

Morris Pitching Well Beyond His Years In Lake County

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Monday, June 23 2008 7:00 PM -

A little over a week ago, Lake County put the finishing touches on a first half division championship in the South Atlantic League (SAL). One of the players directly responsible for that championship is left-handed starter Ryan Morris, who in 13 first half starts went 6-1 with a 2.50 ERA. Morris is just 20 years old, and his success this early in his career has elevated him into the upper tier of pitching prospects in the Indians organization. Tony spoke to him last week when visiting the Captains.



A little over a week ago, Lake County put the finishing touches on a first half division championship in the South Atlantic League (SAL). One of the players directly responsible for that championship is left-handed starter Ryan Morris, who in 13 first half starts went 6-1 with a 2.50 ERA.

Morris, 20, has held his own in a league where he is about two years under the league average age of 22. It is a trend of late where the Indians have sent several very young starting pitchers to Lake County to pitch in the SAL who are two to three years under the league average.

This is evidenced by Morris, Chris Archer, and Kelvin De La Cruz this year, and with Hector Rondon, Paolo Espino and Jeanmar Gomez last year.

Those are all pitchers who have pitched in the league at 18 to 20 years of age the past two seasons.

It is an interesting strategy the Indians have adopted, and the results so far are hard to argue with as just about all the starters they have pumped through Lake County the last two years have grown by leaps and bounds. So far, this approach by the Indians has benefited many players, and Morris is a pitcher who looks like he is more than working his way into a select

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group of pitching prospects in the Indians system.

"I have made some big strides," said Morris in a recent interview at Classic Park. "Things are going great.

The team is off to a great start and we are halfway through the season now.

It makes it a lot easier on me knowing that the team behind me is playing great.

I think some pitchers get caught up if they are doing well, but if the team is doing bad it kind of brings them down to that level.

It has helped me out a lot to have the guys behind me making plays and coming up with big hits.

I give them a lot of credit for the good starts I have had."

If you have seen Morris pitch, he has a violent delivery where as he goes through his windup and cocks his arm back behind his head he quickly jerks and whips the ball to home plate by throwing across his body. It is a pitching style that requires sound mechanics and constant attention by the coaching staff to ensure Morris' arm slot remains consistent.

"Talking with the pitching coach Ruben [Niebla] we have worked on some stuff and been tweaking some things here and there that have helped me out a lot," said Morris. "We worked a little on my front side as it has always been something I have struggled with.

I am the kind of pitcher that they call a guy who throws across their body.

It is not necessarily a bad thing, just that there are some things you have to tweak to be able to make it work.

So, we have been working on my arm slot a little bit making sure I am having a consistent arm slot with my pitches.

We are talking about my direction to the plate and making sure I am leading with my hips as I have a tendency to coil my body around.

It has come together really well."

Armed with a fastball that consistently clocks in around 88-91 MPH, Morris often relies on pitching to contact rather than trying to blow it by hitters. The development of at least one quality secondary pitch will be a key for Morris as he moves up the minor league ladder.

His 12-6 curveball was on its way to being a good pitch for him as it showed good tilt and had a lot of separation from his fastball; however, the Indians felt his breaking ball needed a change.

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Recently the Indians had him start learning how to throw a more slurvy breaking ball, which is a cross between a slider and curveball.

“I just started developing a new breaking ball that has gotten me out of a couple tough jams recently,” said Morris. “I had to get that base of mechanics down before we could start working with new pitches because you need to make sure your arm slot is right and you are on line with your target before you can start snapping off a new breaking ball.

So once we got that underway, Ruben felt we could start mixing in the new pitch.

I used to throw a real top to bottom curveball, so now we are working more on a kind of a slurvy-slider pitch.

Just to give me a pitch I can get across for strikes more consistently.

And hopefully that can help me move up to the next level.”

Morris' curveball had been effective, so it was sort of a surprise to learn of the change to his breaking ball. Morris offered up an explanation as to why the change was needed.

“I used to get around my curveball really bad,” explained Morris. “What that means is I used to get my arm back and wrap my fingers behind my head and come on top.

