The International League playoffs kickoff tomorrow when Triple-A Columbus takes on Scranton/Wilkes-Barre in the opening round of the minor league postseason. It is a time of the year when a great majority of minor leaguer players have already packed their bags and are on their way home for the offseason, while other players that are playoff bound are focused on winning a league championship.

For a select few players, however, now that the minor league season has concluded and Major League rosters have expanded in September, they may be on the verge of getting that dream call to the big leagues. One of those players could be Columbus infielder Josh Rodriguez.

Rodriguez, 25, had a strong comeback season in 2010 as he hit .297 with 13 HR, 57 RBI and an .862 OPS in 107 combined games between Double-A Akron and Columbus this year. It was a comeback in a sense that he struggled with performance in 137 games at Akron in 2008 where he hit just .241 with 7 HR, 49 RBI and a .694 OPS, and he struggled with injury last year where he missed over 100 games because of a nasty hamstring injury and played just 33 games for Akron hitting .295 with 0 HR, 12 RBI and a .760 OPS.

“Yeah, it was a really rough year last season,” said Rodriguez in a recent interview for the IPI.

"It was just one of those things that you can't predict will happen at the beginning of the year. I just had to go with it and try to finish strong."

Everything seemed to come together for Rodriguez this year as he was healthy, performed, and showed some development. What he showed this season is what was always expected of him after he was taken in the 2nd round of the 2006 Draft as a highly touted middle infielder out of Rice, especially after his breakthrough season in 2007 at High-A Kinston where in 133 games he hit .262 with 20 HR, 82 RBI and an .811 OPS.

"I started off the year last year how I wanted to," said Rodriguez. "In years past, I always start off slow, so while the injury slowed things down when I came back I finished how I started off. Having a consistent season is just basically what I have been looking to do my entire career. I just kind of continued that this year and didn't change too much up and started the year off the same way as I did last year and I have been able to keep it pretty consistent throughout the whole year."

Asdrubal Cabrera is pretty much entrenched as the everyday shortstop in Cleveland for at least next season. Also incumbent Jason Donald is playing well at second base in Cleveland and two high profile second base prospects in Cord Phelps and Jason Kipnis loom on the horizon. Knowing this, the Indians need some versatile middle infielders to add to the mix. This is where Rodriguez can fit in and make his initial mark as a big league player.

It is not out of the question that someday Rodriguez could become an everyday second baseman down the road in the big leagues, but he very well will first have to break in as a utility player and play several positions to get into the lineup regularly. His ability to play shortstop, second base, third base and outfield makes him very valuable to the Indians, especially when you consider he can hold his own defensively at each position and his bat could be an added bonus in a utility role.

For the season, Rodriguez played 59 games at shortstop, 23 games at second base, 9 games at third base, and 7 games in the outfield. He filled in at third base in Akron earlier in the year when Lonnie Chisenhall was struggling with his shoulder injury, and the Indians had him focus on playing shortstop late in the year as he played his final 35 games there so they could evaluate him at the position.

“In Akron when Lonnie had some ailments and I think Goedert was having some problems, I played five games in a row at third,” said Rodriguez about his versatility. “I have played one game at third up here [in Columbus], and I have also played some outfield and second base. So I have been all around this year.”

Offensive performance and development is only part of the equation as the Indians place a high standard on defense, especially middle infielders. So while Rodriguez has shown he may be ready to face Major League caliber pitching, it is the defense that they want to make sure is ready. This is why he only played shortstop the final six weeks of the season as the Indians want to see if he could be a backup option for Cabrera at shortstop.

“I take pride in my defense,” said Rodriguez. “I try to keep the errors down, make the routine plays, and be able to make some of the wow plays. That’s what I take pride in, going out there and playing hard defense. The stick will show itself and it is going to have its ups and downs, but I take pride in my defense and that is where I basically play my game.”

Offensively, Rodriguez had a solid showing in Akron earlier in the year where in 21 games he hit .317 with 1 HR, 11 RBI, and an .881 OPS. But it was his performance when he first got to Columbus which started drawing some attention as in 38 first half games he hit .333 with 6 HR, 22 RBI, and a .952 OPS. In the second half his production numbers stayed consistent, but his batting average and OPS dipped significantly as in 48 games he hit .263 with 6 HR, 24 RBI, and a .784 OPS. His struggles mostly came in August where in 26 games he hit .213 with 2 HR, 5 RBI and a .629 OPS, though he finished the season on a high note where in his final ten games he hit .455 with 1 HR, 6 RBI and a 1.243 OPS.

Such is the way things go with the ups and downs in a typical 140-game schedule, and consistency has been Rodriguez’s approach all year.

“Aside from the typical ups and downs, I have had a pretty consistent year all year and have not had too many struggles,” said Rodriguez. “I hit a little skid [in August], but it happens this late in the year. You can’t try and change too much and you just have to stay with what you have been doing all year. I [wasn’t catching] too many breaks, but it is part of the game and you just have to keep your mind right and stick with it. I haven’t changed too much other than some minor details to keep my maybe a little more swing compact and maybe more simple than earlier in the year. That’s basically it, to not go too far from what I have been working on all year and stick with it.”

One area of Rodriguez's game which has not shown itself the past few seasons is his speed. He is a good runner with good speed, but the hamstring issue last year and building his leg strength last offseason sapped some of his speed this year. When the offseason rolls around he would like to continue to workout and get stronger, but getting his speed back up to where it was is a priority for him.

"With the injury to my hamstring I lost some of my speed," said Rodriguez. "Last offseason I tried working on my legs to get them strong so I wouldn't have anymore problems with them, so this offseason I just want to get my speed back up and keep getting stronger. My defense has gotten better as I have been working at that hard, and I am kind of happy where that is even though it can get better. I like where I am at all around."

To date there have been no discussions between the Indians and Rodriguez on what his role may be with the big league club this year or next year, but such is the life for a minor leaguer. Players are often left in the dark as to their future with the big league team or when they may get there.

"No, they haven't really said anything to me really," said Rodriguez. "I just came here and wanted to show them that I could put a decent year together, which is what I wanted to do in the past. Last year was one of the years I wanted to show them, but the injury got in the way of that. I just wanted to bounce back and that was my goal this year to show them I could play."

Rodriguez has most certainly bounced back and then some this year and shown the Indians he is still a player to be reckoned with. Once Columbus finishes play in the postseason, another three to four players are expected to be called to Cleveland, likely an outfielder (Ezequiel Carrera), reliever (Jess Todd), and a middle infielder. Whether that infielder ends up being Drew Sutton – who is already on the 40-man roster - or it is Rodriguez - who is not on the 40-man roster - is anyone's guess at the moment.

At this stage of the game whatever gets Rodriguez to the big leagues is fine with him. Whether he starts or is a bench player makes no difference, he just wants a chance.

"Whatever gets me in that lineup, it doesn't matter where I play," said Rodriguez. "I think wherever I play I am going to give all I got. I am just trying to find a way into that lineup."

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