

Pontius Learns From Inconsistent Season

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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It has been a season of ups and downs for Lake County right-handed reliever Mike Pontius. A Jekyll and Hyde kind of year. Pontius started the year in Lake County and through nine appearances was 0-0 with a 0.00 ERA, and in 21.1 innings did not allow a run. His dominating start forced the Indians to prematurely push him up a level to advanced Single-A Kinston on May 7th where the competition in the Carolina League would offer him a better challenge. Unfortunately, this is where the wheels to his season began to fall off. Tony talked to the promising prospect last week.



It has been a season of ups and downs for Lake County right-handed reliever Mike Pontius. A Jekyll and Hyde kind of year.

"It has been a good season," said Pontius in a recent interview. "Lots of ups and downs, and it has been a very good learning experience.

It has been both tough and good, but that is what baseball is about."

Pontius started the year in Lake County and through nine appearances was 0-0 with a 0.00 ERA, and in 21.1 innings did not allow a run and only seven hits, six walks, and punched out 29 batters. It was a heck of a start for Pontius, a player the Indians were very high on after his superb performance in Instructional League last fall.

"I finished up the season [in Lake County] last year," said Pontius. "I just really got off to a good start and had a good spring training.

I just let it pretty much carry over.

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I wasn't really thinking too much, I was just going out and pitching.

It is no big secret.

I had a good team and good defense behind me, and I know that made it easy for me sometimes."

His dominating start forced the Indians to prematurely push him up a level to advanced Single-A Kinston on May 7th where the competition in the Carolina League would offer him a better challenge. Unfortunately, this is where the wheels to his season began to fall off.

In his first appearance with Kinston on May 8th he was over-excited and too amped up which resulted in him throwing just two thirds of an inning and allowed three runs on three hits and three walks. That first appearance for Kinston was the start of what would be a very inconsistent run of appearances for him there, and in 25 games he went 4-1 with a 6.26 ERA.

In 41.2 innings he only allowed 42 hits and piled up 42 strikeouts, but his loss of command to where he walked 39 batters was his undoing.

The Indians eventually re-assigned Pontius to Lake County on August 9th.

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Pontius is only 20-years old, so the struggles he endured at Kinston are nothing to worry about at this point especially when you consider he was almost three years younger than the average player in the Carolina League. At his age and with his talent he is already a lot further along as a reliever than most players. The large increase in walks after his promotion to Kinston is a byproduct of the hitters being more disciplined in the Carolina League, but also the result of Pontius putting too much pressure on himself.

In fact, when it comes to the walks he puts all the blame on himself.

"It's on me," said Pontius. "I came up to Kinston and I was really pumped up. In Lake County I got off to a good start and was rolling with it, and [in Kinston] I just kind of got shell-shocked a little bit my first outing.

I gave up my first runs of the season in that outing.

Those guys are a little better, a little older, and they will make you pay for it if you make a mistake.

It was not a byproduct of the league, it is me.

I went out there and I was trying too hard to make a lot of my pitches, and I was bouncing my

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breaking ball here and there and getting behind.

I just had a rough patch and am just now getting myself out of it."

While he struggled with his composure some at Kinston, Pontius certainly has the mentality to handle the successes and failures of being a reliever. His makeup on the mound is something scouts and Indians personnel have raved about since last September.

He is a late-inning major league reliever in the making, and potentially has the complete package to be a closer someday down the road.

"He has major league late game setup man written all over him," said a scout for an AL team. "The velocity is there with a plus-plus fastball, and he has a projectable plus-plus curveball. He has the mental skills for the setup role [with] shades of a Rafael Betancourt type guy, but I feel he goes beyond that. He is kind of like a John Wetteland where he might end up being like a closer.

He has the Joe Borowski-type curveball, and he has the Wetteland-type velocity. That is a pretty good combo there."

A big reason for Pontius' breakthrough this year is from a lot of hard work in the offseason where he lost about 35-40 pounds. As a former football player, the 6'2" Pontius weighed in at 275 pounds when the Indians selected him in the 43rd round of the 2006 Draft.

He came into camp this spring in great shape, and had lost so much weight that that scouts didn't even recognize him at first.

