

## Forward Heading

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Friday, November 27 2009 7:00 PM -

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With the 2009 baseball season officially over with the conclusion of the World Series almost a month ago, many fans, players, and the organizations themselves are already getting primed and ready for the 2010 season which starts up in four months. For Cleveland Indians first base and outfield prospect Stephen Head, the end to what was a very torturous 2009 season where he was saddled with several injuries, setbacks and disappointments is very welcomed. He now has his sights set on doing everything he can to come back strong and healthy in 2010. Tony sat down and talked with the Indians prospect about it this week.



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Head, 25, had an injury to his right knee which lingered and affected him all season and forced him in and out of the lineup. The injury and lack of consistent time in the lineup negatively impacted the 6'3" 220-pounder's performance as he only hit .247 with 7 HR, 34 RBI and a .668 OPS in 76 combined games at short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley and Triple-A Columbus.

Rolling the tape all the way back to the beginning, the knee issue cropped up in

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the early part of spring training. He hurt his knee in the second game of spring training sliding into the hard outfield wall. He ended up having to sit out and miss most of the rest of spring training as he rehabbed his knee, though he still opened the season with Columbus.

"I got hurt in spring training and I battled through it all year," said Head in a recent interview. "It is an issue to this day. It is one of those things where it just needs rest. Offensively and defensively it [took] my game backwards a little bit with the way that I can play. Obviously I was looking forward to [2009], and now I have to kind of take it and look forward to next year which I think I still have a very good opportunity. It was disappointing for me obviously because I wanted to get up [to the big leagues] this year, and out of camp I felt like I had a good chance of doing that. It just kind of lingered and never went away and got worse. It happens, but I am disappointed with it obviously."

Injuries quite often in professional sports have a big effect on how long a player plays and how successful he is, and just as often a promising career is sidetracked by a significant injury. There is no greater equalizer in professional sports.

From the start of the season until the end, Head was in and out of the lineup and just never could get the knee right. Considering the trouble he was having with the knee, it may have been wiser to just sit him for a couple of months or even for most of the rest of the season in order to help facilitate a better recovery, but he and the Indians training staff felt like it would get better as the season wore on.

"We were under the impression it was going to get better if I could continue to play," recalled Head. "We didn't misdiagnose it or anything; we just kind of misjudged it. It just didn't get better. Playing on it didn't help it as every time I would slide it would knock me back a week."

There is no specific name for his injury other than it being broadly considered a right knee injury, but to be more specific the problem area was in the back of the knee. He strained his posterior cruciate ligament (PCL), but there was also a small muscle in the back of the knee that he ruptured which was the main source for the pain in his knee. The back of his knee always felt like it was compressed and it would not bend easily. It was just constant discomfort and he always feel like there was something in it, which affected his ability to play on it.

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"My best way to describe it is compression from the inside," said Head. "It was discomfort all the time."

So far, the plan for Head this offseason has been to shut down his baseball activities and just rest the knee and undergo some therapy to help knock it out so the injury does not carry into next season. He had hoped to play winter ball somewhere to make up about 100 at bats he lost over the course of the 2009 season while he was out, but instead he is completely focused on getting healthy and to be ready for the start of spring training in late February. He is not rehabbing at the Indians new Player Development complex in Goodyear, Arizona, but instead at his new home in Anna, Illinois.

"I have always worked out hard [in the offseason]," said Head. "I wasn't able to do any workouts this season because of my legs, and they lost all their strength. I was having quad problems because I had no strength in my legs. Strength for me is one of the stronger parts of my game being able to hit balls hard and far. I just lost all of my strength this year. It wasn't because I was out of shape, I just had to shutdown all of my workouts for my legs to get better. From the ground up is your strength and I was basically from the waist up, so I am really looking forward to getting that aspect back."

At full strength, Head has some definite appeal to a big league roster. He is versatile to where he can play both first base and the outfield well, and not just getting by but as an impact defender at both positions. He also has a potent left-handed bat that has some good pop.

Many consider him the best defensive first baseman in the Indians organization by far, but while he is an accomplished defensive first baseman he takes a lot of pride having been able to move to the outfield. He has shown very good potential as a right fielder even though the knee injury affected his play out there this past season.

"I take a lot of pride that I was able to move to the outfield, but the injury really took away from some of the things I am able to do in the outfield," said Head. "Because I depend on quick jumps, that was the main thing I didn't have as with the knee issue those quick bursts were not there. Once I got going I could run, but it was those first few steps I was laboring badly. That's huge in the outfield and I felt like that is where it affected me a lot defensively."

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As mentioned, Head is rehabbing this offseason in Anna, Illinois, which is also the hometown of his new bride Ashley Hatfield whom he married earlier this month. The two met in college when they were at the University of Mississippi as part of a date setup by Ashley's sorority sisters in what they refer to as something like an "arrange-a-date". The date happened in their sophomore year, the sparks flew, and they have been together ever since.

Also, if the name of Head's fiancé happens to ring a bell, you are not mistaken or hearing things. That is because Ashley was Miss Illinois in 2007, and was also in the Miss America pageant in 2007. Head considers himself to be a pretty average guy, and while he is a professional athlete and has a contagious charm about him, he knows he swung for the fences and hit a grand slam.

"Yeah, I threw up the Hail Mary and nailed it," laughed Head.  
"She is actually more popular than I am."

With things starting to settle and prosper on the personal side, Head is committed to doing what it takes to more firmly establish the professional side of his life. A healthy knee this spring will be a good start.