No one had a bigger breakthrough season in the Cleveland Indians minor league system in 2010 than left-handed pitcher Matt Packer.

Packer, 23, was the recipient of the post season Tony Award for " Biggest Breakthrough ", an award that was handed out just for fun. But there is no doubt that he is a serious pitching prospect after his performance both statistically and developmentally this past season.

Packer spent most of the 2010 season at Low-A Lake County before being promoted up to Double-A Akron in early August, skipping High-A Kinston completely. In 30 combined games at the two stops he went 9-7 with a 2.04 ERA, and in 132.2 innings allowed 112 hits, 7 home runs, 22 walks, and had 123 strikeouts. He allowed less than a base-runner an inning and had an exceptional low walk rate (1.4 BB.9) to go with a very good strikeout rate (8.5 K/9).

It's hard to put up much better numbers than that.

"Yeah, I feel pretty good about my season," Packer said in a recent interview in Goodyear,

Arizona. "I was able to command mainly my fastball and changeup all year and that is probably what helped me the most."

Packer initially opened the season in the Lake County bullpen, but about six weeks into the season after he showed four good pitches and command of all four of them during bullpen sessions and in games, the Indians shifted gears on his role and moved him into the starting rotation.

Even with the success Packer had this year, he still has a ways to go to be considered a finished product as a pitcher. He mainly worked with a fastball-changeup mix at Lake County this year, and upon moving up to Akron he didn't even throw his curveball at all. He is expected to open the 2011 season in the starting rotation for Akron, and when he returns there he'd like to incorporate his curveball more into his pitch mix.

"I want to work on developing my curveball a little more," Packer said. "I really didn't throw it much [this year], and didn't even throw it once in Akron. I want to have it to where it can be a first pitch curveball to change the hitter's eyes because I never really throw anything purpose above the knees. So I would like to have something to change the hitter's eye level, and the curveball could be it."

Packer led all of college baseball in ERA in his sophomore season in 2008 at the University of Virginia with a 1.14 ERA. In 25 games (4 starts) he threw 71.0 innings and allowed 51 hits, 15 walks, and had 58 strikeouts.

The outstanding statistical performance was something Packer thought would serve as a springboard into his junior season and first draft eligible year, but he came back in 2009 with a poor season putting up a 4.13 ERA and threw 61.0 innings and allowed 59 hits, 25 walks, and had 59 strikeouts. While the hike in his ERA was concerning, the biggest concern was the rise in his walks from 1.9 BB/9 in 2008 to 3.9 BB/9 in 2009.

Since Packer was only viewed as a relief pitching prospect, the momentum from his outstanding 2008 campaign quickly evaporated and as a result he slid to the 32nd round of the 2009 Draft when the Indians picked him up.

Being taken so late in the draft and with very little leverage in the negotiation process, it seemed likely that Packer would return to Virginia for his senior year in 2010. But instead he went to pitch in the Cape Cod League to improve his stock with the Indians and get a deal completed.

Indians area scout Bob Mayer had seen Packer at his best in 2008 and his worst in 2009, so he went to the Cape Cod League to see which Packer the Indians would be getting if they made an offer to sign him. After seeing him pitch in the Cape Cod League all summer, the Indians liked what they saw and offered Packer a contract which he quickly accepted.

"I never got hurt or anything, I just had a bad year [my last year at Virginia], “Packer said. “That was a big reason why I signed as I knew if I was given a chance in an organization I could prove that I could pitch and show them what I can do."

As to what caused Packer to struggle that final year at Virginia, he isn’t exactly sure why; however, he does think his role change and lack of early work in the season affected him.

"It was a lot of things,” Packer said. “They had me as a closer - which I am not - and then going into our first ACC weekend I had just two innings under my belt. Then I got hit around and you know how things can just escalate from there and things just got worse and worse. Near the end of the year I started to get it back a little bit, but a lot of things happened that year that I’d [like to move on from]."

And moved on he has as Packer now is widely considered one of the Indians best pitching prospects, something that was inconceivable at this time last year. He snuck up on everyone last year and had very low expectations for him going into the 2010 season, but going forward the expectations will increase ten fold.

At the moment Packer is out in Goodyear, Arizona doing extra work with his strength and conditioning to help him be prepared to start 27 or more games next year and throw 150-170 innings. He is also working through a few small adjustments to clean up his pitching mechanics.

In the coming days Packer will head home to Memphis, Tennessee for some long awaited time off and give his arm some rest in what looks to be a pivotal season for him next year.

A season where the Indians hope Packer continues to exceed expectations.

Follow Tony and the Indians Prospect Insider on Twitter @TonyIPI . His latest book the 2010 Cleveland Indians Top 100 Prospects & More is also available for purchase on his site for a special year end closeout sale of $10.00 (including shipping and handling).