

The Comeback Kid

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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Left-handed pitcher Chuck Lofgren is having a sensational season and has been one of the best comeback stories of the year in minor league baseball. Just a year ago Lofgren came into the 2008 season ranked as a top five prospect in the Indians system in virtually every publication that ranks prospects, but a season last year that affected him mentally, emotionally, and physically saw him tumble out of most of those top prospect listings coming into this season. Tony had a chance to talk to Lofgren this past week.



Left-handed pitcher Chuck Lofgren is having a sensational season and has been one of the best comeback stories of the year in minor league baseball.

Just a year ago Lofgren came into the 2008 season ranked as a top five prospect in the Indians system in virtually every publication that ranks prospects, but a season last year that affected him mentally, emotionally, and physically saw him tumble out of most of those top prospect listings coming into this season. Last year at Double-A Akron he went 2-6 with a 5.99 ERA in 28 games (15 starts), and in 85.2 innings allowed a whopping 93 hits and 52 walks while striking out 72 batters.

Lofgren dedicated himself this past offseason to getting himself in better shape and dropped about 15 pounds in the process. He also got some great news as his mother had [survived a bout with breast cancer](#). With the physical, mental, and emotional things that affected his 2008 season seemingly under control going into spring training this year, he looked primed for a big comeback.

So far, he has comeback in a big way. In eight starts in a return trip to Akron this year he was 3-1 with a 1.48 ERA before getting the callup to Triple-A Columbus this past weekend. At Akron, he held opposing batters to a .160 batting average and had a much better 15-to-31 walk to strikeout ratio in his 42.2 innings pitched

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than in 2008. He was also leading the Eastern League in ERA. In his first start with Columbus on Sunday he lasted just four innings and allowed five hits, four runs, three walks and had one strikeout.

The numbers speak for themselves to date, and his mental health and improved physical state are a big reason for his great start.

"[The Indians] are really happy with the shape I am in," said Lofgren in a recent interview. "I am working my butt off everyday doing what I need to do to get back every fifth day. I am doing extra cardio, extra stretching. Every little thing I can to get me ready and to stay on the same page. My routine has been good day in and day out, and I am not going to shy away from it."

His improved physical condition has allowed him to better repeat his delivery, and in turn his command and control has improved by leaps and bounds over what it was like for him last season.

"Yeah, the command has [improved]," said Lofgren. "After every game we dissect our pitch counts, charts, and fastball efficiency. My command of my fastball has been great. Obviously my walks could go down a little bit, but it is a lot better. I had that one game [early in the year] where I had four walks and been at two or one the rest of the time. It is just one of those things where I can't worry about that and I just need to continue doing what I am doing."

Getting his fastball command back was the first step. Now, the next step in the process of getting his stuff back to pre-2008 levels is continuing to work on his secondary pitches. Lofgren feels they are finally back to being effective.

"They are good," said Lofgren. "In my bullpen [sessions] my main focus [has been] my slider by commanding it more in the zone, and I feel like that pitch is coming along for me. I feel like my changeup has always been there and I can throw it in 2-1 and 3-1 counts when hitters are sitting on the fastball. My two-seamer has also been good."

One of the more impressive stats so far this year is how he is just shutting down the opposition at the plate, holding them to a .175 batting average in his nine combined starts at Columbus and Akron. This is a far cry from the .278 average he allowed last season at Akron or the .442 he allowed out in the Arizona Fall League last October-November. Opposing hitters have not squared the ball up

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much against him so far this year, and a lot of that is a credit to him throwing more strikes this year and getting ahead in the count.

"I think a credit to that is I am getting ahead of a lot of guys with a lot of 0-2 and 1-2 counts," said Lofgren about the low batting average hitters have against him. "And I think the big transition from last year is I would be falling behind 2-1 or 3-2 and they are obviously in more of a fastball hitting count and able to put a



better swing on the ball. My strikeout numbers have not been as high as they were last year, but I am getting a lot more outs earlier in counts and the Indians like to see that."

After the year he had last year at Akron, as well as in the Arizona Fall League where in 10 appearances he was 0-3 with a 32.14 ERA (7.0 IP, 19 H, 18 BB, 6 K), the Indians sent him back to Akron to get his bearings. Even though he was sent back to Akron for a third year in a row, he is still only 23-years old and was younger than most of the pitchers on the opening day staff.

"Coming in [to Akron] for a third year in a row showed me they still have faith in me, and I really appreciate that," said Lofgren. "I gave them a commitment in spring training and I told them that day in and day out I am going to work as hard as I can. They like to see that, so I am not going to change anything and continue doing what I am doing."

With all the problems the Indians have been having in the bullpen this year, just about every pitcher in Akron and Columbus, whether they are on the 40-man roster or not or considered a prospect or not, feels if they perform well they have a shot to get to Cleveland and help. Lofgren has some experience pitching in the bullpen, having pitched there for most of the second half of the 2008 season making 13 appearances.

"Yeah, last year when I came back for that first month [in July] I did really

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well out of the bullpen," said Lofgren. "So it is just a matter who they feel is closest to the big leagues now and bullpen ready. Whoever they decide to fill that role I am sure that person will do a great job."

Anything can happen at this point with all the changes the Indians are making, especially with the focus starting to come off 2009 and instead getting some young players some looks for 2010 and beyond. In the meantime, Lofgren will just await his chance and is happy to be up in Triple-A whether it is short term or long term.

"All you can do is go out as a starter and throw every fifth day and do as well as you can," said Lofgren. "I just want to stay healthy and make every start on the fifth day and go six-plus innings and keep my team in the game. That's my goal. Those other goals will come. You can't control them. Doing well will dictate whether you move up or not."

The task at hand is all Lofgren is concentrating on. Having experienced the lowest of lows as a player last year, he knows his good start can be derailed at any moment.

"You can't take a minute off, because if you do you will lose that much. You always gotta stay in the game, always gotta be watching things as you learn something new every pitch and every moment."