

Popham, Recknagel Show Potential From '08 Class

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Friday, October 09 2009 7:00 PM -

The Indians 2008 Draft has been widely considered one of their best drafts in years and is already bearing fruit with the likes of Lonnie Chisenhall, T.J. House, Zach Putnam, Eric Berger, and more. While there have been a lot of high profile guys taken in that draft who have excelled, the Indians have also shown they may have found a couple late round gems. Two of those players are Nate Recknagel and Marty Popham, and Tony talks about them in his latest. Don't forget, Tony heads out to Arizona on Sunday and will be reporting all week on the Happenings in Goodyear with the Indians Fall Instructional League and the start of the Arizona Fall League!



Popham Working Hard To Make It

Short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley almost had a season for the ages. They won a franchise record 49 games this year, but fell just short of the NY-Penn League Championship losing a lead in the late innings of their decisive Game 3 matchup with Staten Island.

The key to Mahoning Valley's success this season was their starting pitching as all five of their regular starters finished ranked in the top 25 for ERA, with four of them ranked in the top 13 of the 14-team league.

With a starting rotation filled mostly with 2009 college draft picks and one young, inexperienced pitcher, the Indians turned to Marty Popham to be the staff ace and he more than lived up to that designation. The 2008 20th round pick out of Union

Popham, Recknagel Show Potential From '08 Class

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Friday, October 09 2009 7:00 PM -

College (KY) went 6-1 with a 2.76 ERA in 14 starts, and in 75.0 innings allowed 75 hits, 10 walks and piled up 83 strikeouts. He finished 11th in the league in ERA (2.76), tied for 8th in wins (6), 2nd in strikeouts (83), and 13th in WHIP (1.13).

Popham, 22, had a brilliant professional debut with the rookie-level Gulf Coast League Indians in 2008 going 1-1 with a 0.78 ERA in 14 appearances out of the bullpen (23.0 IP, 15 H, 5 BB, 25 K). But even though the right-hander was tabbed the staff ace and had some good performances under his belt coming into the season, he was still learning.

"I am still learning a lot," said Popham in a recent interview. "I am still working on things, and I am still new. I have only been here for a year, but it feels like I have been here for two or three. I am just learning so much and there is only so much you can take in at one time. I work on everything daily."

One of the things he has worked on and become more experienced with his understanding of handling different pitching situations and what to do when they come up. The Indians work with their pitchers not only with fielding in just about every situation imaginable, but also on how to pitch in certain situations. It is something Popham worked a lot on this year in spring training and extended spring training, and he carried it over into the games he pitched in with Mahoning Valley this season.

"I would say I worked a lot with situations," said Popham. "When we were in sim games in spring training they would put us in situations with bases loaded and no outs, and the first game I pitched here it was bases loaded and no outs. You gotta keep thinking when you are on the mound. After you get done throwing a pitch you have to know what you are throwing on the next pitch before that ball even gets to the plate. It all just comes back to you, and you learn everything before you are actually in that situation in a game. Once you get in that situation you know what you have to do: you have to throw strikes, get the ball down in the zone, get the groundball, or get a couple strikeouts. I think I did a pretty good job of that with getting in certain situations and knowing what to do and working my way out of it."

In spring training Popham tried to learn to pitch while wearing a cup. It was something he had never done before, and he had trouble learning to pitch with one on due to his very high leg kick so he quit wearing it. In addition to that, he also had to get used to all the throwing he had to do this year, something that

recent college and high school picks are not accustomed to when they start their professional career.

"I had six months off after last season, so that is kind of hard and a long time away from baseball when you go into spring training and do all that throwing," said Popham. "I didn't really have a good arm slot out in spring training in Arizona. It felt like every time I would throw my arm would be in a different position, whether it was three quarters or over the top, it was everywhere."

Throughout the season, Popham showed much improvement with his secondary stuff, namely his changeup. The improvement of his slider and changeup is important as it should keep him as a starting pitching option at least for next year.

"The changeup [worked] really well, and I [got] a lot of batters off balance with that pitch," said Popham. "It probably sits at 80 MPH, and my fastball [was] more at 89-91 MPH. I need to get a little more velocity on my slider, and I [was] wrapping it a little bit. If I stay on top of it and go straight through it, it will get that bite at the end and drop straight down. My changeup and slider are coming along, and I worked on all that this season and in extended spring training. Out of college I actually did not have a good changeup, so [Lower Level Minor League Pitching Coordinator] Steve Lyons started working with me on that. You keep the same motion as your fastball and don't change anything as you want to have the same arm speed so batters can't pick anything up. I worked on that a whole lot and [the results showed]."

Popham has established himself as an interesting starting pitching prospect in the Indians organization. It is possible he could skip Low-A Lake County next year because of his age and recent performance and go right to High-A Kinston, but in either case it looks like he has shown more than enough to remain in the rotation at one of the two levels next year.

Whatever happens next year is fine with Popham as he feels he learned a lot about himself as a player this season, and the experience he gained will help him as he prepares for next season.

