

Realini Leads The Captains

Written by {ga=consigliere}
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Dustin Realini is now playing in his third minor league season, and at age 24 he is much older than a lot of players on the Captains roster. In fact, the league average age is a shade under 22, so he is much older than most of the players in the South Atlantic League. Given his age, Realini has become somewhat of a father figure to the young guys at Lake County. In addition, Realini has been having a real nice season playing first base for the Captains. Tony had a chance to talk to him on a recent trip out there.



One look around the Lake County clubhouse, and most of what you see are a bunch of young 19 and 20 year olds experiencing life as a professional on their own for the first time. Most of these players are not far removed from high school or even college, and while baseball is a sport that most of us played for fun as kids, for these guys it is a job that requires a lot of skill, discipline, patience, and endurance.

Who better to have around while these young men break into their minor league careers than a player himself who has the same dreams and aspirations as them, but who has already experienced some of the hard knocks a player goes through early in their minor league career. That player is Dustin Realini, who is now the starting first baseman for the Captains.

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"I kind of get looked at it in that way," said Realini in a recent interview at Classic

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Park. "I like that. A lot of the guys are young and kind of have their heads barely above water and trying to get comfortable and figure out what pro ball is really like.

It is only my third year, but it has been a long three years.

I just try to keep it simple and loose in the clubhouse with all these young guys we have.

I have a lot of different experiences at three different levels already.

It has been fun just being able to tell guys what to do here and there, and how to do things in a professional way.

Doing things right and how the Indians want us to do it.

It has been fun so far and it is a great organization."

Things did not start off well for Realini this year. After bouncing around at three different levels last year in Mahoning Valley, Lake County and Kinston where he hit only .250 with 1 HR, 16 RBI and a .667 OPS in 47 games, he probably felt he would start the year in Lake County or Kinston and get a chance to play everyday. W

When minor league camp broke at the end of March, Realini was assigned to Lake County again; however, he spent almost the entire month of April glued to the bench as heralded young first base prospect Chris Nash started at first base and promising young infielder Karexon Sanchez started at third base.

Realini played in only 10 games in April and had just 29 at bats hitting .276 with a .915 OPS.

Realini got a break near the end of April when Nash finally succumbed to a sore shoulder that had been bothering him since the start of spring training, and with the opportunity given to him his play and performance took off. In May, Realini played in 23 games and hit .325 with an .828 OPS, and he had a streak of 29 consecutive games that he reached base by a hit or walk that ended in early June.

"I was just being patient," said Realini. "I can say it has helped out being in there everyday where I have been able to be more consistent with my approaches.

I am seeing pitchers everyday so I am seeing what they are doing and I can be a little more specific in what I want to swing at.

I am able to work my plan everyday as opposed to getting in there every fourth or fifth day where maybe I would be a little more aggressive in that if I saw a strike I would swing at it right away instead of maybe taking it.

I am able to time off-speed pitches better."

One of the most notable things Realini has improved this year is his plate discipline. Coming

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into the season Realini had a career batting average of .243 and had drawn only 34 walks while striking out 92 times in 374 combined at bats (110 games) between Mahoning Valley, Lake County and Kinston.

So far this season, however, Realini has been much better in all areas hitting .285 with 4 HR, 32 RBI and an .827 OPS, and has 32 walks and 42 strikeouts in 165 at bats.

“What they say when they preach that kind of thing is that you take it in and try to work on it everyday,” said Realini in reference to the Indians philosophy pertaining to on-base percentage. “It is a big thing just looking for a certain pitch in a certain zone and swinging at that pitch and not going away from that. Sticking with my plan and swinging at the good stuff and letting the bad stuff go.

Just being patient, and just trying to be zone specific up there.

It is just one of those things I am always trying to get better at and I have been able to stand out more with it just recently.”

While he is starting to grasp the Indians plate discipline philosophy, it is still something Realini needs to continue to improve. He knows he needs to have a good approach every time he steps up to the plate. Not just one or two at bats a game, but all four at bats where he dictates the at bat and not the pitcher.