I had a good breaking ball as far as the depth of the break and the swings and misses that I got.

I can get away with it at this level where guys are a little less disciplined, but as I get higher and guys start picking up and seeing that I use my breaking ball as a strikeout pitch in the dirt they are going to start taking it.

So we had to come up with some way that I could get swings and misses, but also if the guy takes the pitch I can still make it break for a strike.

So what we did was more or less stay with the fastball and just curl the fingers instead of wrapping them around so you are using more of a slider grip.

I have actually been working on it some since last season, but last year was more a mechanics thing.

We fine tuned them at the beginning of the season, so it is good to get it going.”

Morris is not a power pitcher. While his fastball is actually a borderline above average fastball, it is not a pitch he can rely on to regularly blow by people. Morris knows this, which is a big reason he has learned at a very early age that throwing good strikes and letting hitters make contact and get themselves out is not a bad thing.

This type of mentality on the mound is typically not grasped or welcomed by a young pitcher like

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Morris, but Morris is not your everyday pitching prospect.

Morris is an unbelievable competitor with outstanding makeup, and these two qualities were big in him realizing at a young age that it is okay if you are not striking out ten guys a game and letting them hit the ball. It was something he quickly came to understand after he dominated the local high school fields in the Charlotte, NC area and moved into professional ball.

“In high school I was blowing it by guys as I still had an above average fastball in high school,” recalled Morris. “But I still knew I was never going to be a power pitcher like a Roger Clemens or Randy Johnson, guys who could run it up there anytime at 97 MPH.

I figured it out my first year when I got into pro ball that every hitter has seen a 90-95 MPH fastball.

So it doesn't matter if you throw the ball 85 MPH or 95 MPH, they see it everyday.

So the key now, I had to kind of mature a little bit and quickly start realizing what kind of pitcher I was going to be.

Last year I started figuring it out, and I learned to start spotting it up and get some missed swings.

I think that is what is going to help me go down a long road in the end.

So really what I want to focus on is getting my fastball to go where I want it to go and not try and rare back to try and muscle up on it.

If I can just continue to get groundballs, quick outs, and stay long into the games I think I am going to be alright.”

Morris is not the only starter in Lake County enjoying a lot of success this year. Fellow SAL All-Star left-handed starters Kelvin De La Cruz (5-3, 1.60 ERA) and Ryan Miller (7-2, 2.13 ERA) have been awesome.

Also, 19-year old diaper dandies Chris Archer (2-7, 4.21 ERA) and Joey Mahalic (4-2, 4.50 ERA) have done a great job pitching against players who are mostly three to four years older than them.

Sometimes when a staff is performing so well, it is a reflection of how close they all are on and off the diamond. These guys have to be, as they often are living together and sit in the stands for two or three of the four days they do not start and chart pitches.

When everyone is pitching well, some friendly competition also breaks out. Everyone is trying to do what they have to do to get to the next level, but even though the other pitchers on the roster are ultimately their direct competition and obstacle in getting to that next level everyone still pulls for one another.

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Some good-natured competition has broken out as a result of all the success the starters have enjoyed on the mound.

"Ruben has told us none of us are here to beat the other person out," said Morris. "We are all trying to get to the next level, but right now we are competing against the rest of the league.

Yeah there is a little bit of competition throughout the team and joking about stuff like 'Miller has seven wins I gotta get my seventh tomorrow'.

I think the good thing is you will notice around the ballpark is that Archer will come out and watch my bullpen, and I'll go out and watch his bullpen.

We can give feedback to one another

talking about what we saw in each other's delivery and how we may be doing similar things as far as what we can work on. It is kind of funny how one day we will be joking around about how we are going to outdo each other, and then the next day we are talking about what we can do to help boost each other up."

Archer and Morris actually go back to their days in North Carolina, as both are from the same state, are close in age, and were seniors in high school taken on back-to-back picks in the 2006 Draft. Since the draft when Morris was selected in the fourth round and Archer in the fifth round, the two have been with each other virtually every step of the way in their minor league career.