"All the running and stuff I had to do was really tough [last season], so in the 2007 offseason I just really went home and worked as hard as I could and ended up losing about 35 pounds," said Pontius. "This year they let me put some weight back on which has helped and my arm feels better. I am at 240 pounds now and happy at that. It has made me healthier and hopefully able to make it through a full season.

So we will see how I feel at the end of the season."

Pontius was a heck of a football player in high school, and played defensive end, defensive tackle and offensive tackle. His grandfather Tom Pontius played for the Green Bay Packers back in his day, but a skull fracture prematurely ended his career and he never really got a chance to play much. In any case, the football bloodlines have passed through the family over the years, yet here Pontius is making a career now as a baseball player.

"I started playing baseball year round and did not play football my senior year," said Pontius. "I just really gained a lot of respect and love for the game. It is a grind and it is

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more a grind than football really because in football you can train all year in the offseason in the weight room and then you have 13 games of football and you are done, but you have to make it through a 140 games of baseball.

I just never realized how tough baseball really was until I did that.

Once I did that I was sure I made the right choice [in becoming a professional baseball player]."

His experience as a defensive lineman has carried over to his role as a relief pitcher. Pontius has a motor that never stops, so his

days of chasing a quarterback or stuffing a running back has translated well to the mound to where he is relentless in attacking hitters. Even still, Pontius needs to learn how to dial it down a notch at times and control his aggression on the mound.

The hardest thing for any pitcher that throws as hard as he does to learn is to not just rare back and fire the ball on every pitch, but to actually "pitch" by changing speeds, changing location and mixing in quality secondary pitches.

"I am learning to not be just a thrower but a pitcher," said Pontius. "Sometime s there is a guy who is going to be able to turn on your best fastball and you gotta actually pitch.

I like to take it to them as best as I can, but I also am starting to learn you have to go into a pitching mode and actually make a pitch.

I just can't go out and bulldog people all day, I have to take a step back and make a pitch and execute."

The focus right now is getting Pontius back to throwing consistent strikes like he was earlier in the year, and in three appearances since his return to Lake County Pontius is slowly showing signs of getting back there. He worked a lot with Kinston pitching coach Greg Hibbard on controlling his effort level and emotions on the mound, and also Lake County pitching coach

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Ruben Niebla has helped him with his mechanics to get him to throw the ball more down in the zone and downhill.

"I'm just trying to execute a little more and pitch with conviction and not second guess anything," said Pontius. "It is not like I am going out there and am afraid of anybody. I am just kind of going out and second guessing myself every once in awhile, and I am getting into my own head.

It will be fixed, it is nothing to worry about."

In addition to his outstanding fastball and curveball, Pontius has also been working on a third pitch which is a straight changeup. Developing a third pitch for a reliever is not critical since many live off a good two-pitch mix, but the addition of a changeup would help play up the speed of his fastball and give hitters who are geared up for it something slower to worry about.

The development of his changeup has been slow since he has used it sparingly and because he has spent a lot of time of late focusing on his fastball command. It is a pitch that is clearly still a work in progress, and since it has not gotten a lot of work this season it may get much more attention in the offseason.

"If there is one thing I am working on it is that," said Pontius in regard to his changeup. "I threw it one time in Lake County, and I have been trying to work on my other pitches before I can throw it here. I always like adding something new. It is always nice to be able to fool someone with a pitch when you are up on them 0-2."

Pontius is one of those great finds late in a draft that is the result of some luck, but also a lot of hard work by the Indians scouting staff. Coming out of high school he was not scouted heavily by colleges, and in fact before signing with the Indians he was set to go to little known Division-II Central Missouri State. He did play on a showcase team in high school and every once in awhile would show a glimpse of something good, but then would be kind of shaky after that and didn't really show enough for anybody to stick around. So, when the Indians came calling about an opportunity to start a professional baseball career he jumped at the chance.

"No, I was pretty much going to take a shot," said Pontius on whether to go to college or sign with the Indians. "I just wanted someone to give me a chance, and I knew getting drafted late I was not going to get money. I didn't care, I just wanted to play.

When money becomes an issue later on I'll make it in the majors if I get there.

Money was not an issue for me, I just wanted to play."

If he can find a way to harness that 97 MPH fastball and consistently control where it goes, he'll surely make a lot more money down the road.

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Photos courtesy of Ken Carr