

## Dixon's Durability And Consistency A Strength

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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The Indians minor league season came to an official close on Sunday evening with Akron losing 5-1 in Game Four of the Eastern League Championship. With the season over, many players will return home for the winter for some long overdue rest and relaxation. One of those players is Akron right-hander Kevin Dixon, who piled up 157 innings in the regular season and was a rock in the rotation all year for the Aeros. Tony had a chance to speak with him last week.



The Indians minor league season came to an official close on Sunday evening with Akron losing 5-1 in Game Four of the Eastern League Championship series, and with the loss Akron dropped the best-of-five series three games to one. With the season over, many players will return home for the winter for some long overdue rest and relaxation, while others will go to Arizona for Instructional League which starts up soon.

One of those players who looks like he will be spending the offseason at home resting is Akron right-hander Kevin Dixon. Dixon piled up 157 innings in the regular season and was a rock in the rotation all year.

While he never really dominated, he was consistent seemingly every time out as he racked up a ton of quality starts on the season.

In 27 starts Dixon went 9-11 with a 4.41 ERA and allowed 159 hits, 48 walks and struck out 113 in the 157 innings he pitched.

His ability to pitch deep into games was a key for Akron all season.

“I just try to go out and get as deep into the game as I can and give the team an opportunity for a win,” said Dixon in a recent interview at Canal Park. “I have tried to be steady all year and tried not to change much.”

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I had a little bit of a rough stretch toward the end of the year with some bad outings, but I [was able] to go back to doing what I was doing early on with pitching steady."

While the numbers are not exactly eye-popping, his ability to be consistent start to start to where he can be relied on to give six to seven quality innings a start is invaluable. At 6'3" 225-pounds Dixon is big and strong, so having a guy in the rotation that is durable, can eat innings, and keep the bullpen from being overworked is a huge advantage for any team.

The key to his consistency has been his ability to attack hitters with his fastball and not be afraid of the results.

"I think one of the best things I can do is go out and attack guys with my fastball," said Dixon. "I am able to throw in the strike zone and get guys out in there without striking them out. I throw a sinker and four-seam fastball, so I try to get ahead of guys with the four-seamer and when I get ahead of them I can throw the sinker. I'll throw the sinker down the middle and roll the dice where chances are I will get groundballs with it.

I am not afraid to throw it in the strike zone and if I give up a couple hits in the inning I just make sure I try to get a double play and not let the inning explode."

Dixon throws a fastball, changeup, slider and split-finger. His fastball sits in the 91-93 MPH range, and he showcases a plus slider and a decent changeup with good command of all his pitches. One of the big things that has helped Dixon grow as a pitcher this year is the addition of the split-finger that was added to his arsenal last year during Instructional League in Winter Haven.

After toying around with the pitch, he came to spring training and continued to work on it and it now has become a serviceable pitch for him and one he relies on to finish hitters off for strikeouts.

"Dixon has a splitter that he has started to develop since the end of last year," said Akron pitching coach Tony Arnold. "This year at times it has been really good and at times it has not been very good. If he can maintain feel for it, then that is the out pitch he has been missing."

Dixon agrees with that assessment.

"At the end of last year I went down to Florida and picked up the splitter," said Dixon.

"It has helped me a lot as in the past I have not really had very many strikeouts and I relied on contact to get guys out.

I still do that, but now when I get ahead of guys I have another pitch to go to.

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For awhile there it was lights out where I would get two strikes on a guy and get a strikeout every time."

In addition to refining his split-finger, Dixon has also been working on repeating his delivery and ironing out some flaws in his mechanics.

"I really have just been nailing down my mechanics to be consistent with my delivery every time," said Dixon. "I'll get in trouble where I will fall off to the side and the biggest thing has been falling off to the left and landing on the outside of my foot which causes everything to drag. I am really focused on landing good on my front foot and getting out in front of my pitches and trying to repeat that every time.

One thing I have noticed is before the season [in spring training] my foot would be landing all over the place and the hole I would make would be big.

Now I am consistently landing in the same spot, and have my delivery down and it has really helped my command with every pitch."

Dixon is a former 5th round pick in the 2005 Draft out of Minnesota State University in Mankato, MN. It was a small Division-II school and one where he found success both as a hitter and a pitcher. While he was drafted and signed as a pitcher, Dixon felt coming out of college he was actually a better hitter than a pitcher, so the scouts must have seen something in the limited chances they got to see him pitch since he was only a closer in college.

With his experience in the bullpen in college and now his starting experience as a professional, Dixon has the versatility to go either way this offseason when the Indians will likely need to make a decision on his future in the organization. Because of the logjam of starters expected to be at Triple-A Columbus next year, Dixon will either have to start the 2009 season as a starter in the Akron rotation or be a reliever on the Buffalo roster.

"I was a pitcher and hitter in college," said Dixon. "That is a big change for me not hitting anymore. It was a big talking subject when I was drafted as I put up better stats as a hitter than as a pitcher, but ended up being drafted as a pitcher.

It was kind of convenient the way my pitching coach and head coach used me as I would hit and got to pitch whenever it was available.

I would play first base and I would come straight in from first base and close out games.

I don't think I ever got to develop as a pitcher as I could throw hard and I was getting guys out, but I played Division II so what I had was good enough.

Being a full time pitcher and being able to refine it to the point where I can succeed at this level has been a big change for me.

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That has been the biggest transition for me in pro ball and now I am more of the pitcher like the hitter I was then."

Dixon has the potential to one day crack a major league roster because of his durability and penchant for being an innings-eater.

"He is continually developing himself to become a major league pitcher," said Arnold. "It is just a matter of him solidifying his delivery and trusting his delivery to allow him to throw the ball like he is capable of throwing it and commanding it."

Besides playing baseball, Dixon is an avid hockey fan and used to throw the skates on a lot as a kid and play. He often gets the itch to play now, but his contract prohibits him from playing as long as he is playing professional baseball because of the potential for injury. Nonetheless, growing up and playing hockey was something that was a huge part of his life growing up as a kid in Minnesota. N

Dixon is a pretty down to Earth person, and is really your typical average guy trying to make a living while living his dream to play professional baseball. He lives in Burnsville, MN and recently got married this past offseason.

While any talks of extending the family with kids are on hold at the moment, Dixon and his wife are just trying to get by on the little he makes in the minors.

"Dealing with being a married man and living this lifestyle has kind of been the biggest thing working out the relationship with my wife," said Dixon. "It has probably been the biggest thing in my life right now, and it has given me perspective that there is more to life besides baseball. Figuring out how to make her happy is a big thing I am going through right now."

The money we make with me living the minor league lifestyle is enough, but we will try to make some more money in the offseason.

It's tough.

Right now my wife is doing a great job.

She is a nurse and working a whole bunch and it is really helping us out."

With the offseason now here and another season in the books for Dixon, next season could be his biggest as a professional is on the cusp of getting a major league opportunity with the Indians or another team. When and if that happens, Dixon is ready.

"Hopefully I can get to the point where I can make some money and pay [my wife] back," laughed Dixon.

*Photo courtesy of Ken Carr*