"Archer and I are both from North Carolina," said Morris. "We knew each other before the draft, and I went in the fourth round and he went in the fifth round in 2006.

So we became pretty close my first year as we roomed together and we have pretty much played every level together coming up through the system.

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He and I have been real close through the whole minor league experience, and we also share the same agent."

As a high school player coming out of the draft, Morris had a big upper-hand in the negotiating process with the Indians. It would take a sizable deal to get him to sign, and if he did not get it he was signed with and ready to attend Clemson University on a full scholarship.

Morris had actually verbally committed to Clemson University during his junior year in year school, so he was very excited to attend as a student athlete and start his college baseball career as well as earn a degree.

Eventually, without much hassle really, the Indians and Morris agreed on a \$500,000 bonus. Included in the deal was a voucher by the Indians where they agreed to pay for his expenses in the future should he decide to attend any four-year college in the United States, which is something the Indians actually provide to most of their high school signees.

Morris came in right away in 2006 and pitched in a combined nine games at rookie level Burlington and GCL Indians team.

"Coming into the draft I still had my mind set on college," recalled Morris. "That is something my parents pushed on me growing up, to go and get a college education as that should come first.

We got a family advisor and talked with him about the different opportunities we could have as far as the draft and that I could get my college paid for which is something the Indians are good about.

After we discussed money and stuff like that, it seemed like a real good opportunity for me to go ahead and get out and start my professional career and have that money set aside where if baseball did not pan out I could always go back to school.

It was a pretty easy decision in the end.

I have no regrets looking back.

I think I would have been just as happy if I would have gone to Clemson if things did not work out as far as the draft.

But now that things have panned out I feel real great about the decision."

The \$500,000 bonus Morris received was well above slot for a fourth round pick, but it was necessary in order to sign him. Morris recalls listening to the draft that day and being disappointed in not being picked in the first three rounds since he had been projected to go sometime in the second round. Signability concerns had caught up with him, which was a big reason for his draft day slide.

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The Indians contacted him at the end of the third round and told him they were going to take him with their next pick.

It was a gamble by the Indians, but when Morris got what he was looking for he did not hesitate to sign.

In the end, Morris was relieved and happy with the results from what was a stressful few hours listening to the draft.

"I signed pretty quick compared to some of the other guys," said Morris. "Like Archer was a later sign.

But the negotiations and stuff went pretty quick as they gave me what I was looking for so there was not a whole lot of hassling or anything like that.

Draft day was a very stressful period because I thought I was going to go in the second round because of the money I was looking for, so when the second and third round went through I was like 'aw man this is not going to pan out'.

But I got a couple calls in the fourth round saying 'look we are going to take you here and still give you what you want'.

That just took a whole lot of pressure off my back.

A stressful day, but it was worth it."

Growing up, Morris was an active kid who played a wide variety of sports and always played football, basketball, and baseball growing up. It was something his father Rob Morris had pushed on him growing up, which was to play sports and try everything out.

His father was a former two-sport athlete himself who played football and baseball in college.

He had a chance to play football at the University of South Carolina, but he wanted to play baseball, so he turned that down and ended up attending the much smaller Francis Marion University in Florence, SC to he could play both sports.

The elder Morris coached his son all through his younger years in all the sports he played, and eventually when his son reached high school they sat down and decided it was best to concentrate just on baseball.

"[My dad] just wanted me to get out and try everything and he coached me in everything," said Morris. "When I got to high school he realized baseball was something I excelled at a little bit more than other sports. After talking about it we decided baseball was probably the better, safest route to go as far as injuries go and stuff like that.

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Once I got to high school I stuck with baseball and obviously it worked out for me.

But growing up I did it all and enjoyed playing sports and being active.

I think that is what all kids have to do.

You can't just focus on one thing, you kind of get bored real quick playing one sport.

Kids need to get out there and try it all."

His father was right, as his son certainly is a talented pitcher. And that decision they made to concentrate on baseball has paid off to where Ryan Morris is a name Indians fans are going to be hearing a lot about in the minors the next couple years.

Photos courtesy of Ken Carr