

Head

Written by {ga=consigliere}
Monday, September 08 2008 7:00 PM -

After a controversial first round playoff series win, Akron is ready to play in the Eastern League Championship Series which kicks off tonight at 7:05 PM at Canal Park in Akron. One of the key cogs in the Akron lineup all year has been first baseman Stephen Head, a 2nd round draft pick out of the University of Mississippi in 2005. Tony had a chance to speak with him on a recent trip to Akron.



After a controversial first round playoff series win, Akron is ready to play in the Eastern League Championship Series which kicks off tonight at 7:05 PM at Canal Park in Akron. The best-of-five series will see Game One and Game Two played at Akron tonight and tomorrow (Wednesday), with the series shifting to Trenton, NJ for Game Three on Friday, and if necessary Games Four and Five on Saturday and Sunday.

This is Akron's fourth straight appearance in the Eastern League Championship Series and their second consecutive matchup with Trenton in the Finals. After winning the league championship in 2003 and 2005, Akron has lost the last two years in the Finals.

One of the key cogs in the Akron lineup all year has been first baseman Stephen Head, a 2nd round draft pick out of the University of Mississippi in 2005.

After making an immediate impact in his draft year when he hit .308 with 10 HR and 50 RBI in just 57 combined games in Mahoning Valley and Kinston, Head fell off some with a sub-par year at Kinston in 2006 when he hit .235 with 14 HR, 73 RBI and a .694 OPS.

Head showed signs of rebounding last year when he hit .256 with 16 HR, 79 RBI, and a .768 OPS in 128 combined games in Kinston and Akron, and continued to have success this year hitting .290 with 13 HR, 49 RBI and a .780 OPS at Akron in 106 games.

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"This year has been great," said Head in a recent interview at Canal Park in Akron. "Other than some injuries that I have had this year that have limited my at bats, it has been a year I was hoping for."

Things did not start out so well for Head this year. When players broke camp in spring training Head remained in Winter Haven to continue to rehab his shoulder from offseason surgery.

Head had surgery on the labrum in his right shoulder to correct an issue that resulted from being hit with a pitch in the middle of the 2007 season.

"I don't remember the exact day, but it was late June where I got hit by a pitch and my shoulder was hurting and I did not play for a day or two," responded Head. "I didn't think it was completely torn as I remember hitting a couple days after that and taking a swing and just being like 'wow, something is hurt'.

But I didn't want to come out of the lineup, so I kept playing and I was able to play through it.

But I definitely knew something was wrong."

Head played through the pain in the second half of last season and then had surgery on the shoulder a week after Akron's season concluded. Even though he was hurt, Head was sensational the final two weeks of the season and in the playoffs last year.

In the last ten games of the regular season he hit .361 with 2 HR and 9 RBI, and then carried that into the Eastern League playoffs where he hit .367 with 3 HR, 8 RBI, and had a 1.133 OPS in eight games.

"I had to make an adjustment, because when I came up to Akron [halfway through the year] it was getting worse and worse and I just was not hitting that well," said Head. "So I had to make an adjustment to where it didn't hurt, and I just remember it was a specific at bat where I was hitting and I kind of moved my hands a little bit, got a base hit, and it wasn't the base hit that had me so excited I was like 'man, that didn't hurt'.

So I did that and things just took off from there [the final few weeks of the season]."

After the surgery Head took it easy and did not participate in any baseball activities in the offseason as he rested and took part in loads of rehab to get the strength back in his shoulder. When spring training rolled around he was still limited in how much he could do and played sparingly in minor league games, and when camp broke he stayed behind in extended spring training.

His stay in extended spring training was short as he only hung around for a week before he was cleared to play and sent to Akron on April 10th.

But, Head experienced some tough luck as after just five games Head was back on the disabled list, this time for a broken bone in his hand that was suffered while sliding into second base.

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"I broke my hand stealing a base of all things," said Head. "The one thing I can't do really, and I break my hand doing it.

I missed two and a half weeks.

It was basically I go to Florida for two months until it heals, or suck it up and play after a couple weeks.

I was like 'I don't want to go back to Winter Haven'.

We are already out of there and I am done with it (laughs)."

Head went on the disabled list on April 16th and returned on May 3rd. Since his return he has remained healthy, although played through the rest of the season less than a 100% as he is still recovering from the shoulder surgery and is playing through the wrist injury.