"I am just trying to get my bearings right now as this was my first season starting for the Indians," said Popham. "I am trying to get my body back to where it needs to be and just trying to get better. You have to take it one

Popham, Recknagel Show Potential From '08 Class

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Friday, October 09 2009 7:00 PM -

pitch at a time, one batter at a time, one inning at a time, and so on. Don't get too high or too low, just be the same guy everyday and keep working trying to make it."

Photo courtesy of Christina Marion of the Mahoning Valley Scrappers



Recknagel Looking For A Position

When the Cleveland Indians drafted first baseman Nate Recknagel out of the University of Michigan in the 19th round of the 2008 Draft, they knew they were getting a power hitter who lacked a true defensive position.

Recknagel has very good power and strength, which he showcased when he set a Michigan record with 23 home runs in 2008. He spent most of his time this season in Low-A Lake County, and in 117 combined games between High-A Kinston and Lake County he hit .270 with 14 HR, 75 RBI and an .809 OPS.

While Recknagel's bat has certainly shown potential, the mystery over where he fits in the organization on the defensive side of things is a big question mark. He was a catcher and first baseman at Michigan, but this season he only played 61 of his 117 games in the field as he was the designated hitter almost half the time. In all, he played 59 games at first base and also filled in for two games at third base.

The Indians sent Recknagel out to Instructional League last year to continue to work and improve defensively as a catcher, and he even went to spring training this year and worked almost exclusively at the catching position. Since he is challenged defensively at first base and considered a below average defender there, the thought was he would fit in better behind the plate where his good arm could be better utilized. But, when all was said and done, he did not play a game this past season as a catcher.

With the opening of this year's Instructional League two weeks ago Recknagel is once again a participant, but this time he is there working on improving defensively at first base. Seeing as how he did not catch any games in Lake County or Kinston this year and his primary defensive position was first base, it appears that this is the position the Indians have settled on developing him at.

Working on his defense at first base is something Recknagel knows full well is a key to furthering his professional baseball career.

"That is definitely one of the things I have to work on," said Recknagel in a recent interview. "It is something I need to get better at obviously, and is one of the things I will definitely be working on in Instructional League."

Even with the defensive shortcomings at the moment, it is hard not to like what Recknagel does when he hits. He may not be the caliber of hitter former Indians first baseman Ryan Garko is, but he looks very much like Garko when he stands in at the plate not to mention his overall build and lack of a true defensive position.

Recknagel had a solid 2009 campaign, one that was a learning experience for him as he adapted to the professional game, and one where the Indians learned about him more as a player. The successes and failures he went through this season should give him something to build off of going into next season where he should be at High-A Kinston.

"The season [went] well," said Recknagel. "It was just kind of getting used to playing a long schedule obviously. In your first year you learn the do's and don'ts basically for next year. That's kind of what this year [was] about, to just kind of get my feet wet."

Coming from Michigan, Recknagel was used to a schedule there where they only played maybe three times a week, and when they did the games were often on

Popham, Recknagel Show Potential From '08 Class

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Friday, October 09 2009 7:00 PM -

Friday, Saturday or Sunday. They had several off days and the intensity of the games and preparation was completely different than the professional game where it is a daily grind and all about routine.

"I think the biggest adjustment for me was getting used to playing every day and taking care of my body," said Recknagel. "Also, the fundamentals and the wood bat. The pitching is better, so it is a little bit of everything."

Recknagel seemed to feel his way through the first half of the season where he hit just .256 with 5 HR and 28 RBI in 56 games, but in the second half he hit .283 with 9 HR and 47 RBI in 61 games. Some of that may have been him adjusting from the transition of a metal bat in college to the wood bat in the pros.

"My swing was a college metal bat swing," said Recknagel. "But once I got into it for a couple months, I was able to really focus in on it and put an emphasis on what I really needed to fix and what I need to do. I got lots of help from [Lake County Hitting Coach] Jim [Rickon] and [Minor League Hitting Coordinator] Bruce [Fields] whenever he came around. The first few months were okay, but it seems like when I came back down from Kinston things seemed to start kind of working their way back into place."

In addition to adjusting to playing every day and to wood bats, Recknagel also found that another adjustment he had to make was one he never dreamed possible, which was having so much down time from one game to the next. Since the players are generally only at the field from about 4pm to 11pm every night, they have a lot of time on their own back at the apartment or hotel.

"One thing that was really hard for me at first was trying to keep myself busy," said Recknagel. "You have this feeling where you are going to the field to play a game, sleeping in, and then waiting until the next game. You just have so much down time, especially when you are on the road and you have nothing to do. It's hard to keep yourself busy. That was the real hard part for me at first. It has a lot to do with your routine. Sitting at the hotel sometimes watching TV gets pretty old."

With the offseason here and Instructional League about to begin its third week, Recknagel just wants to continue to work this offseason on his defense and be prepared for what happens next spring.

Popham, Recknagel Show Potential From '08 Class

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Friday, October 09 2009 7:00 PM -

"I need to work on everything," said Recknagel. "Keeping a consistent swing and making sure my swing mechanics are fine tuned. And I definitely need work on my defense."