Coming into this season it was one of the things the Indians challenged him on improving and it is one of the things he is the most focused in working on this season.

“It is something they have said to me the last couple years that they want my on-base percentage to get better as it gives me a better chance of scoring,” said Realini. “What that means is getting more walks to get on-base more, and also working counts in your favor into 2-0 and 3-1 more.

Before I was maybe just a little too aggressive.

It got me swinging at 0-0, 1-0, and 0-1 pitches a lot.

Now I have been able to get in a 1-0 count and if it is a borderline strike I can take that.

If it is a strike it is a strike, if it is a ball the count is 2-0.

It is just being able to be more patient.

Instead of trying to hit every 1-0 pitch because I think it is going to be a strike I'll take a pitch I am not looking for.

Maybe I am looking for a ball inside I can pull but I get an outside pitch thrown for a strike.

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Before maybe I swing at that because it is a strike and I wanted to be aggressive and swing at a strike.

Now I will take that and get to 1-1 and maybe the next pitch is a ball.

I am seeing more pitches and all that pitcher has to offer in the first couple of at bats, so by the third or fourth at bat I know what he's got and what he is gonna come with.

I know if he throws me a first pitch curveball and it is hung I have a better idea of what it is going to look like and how I can hit it, as opposed to swinging at a 0-0 fastball or 1-0 fastball my first two at bats now I don't know exactly what to look for."

One of Realini's biggest assets is his ability to play multiple positions. While he is playing first base in Lake County, he played third base in college at Santa Clara University (CA).

He also has played some second base during his time in the Indians system, but he has mostly split time at first and third base.

"Yeah, I played third base in college," said Realini. "I played a little bit of first too. Last year I played third and first and have mainly been playing first base this year, but I can play other positions.

I don't really have a preference [at any position] because I am starting to feel more comfortable over at first base."

Before settling into Lake County this season, Realini had been sort of a nomad the past two seasons bumping around the system and filling in where needed. Last year he played 15 games in Mahoning Valley, 24 games in Lake County, and eight games in Kinston.

"Yeah, I was here [in Lake County] for about four weeks in the middle of the season last year," said Realini. "Then I was down in Mahoning for a week or so and then went

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to Kinston.

I did really well up there in Kinston and then they moved Beau [Mills] up there to get him some time up there, which I understand, so I came back here for the last couple of weeks.

I am just taking it all in stride and trying to get better whether I am here, Kinston or Akron or wherever I am at."

Having lived his entire life out west in California in a big city atmosphere, Realini is far away from the comforts of home. Every once in awhile his parents come out to see him play, and most recently they came out to see him at the end of April. Realini had his best game of the season in one of the games they saw as he went 4-for-4 with 2 HR and 3 RBI on April 19th.

This was a new experience for the Realini family, as in past visits when they saw their son play he did not fair so well.

"It's funny, because the last couple years they have come out to see me play it has been a struggle," laughed Realini. "The first year in Mahoning Valley they came out and I was a little bit under the weather and we had a doubleheader and I played both games and tried to play through it and I was like 0-for-8 with five strikeouts. An d my mom is my biggest fan and she is like 'it's ok, it's ok' and my dad is like 'oh gosh, what happened?' and I am just like 'you guys can't ever come out again' (laughs).

Last year was kind of the same thing, it was okay.

This year I had to wait it out for my time to get in there everyday and when they came out it was kind of like my parents are in and it felt like I was back at home and had my family with me so I wanted to do well for them.

It was great and I played real well."

Later this summer, Realini's parents as well as his brother and his wife are expected to come back out and visit him somewhere while Lake County is playing on the road. The rest of the league should take notice.

In the meantime, Realini will continue to lead his teammates and act as sort of a father figure as they play through the second half of the season and get ready for the playoffs.

Realini was involved in a non-baseball accident last Tuesday 6/24 after the game. No official word has been given on what happened, but it was not a fight or car accident.

He suffered some severe facial injuries, and is scheduled to undergo surgery tomorrow (Wednesday) to repair some broken bones around his eye.

He is expected to be on the disabled list until at least late July.

Photos courtesy of Ken Carr