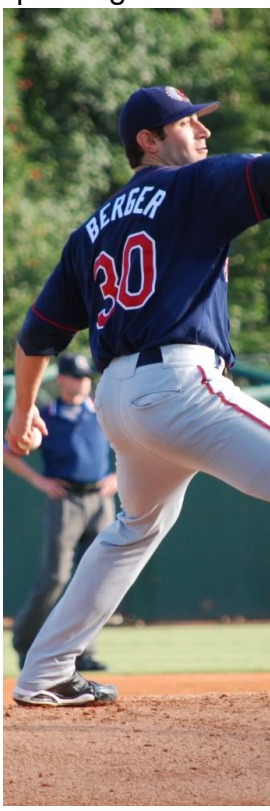
Indians left-handed pitching prospect Eric Berger could be going places.Being a part of a military family, the 23-year old Berger has already been all over the world. His father Mitch Berger is a squadron commander currently stationed in Germany, and he has been out to visit his father in other places in the past like Korea, Alaska, Kansas and many others. One place Berger has never been though is the major leagues. It is his focus at the moment and something he has worked hard to get to throughout his amateur and now professional pitching career. Tony talked to him about that journey as the basis for his latest piece for us.



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One place Berger has never been though is the major leagues. It is his focus at the moment and something he has worked hard to get to throughout his amateur and now professional pitching career. While it is far from a sure thing of ever happening, his talent along with his performance since being drafted in the in the 8th round of the 2008 Draft out of the University of Arizona continue to make that more of a possibility every day.

Berger had a very successful professional debut in 2008 where in 10 combined starts at short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley and Single-A Lake County he went 2-0 with a 2.11 ERA (38.1 IP, 29 H, 11 BB, 45 K). He followed that up with a

another very good campaign in 2009 where he made 27 combined starts between High-A Kinston and Double-A Akron going 10-9 with a 2.50 ERA (144.0 IP, 125 H, 61 BB, 133 K).

While fans tend to look at wins and losses and ERA to evaluate the effectiveness of a pitcher, the Indians and other major league teams typically do not pay much attention to these numbers. Instead, teams look at a pitcher's ability to control the strike zone (walks), his ability to get swings and misses (strikeouts), and his ability to get groundballs (less extra base hits). In addition to the stats, a heavy emphasis is also placed on the evaluations and opinions from scouts, coordinators, and coaches to provide info on how the pitcher projects or what strides they made or did not make with any adjustments.

While some stats like wins and ERA can often be misleading of just how effective a pitching prospect performed, in the case of Berger he is one of those guys who not only has great stats with regard to wins, ERA, strikeouts and so on, but he also has the stuff and projects as a very good pitching prospect.

"What an awesome [2008] draft that was," said Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins in an interview at the end of the season. "That's what we look at, as he was in the 8th round and is in Double-A already for us. He is extremely competitive, and he is moving quick. He is the most athletic pitcher in our system just objectively and the measures we use to study that. That showed as at the end of the season he was getting stronger, and his last outings of the season [were] some of his best."

Berger has a standard three-pitch mix of a fastball, 12-6 curveball, and changeup. Before undergoing Tommy John surgery as a sophomore in college he touched 96 MPH with his fastball but currently sits between 90-92 MPH while touching 93 MPH. His curveball is a solid average pitch and his changeup showed a lot of improvement over the course of the 2009 season. He does a good job of keeping the ball down in the zone, particularly because of his arm angle on his fastball which is straight over the top.

In looking at his growth over the course of the 2009 season, Berger was pretty happy with the results.

"I [felt] pretty good with what [was] happening," said Berger in a recent interview. "Obviously there are some changes I want to make and knock

some things down. But I am happy with the way things [went]. I mainly [tried] to keep the team in the game and give us a chance to win every time out there."

When Kinston ace left-handed pitcher Kelvin De La Cruz went down with an elbow injury in early April, Berger had to take up the slack as the leader of the pitching staff. He did not disappoint and was the glue that kept a very fluid Kinston rotation together until his eventual departure when he was promoted to Akron in early August.

Pitching every fifth day and making 27 starts all year was a true test of his durability and endurance, something that coming out of college the year before he was not used to as he pitched once a week over the course of three to four months. Plus he did all this while still shaking off the rust from Tommy John surgery in July 2006, though was pain free all year with no restrictions.

"Yeah, my junior and senior year at Arizona I was coming back from Tommy John and it was tough to be in that position because I was just trying to get my location back," said Berger about his role as a leader of the pitching staff. "It's been a big difference losing two days in the rotation. Ever since about half way through the year it [seemed] like I [was] starting every third day and not every fifth day because it [was] moving so fast. It's like every time I [woke] up I felt like I was starting. But my body definitely made the adjustment for the good and I felt better and more fresh even with having still lost two days. My body didn't really feel that good at Mahoning Valley going from college and signing and playing there. It was tough for me. But now I feel like I did before the surgery so it [was] nice to get back to that position and be consistent and show them that I am durable and can do this."

While Berger had a very good season statistically, there were still several things he worked on behind the scenes with Pitching Coach Greg Hibbard when he was at Kinston, and then continued with Pitching Coach Ruben Niebla when he was promoted to Akron.

"I [was] just trying to repeat my motion," said Berger. "Not my delivery, but I have had to work with the speed of my motion. Also rubber placement with where I am standing more to the left as I had been standing all the way on the right. It is visually different as it looks like I am throwing at a different angle because the plate is more to the right, but it will be better for me in the long

run especially with the arm side fastball."

One of the things the Indians really wanted to see out of Berger last year was improved command, and they were very happy with the progress he made, particularly in the second half of the season when pitchers who are pitching in their first full season tend to fatigue.

"I think it [got] a lot better after the All Star break," said Berger. "I just want to [continue] to get a higher percentage of strikes with all of my pitches and get as deep into games as I can. Throw first pitch strikes and have my walks go down, and just be able to say I finished strong and did not break down."

Berger should open the 2010 season with a return trip to Akron and spend the majority if not all of the season there, but a midseason callup to Triple-A Columbus is not out of the question. It's an important year for him, and one that could set him up for that big league debut sometime in 2011.