The young relief corps the Cleveland Indians have put together in the upper minors is pretty impressive, which up until this year developing relievers had been one of the biggest Achilles heels for the organization. That unit just got even stronger recently with the announcement that left-handed pitcher Nick Hagadone will be making the permanent transition from a starter to a reliever.

Hagadone, 24, had been a starter his entire minor league career up until the recent shift to the bullpen at the end of July. But while the decision to move him from the starting rotation may appear to be something which came out of the blue, it actually is not the case as the Indians had discussed it with him back in January that a move would occur sometime in the second half of this season.

"They actually told me in January that it was going to happen," said Hagadone in a recent interview for the IPI. "They said that I was going to have a certain amount of starts and then I would finish the year in the bullpen to control my innings and keep them around 100."

As a first round pick of the Red Sox in 2007, Hagadone came in as a college reliever who in 55 career appearances had made only seven starts in college. But from the start of his pro career he was profiled and viewed by big league teams as a serious backend bullpen prospect because of his fierce competitiveness, 95-99 MPH fastball, and very good slider.

While Hagadone has the size, stuff and ability that most people would rather prefer stick in the starting rotation, this was a move that was coming no matter what. Going all the way back to his time with the Boston Red Sox, he had always heard that he would eventually be moved to the bullpen. Like most priority relief prospects, he initially pitched out of the bullpen to start his pro career (i.e. Austin Adams) in order to help him develop a routine, work on his pitches, expose him to as many game situations as possible, and flipping a lineup two to three times help teach him to pitch rather than throw.

"I think it will be good [to be to the pen]," said Hagadone. "I pitched there in college and I enjoyed it. That's my mentality; to go out there and let it go for two innings and throw everything I have at the hitters right away and see what happens. [The Indians] haven't ruled [starting] out in the future, but I am not sure. If I continue to pitch like I have this year I have no idea what role I will be in (chuckle). It is up to them and how I throw."

Now that his starting days are all but over, Hagadone has a chance to let it all air out for one to two innings every night. His changeup had been inconsistent and a work in progress, so now that pitch can be shelved to where he can almost exclusively rely on his fastball-slider combination to get hitters out. His stuff and command may start to play up in the role, and now that he doesn't have to worry about flipping a lineup two to three times a game he can show everything and go after hitters more aggressively.

So far, the move to the bullpen has not brought much change in Hagadone's numbers as in five relief appearances he is 0-0 with a 2.61 ERA (10.1 IP, 11 H, 3 ER, 8 BB, 10 K). He is still giving up way too many base-runners and still has trouble with his command as evident by the walks. Overall on the season in 22 games (17 starts) between High-A Kinston and Double-A Akron he is 2-4 with a 3.41 ERA (74.0 IP, 64 H, 55 BB, 81 K).

The move to the bullpen became official a few weeks ago in late July when he came off the disabled list in Akron. He had been on the disabled list because of some mild shoulder soreness he was having, but the soreness has since disappeared.

"I feel pretty good," said Hagadone. "My shoulder feels better after the short time on the DL, but it wasn't anything serious. It was a strain after an outing in Bowie and for two days I tried to throw and it wasn't going away and it wasn't something I could throw through, so I had to shut it

down for a few days. I came back and it is feeling a lot better now."

The shoulder discomfort may help explain some of Hagadone's poor performances this year and his overall struggles with throwing strikes consistently and avoiding walks (6.7 BB/9). He is two years removed from Tommy John surgery, so that can no longer be used as an excuse to explain any sub par performances. But he has had to endure a lot of high pitch and high stress outings in almost every outing this season, which may be a byproduct of still finding his way back to complete health.

"I don't think [it is the injuries]," explained Hagadone about why he has struggled to throw strikes consistently this year. "I mean it probably has something to do with the injury before, but I don't like to admit that because it has been so long and I feel like everything should be good to go now. It has been so frustrating all year because I will have one outing where my fastball command is good but my offspeed is not good, and then have an outing where my offspeed is good but I am not working ahead so I can't throw it. I just haven't put it all together in one outing really all year. I am just trying to continue to work on everything and not get too frustrated ands keep working."

At the moment, the Indians lack any real left-handed relief pitching depth in the upper levels of their farm system. Considering that Hagadone is up for roster protection this offseason, he will be added to the Indians 40-man roster after the season and be a bullpen option for the Indians sometime in 2011 and beyond.

Hagadone knows he is on the short list of relief pitching options for the Indians, but his plan for the rest of this season is to remain positive and get his mechanics back on track.

"I am working on a lot," said Hagadone. "We found some stuff with my mechanics and made some tweaks that I have been working on in my last few outings with my command just helping me be around the plate. That's the big problem with me as I have been throwing the fastball up a lot mostly this year, so I am just trying to get a better feel for that. I am just trying to get better and back to where I was. The whole year I haven't really lived up to my own expectations for myself just with everything as my stuff and command have been down. I am just trying to stay positive and try to get back to a level that I know I can pitch at."

What makes it especially tough is when a player knows what is wrong and they have the talent to correct those problems, but for whatever reason things don't materialize as envisioned.

"This season has probably been the most frustrating year of my life so far," said Hagadone. "It hasn't been the same this year. I don't really have an explanation for it. I don't know why. I know it is going to come back and it is just a matter of time, so I am just going to keep doing what I have to do."

At some point or another in a pro career, an athlete will most likely face adversity with a sub par season. Most of the greats have had that one clunker of a season. Ask Cliff Lee if he remembers 2007. With that in mind, a clean slate next year may be just what the doctor ordered, but even so he is going to try and finish this season strong and do what it takes to right the ship.

"I haven't lost faith in myself or confidence I will be the pitcher that people have said I will be," said Hagadone. "It will just happen a different way than I wanted it to."

Photo courtesy of Lianna Holub

Follow Tony and the Indians Prospect Insider on Twitter @tlastoria . His new book the 2010 Cleveland Indians Top 100 Prospects & More is also available for purchase on Amazon.com or his site .