"It is getting there," said Head. "The shoulder surgery requires basically a years worth of healing before it is even done. You add swinging on top of that and it probably prolongs the healing process.

I am still probably a few months away from what would be considered healed under normal circumstances.

I am still feeling the effects of it, but it is not bad when I am playing.

It is things like when I am sleeping I wake up in the middle of the night and my arm is on fire.

But baseball-wise it has been good so far."

Ever since that great start to his professional career in 2005 where Head hit .432 with 6 HR, 15 RBI and a 1.560 OPS in just ten games at Mahoning Valley, Head's career had sort of stalled until his late season resurgence last year. After taking that step back, Head appears to have made some good progress toward re-establishing himself as a top prospect in the system.

"You know, the one thing I think that was the key for me this year is I had a lot of extra base hits last year," said Head. "That's kind of my thing and what I am going to do. I am not going to beat out infield singles.

I am not a real speed guy.

I am a guy that puts balls into the gaps and hopes some go over the fence, and I did that pretty well last year but I think I only hit around .260.

So it is give or take.

This year I really wanted to focus on maybe getting more singles and putting balls in play better

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and trying to get those extra hits.

It really paid off this year.

Not that I didn't hit as well last year, just my average is better this year.

It is one of those things where I think I just have a little better approach which led to me getting those hits which help out."

Going into this season, the Indians system was loaded with a lot of first basemen in the upper levels of the system with Ryan Mulhern (since traded) and Jordan Brown at Buffalo, Michael Aubrey and Matt Whitney at Akron, and top prospect Beau Mills down in Kinston. Due to the roster crunch, the Indians moved Head into the outfield halfway through the season last year because of his athleticism.

Head is clearly the organization's best defensive first base prospect, but a move to the outfield gave the Indians the flexibility they needed to move Head up and not affect the playing time of the other first baseman.

"[The move to the outfield] has gone well," said Head. "I mean, I love playing defense. There are probably not a lot of guys who say they like to go out and make a great play, but I love going out there being able to run and dive or do something that people are just like 'wow, that's a great play'.

As I like to always say, 'making web gems'.

I really take pride in my defense because I have fun with it, which translates into being better defensively whether it is right field or first base since I am looking for that play."

Even still, moving from first base to the outfield does present its challenges.

"You know what, the hardest [thing to learn in the outfield] is learning to field the balls off the end of the bat," said Head. "Everyone is yelling 'In! In! In!' and you are thinking they are going over your head. So those are the hardest ones. As long as it is not hit right at me I am alright.

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If I can see it from side to side I usually do pretty well."

After some initial struggles, Head has taken to the new position well and now can play both first base and the outfield. Head now splits times at both positions, as he played 56 games at first base and 42 games in the outfield this year. The Indians love versatility, and with Head already being an accomplished defensive player at first base and growing as an outfielder, it has helped his standing in the organization.

"I certainly like playing in the outfield," said Head. "You never want to move positions, but it is only going to help.

First base is one of those positions where defense is kind of on the backburner because if you can get a guy that can just catch it but will hit you 50 home runs, then you are going to let him stand in there.

So being able to go out there in the outfield and be pretty good defensively helps me out as well as being good defensively at first base.

It does matter, because having that second option to where they are not worried about you being out there and ruining the game for them is good.

So I am definitely excited about being able to play two positions."

Considering Head's background in athletics growing up, it is no wonder he handled his transition to the outfield with such ease. Head was an accomplished athlete in almost any sport growing up. Not only did he play baseball in high school, but he also played basketball, football and soccer.

"The high school I went to you could actually play four sports," recalled Head. "t;They were timed just right so I played basketball, baseball, football and soccer.

Soccer was the same time as basketball, but the way our league was with a bunch of private schools everything was coordinated where if you had a basketball game that night you would have a soccer game that afternoon.

But it was very rare that you would have two on the same day. You may have a basketball game the one day and a soccer game the next.

All the schools are close, so it wasn't too bad.

But I just did soccer to get my legs in shape for baseball season."

While Head was a multi-sport star in high school, baseball was always his primary focus.

"Baseball has always been my one thing," said Head. "It is the first sport I

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ever played, and will be the last one I continue to play."

Photos courtesy of Ken Carr