Vinnie Pestano has come a long way from where he was a year ago at this time.

Pestano, 25, is having a great season where he has mostly pitched as the closer for Triple-A Columbus. Prior to joining Columbus, the right-handed pitcher was 1-1 with 3 saves and a 2.70 ERA in 14 games at Akron, and in 13.1 innings allowed 12 hits, 2 walks, and had 18 strikeouts. Since joining Columbus in mid-May he has been sensational where in 42 games he is 1-2 with 14 saves and a 1.59 ERA, and in 45,1 innings has allowed 35 hits, 14 walks, and has 58 strikeouts.

But looking at his performance this year you would never know that Pestano was very close to possibly seeing his career come to an end at this time last year.

Pestano had a breakthrough season in Akron during the 2009 season where he was 2-3 with 24 saves and a 2.86 ERA in 34 games before he had to be shutdown because of elbow problems in early July. He did not pitch again last season until the fall when he went out to the Arizona Fall League and made a few appearances, but then the elbow problems came back and there were serious concerns with his elbow.

But of no surprise, Pestano took his never give in and tenacious approach he usually saved for opposing hitters and instead applied it to rehabbing and getting himself back healthy before the start of this season. He did it before after Tommy John surgery in 2006, and he did it again last offseason.

To date, Pestano has shown no wear on the arm, and is healthy and enjoying his best season as a professional.

"I'm doing good and glad to be in Columbus," said Pestano in a recent interview for the IPI. "I am feeling good, a lot better than I was at this time last year. I was throwing in the [Arizona] Fall League and got four to five appearances there after that 60-day shutdown [from July] and the elbow started barking again. So I went and got a second opinion and MRI from Dr. Yokum and they didn't see anything. I moved out to Goodyear in the offseason and got to work and stayed out there for four months to try and get my body and arm in shape for the upcoming year. So I am glad to be healthy and glad to be out there getting a lot of opportunities to throw."

Prior to this season, Pestano had used a submarine-sidearm style arm slot since college to help add some deception and movement to his pitches. He was not a true submariner as he wasn't the "knuckle-duster" type, but he also had a slot lower than your typical side-armer.

In any case, one of the things Pestano did this year to help maintain better health and eliminate a lot of the wear and tear on his arm was to bring his arm slot up from the near traditional sidearm slot to more of a three-quarters arm slot. The results have helped not only in the health department, but with his performance as well.

"I raised [my slot] up to more where I was in high school because I really thought my elbow problems were a result of my sidearm slot," said Pestano. "I didn't have arm trouble until I started throwing sidearm in college. After Tommy John and getting shut down last year it was kind of a decision I made that it was something I needed to do to prolong my career. I really didn't know how my stuff was going to play out. I am not much higher than I was, but I am throwing my slider different so I am still feeling for that as far as location and feel. As time goes on I am feeling more and more confident with it, but I still go out there with my fastball mainly."

Having pitched for the better part of the past six or seven years with his sidearm slot, even though Pestano has only adjusted his arm slot a little bit it can affect everything with his pitches and mechanics as he has to almost re-learn everything all over again. It can take a while to get used to, but he looks to have found his groove and really taken to it well.

"It didn't take long," said Pestano on adjusting to his new arm slot. "I always had a good feel for the zone, so raising it up really did not change much. I am getting better at locating both my four-seam and two-seam fastball to both sides of the plate. It has been a process and something I have worked on all season. Sometimes it is there, sometimes it is not. I just started throwing a new slider I picked up in January. Every time I go out there I am learning something new and taking it one day at a time."

In addition to remaining healthy, two things have happened which have helped Pestano's spike in performance and effectiveness out of the bullpen this year.

The first thing is his fastball velocity has improved where he more consistently is sitting in the low 90s at 91-93 MPH and has touched up to 95 MPH. He is also getting some movement with his fastball, something he always had a problem with before dropping to the sidearm slot. His four-seam fastball cuts on occasion and he is getting good depth with his two-seam fastball.

"I topped out at 93 MPH last year on very few occasions, but I have been hitting that a lot more consistently now," said Pestano. "I was hoping I would get a little boost in velocity going up with the slot a little more. I threw pretty hard in high school, but I dropped down not because I needed velocity but because I needed movement. My fastball was straight coming out of high school, and in college it was not really going to help me out. In a way throwing sidearm all those years actually helped me learn how to pitch. What is important is movement and location and not so much velocity. Mechanically I am going more north and south than sidearm where I was more east and west flying open coming off the ball trying to force that movement. Now I am letting my angle and my hands do the work while my body is going toward home plate."

The other thing that has changed is Pestano has seen a significant improvement with his slider which has become much sharper and with more velocity compared to the slower, slurvy break it used to have.

"[My slider] is probably three to four MPH harder than my old one without a big hump in it, so it is a little more deceiving to hitters and tight," explained Pestano. "They don't see that hump out of my hand as they see it out of my hand as a fastball. I am throwing it from a new grip and a new angle," said Pestano. "It was a lot to undergo right before spring training, but I felt it was something I had to do to be successful for the rest of my career and not just for a season. I have had pretty good success with it, and have been hurt some times when I have hung it, but other than that it is going all right."

After initially breaking in at Columbus as a middle reliever, Pestano is back to his familiar closers role. Closing is something he has excelled at since college as he racked up 27 saves in his three year career at Cal-State Fullerton from 2004-2006, and in his four year professional career with the Indians from 2007-2010 has 71 saves. He may not have the electric stuff that most people become so infatuated with when looking at closers, but he knows how to pitch and is a warrior on the mound, which are arguably the two most important traits for a closer than stuff alone.

"I gotta recruit available ounce of energy to get outs," joked Pestano. "I have to work every hitter to them out. I am fine with doing that as I have done that for my whole career. Every time I go out there I am working on something because something is not there that day. Maybe one of the five days out there you have your stuff, so the other four days you have to battle and get outs. Maybe my two-seamer is not working or my slider, but everyday I am learning something."

Pestano's health, performance, and development this year has not only made him a priority bullpen arm in Columbus, but now potentially in Cleveland as well. With the 25-man big league roster now being expanded to 40 players in September, there is some talk the Indians may seriously consider adding him to the big league roster later this month once Columbus' season ends.

This of course would be a delight to Pestano.

"You know what, my goal my whole life has been to get to the big leagues," said Pestano. "Now that I am in Triple-A I feel like one more step and I am there, so every time I go out I am not just okay with getting results or giving up a run. I feel like the more mistakes I make here, the less of a shot I will have getting away with those mistakes. If I get two line outs and a pop out in an inning and they are on mistakes, I cannot be comfortable with those mistakes even though they

were outs. I have to be able to make better pitches. You can't afford to go out there and have an off night. My main goal is to get to the big leagues and help Cleveland in any way possible. Right now I am taking it one day at a time and not really worried about getting there as I am just worried about taking care of what I can and hopefully everything works out."

No matter if Pestano is called up or not this season, he is certainly at the high point of his career. Having been at his low point last year though, he understands that you can never take anything for granted.

"It's tough to get excited about [getting called up], especially after last year with what happened to me throwing well in Akron," said Pestano. "All it takes is one pitch or throw to potentially have that taken away from you. So I am going out there one game at a time and just enjoying it and whatever happens, happens."

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