

Against All Odds, Stiller Nears End Of Incredible Journey

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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If there is one area of the Cleveland Indians minor league system where they have a lot of depth and talent, it arguably is in the bullpen. They have relievers of all different types up and down the system, be it high impact potential prospects or just good middle relief depth options. While the high profile guys tend to get more attention because they were once starters who converted to a relief role, there are several pitchers in the system that have made a name for themselves as a reliever for almost their entire minor league career. One of those is right-hander Erik Stiller. Tony spoke with him this week.



If there is one area of the Cleveland Indians minor league system where they have a lot of depth and talent, it arguably is in the bullpen. They have relievers of all different types up and down the system, be it high impact potential prospects or just good middle relief depth options. Power righties or crafty lefties. You name it, they pretty much have all bases covered in the system when it comes to relief pitching talent.

While the high profile guys tend to get more attention because they were once starters who converted to a relief role, even though they are largely overlooked there are several pitchers in the system that have made a name for themselves as a reliever for almost their entire minor league career. One of those is right-hander Erik Stiller.

Stiller is a success story in his own right as he was an undrafted free agent signing out of Princeton University back in 2006. Instead of a high paying job in the financial world right out of the prestigious school, he instead took up the chance to play professional baseball when the Indians came calling and offered

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him a minor league contract with a bonus of \$1500 to sign.

Stiller signed and ever since then has put up some good numbers in his four years in the Indians system. In his four year covering 123 appearances (22 starts) he is 23-19 with 4 saves and a 3.57 ERA, and in 277.2 innings has a 7.8 H/9, 2.8 BB/9, 7.7 K/9, and 1.18 WHIP. All very solid numbers for a relief prospect.

Of course, there is more to being a good relief prospect than just the stats. It is mostly about talent, and while Stiller does not have top shelf stuff, most of his pitching tools are pretty solid across the board. His fastball sits in the low 90s, though has hit 94 MPH from time to time. He complements the fastball with a curveball, cutter, and changeup, with the changeup regarded as his best secondary offering. At 6'5" and 215 pounds, he has good size that allows him to get on top of hitters and handle a heavy workload as a reliever.

In Stiller's last two seasons he pitched 76 of his 85 games at Double-A Akron, and this past season in 41 appearances he was 8-3 with a 3.23 ERA (69.2 IP, 56 H, 30 BB, 68 K). His success at the Double-A level has put him on the big league map as a depth option in the bullpen in 2010 and beyond, and he may even get some consideration for the Rule 5 Draft on December 10th since he was not rostered by the Indians.

Stiller's season was really a tale of two different parts, which were the 36 games as a reliever and five games as a starter. When the Indians made the decision to put right-hander Hector Rondon in the bullpen in early May, they swapped Rondon and Stiller's roles. In his five starts Stiller went 0-3 with a 7.24 ERA with a .273 batting average against (BAA), but in his 36 relief appearances he was dominating going 8-0 with a 2.25 ERA and a .199 BAA. In fact, his only rough month was May when he was in the starting rotation as he had a 6.62 ERA and .261 BAA, whereas he was very successful in April (3.18 ERA, .227 BAA), June (0.69 ERA, .140 BAA), July (2.08 ERA, .240 BAA), August (2.31 ERA, .182 BAA), and September (3.00 ERA, .182 BAA).

"It was a good season and I had fun [in Akron]," said Stiller in a recent interview. "I suppose [my season] had some bumps early on. I was kind of in and out of the starting role for awhile because Hector was moved to the bullpen, and then we kind of traded places back so that he could get back to the starter's routine and me in the bullpen. I sort of got back into a good rhythm once I got back settled into the bullpen I think. Things went pretty well from there."

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Stiller was eventually moved back to the bullpen a few weeks later in late May after the Indians abandoned the Rondon experiment in the bullpen, and from that point he was excellent. From June 1st until the end of the season he made 26 appearances and had a 1.77 ERA, 6.3 H/9 and 10.6 K/9. The only concerning number was his 19 walks good for a 4.2 BB/9 rate, but the microscopic numbers were what he calls a result of things just finally settling into place.

"I think so," said Stiller. "I felt fine starting too. I had one seven run outing against Altoona which skews my own memory of the five starts. So it is tough to kind of compare those. Also I really didn't get to build up to a full pitch count, so I didn't have that chance to go six innings if I gave up six runs where if I gave up three runs I was just going three innings. It is kind of tough to compare the roles. I was getting geared up to be in the bullpen at the beginning of the season and in spring training. I was happy to be a starter when they needed me, and I feel like that is the kind of guy you have to be to be able to jump into any role they need because that has value. I was happy to get back into the bullpen role where I have had success, been comfortable, and the role I was gearing up for all year really."

It also helped to have some friendly competition in the bullpen as the entire bullpen which consisted mainly of Stiller, Zach Putnam, Josh Judy, Carlton Smith, Steven Wright, Neil Wagner, and Vinnie Pestano was just dominating all year.

"We had a good team so that helps as every individual is helped by a team that does well," said Stiller. "It gives a good atmosphere to play in and you know that when you come out of a game the guys that are coming in are also playing well so things kind of fed off each other. It made for a great year as a team and I am happy with how things went individually. I think we all really fed off of each other [in the bullpen]. We fed off the starters too for sure since they set the tone for the game, but when the guys out in the bullpen are kind of getting on a roll where someone is on a roll of five or six scoreless outings it kind of challenges everybody else to do the same. Not in a super competitive way, but in a kind of friendly bit of competition. It definitely helps to push each other."

Some of Stiller's early season struggles can be attributed to a dead arm phase he was going through. Even though he was battling a minor back issue the second half of the season, his arm strength started to return which allowed his velocity to creep out of the 88-91 MPH velocity he mostly sat at the first half of the season to the 90-92 MPH he was at in the second half. The back issue kept him from being

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able to extend through the ball, so the offseason came at a good time in order to allow him to get some much needed rest and also build his strength back up.

Two big changes also helped Stiller. One was moving from the right side of the rubber to the left side, and the other was committing to using his changeup more.

"There are a couple of things that [came] together throughout the year," said Stiller. "My changeup really improved and become a much better pitch. I started throwing it a lot this year, especially to lefties and it really helped me have some success keeping them off the ball. My arm didn't feel great for much of the season, maybe just some fatigue from those two long seasons in a row with the Arizona Fall League last year and the Hawaii Winter League the year before. So I think feeling a little bit of that fatigue coming into the year I knew I needed something to keep them off the fastball. So the changeup became a good pitch for me and I threw it a lot, like it was when I was in college where it was probably the best pitch for me."

The changeup helped Stiller neutralize lefties more as they only hit .195 against him on the season, compared to the .280 clip lefties hit against him at Akron in 2008. In addition to improving against lefties, his success against right-handers was aided by a subtle move from the third base side of the rubber to the first base side. The move helped him create more deception on his pitches to right-handers.

"The other thing is Ruben and I had a talk about standing on the mound in a certain spot," explained Stiller. "I usually stood on the far third base side on the rubber, and the theory was that getting that angle across a right-handers body would add another angle and some deception. But we switched to the other side of the rubber [toward the first base side], and the theory behind that was I want everything to start in the middle like it will be a pitch down the middle. I wanted a fastball outside to look like a fastball inside coming out of my hand and make them make the decision as the ball travels as opposed to when I am on the far right side of the mound out of my hand a righty either sees it as a sharp angle across knowing it is outside or the righty sees no angle and knows it is inside. Now if you shift that over a little bit, they really don't see an angle either way. I feel like it is a little harder to read, and ever since then when I tried it out I have been there ever since. That was a really big move and I feel like it has added more deception. I think the theory is reasonable if the ball starts in the middle of the plate you are going to want to swing at it. If I can start in the middle of the plate and hit corners, I am going to get more swing and misses or

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mis-hits."

Stiller is home for the offseason taking time away from the game and doing some part time work in Nashville as a financial advisor and spending the rest of his time training to get ready for next year. He is also getting ready for his big day this weekend where he will be marrying his fiancé Anna this Saturday November 28th.

After the Indians made a special arrangement with Stiller's flight at the end of spring training from Arizona to Cleveland, it allowed him the chance to meet his fiancé's parents during a quick two hour layover in Houston to ask for her hand in marriage. The next weekend, Anna came to Akron to visit him for Easter. After a day game on that Saturday because of the holiday weekend, he had a date set up that night at a nice restaurant and had desserts and other goodies brought out to her. One of those goodies was an Easter basket with Easter eggs and gift wrapped present in it, and the gift of course was the engagement ring.

It was a romantic end to what was a very stressful day for Stiller as he planned and tried to coordinate the night all while having to pitch earlier that day.

"You know what was most stressful about it is everybody knew I was going to do it, coaches included," said Stiller. "I had to pitch that day and went into the game. It was funny because when I came into the game I was so nervous and I kept thinking if I don't do well everybody is going to think it was just because I could not focus on the game. Thankfully it went well and I had a good one. I was glad the nerves settled down after that, but of course they picked back up once I was about to ask her the question."

After the wedding this weekend, Stiller will go on his honeymoon and there is a good chance that while he is on it or shortly after he returns that he could be a selection in the Rule 5 Draft. But even if he isn't taken Rule 5, with him viewed as one of the anchors in the projected Triple-A Columbus bullpen next year there is a distinct possibility that he could get a major league opportunity at some point next season if things go his way.

Looking back on how things looked when he signed that undrafted free agent deal and where he has gone since, what was once a long shot journey through the minor leagues to the big leagues is now a potential reality. Against all odds he has put himself on the brink of finishing off an incredible journey to achieving that big league dream.