

Gardner Off To Dominating Start

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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It was a long time coming for Cleveland Indians right-handed starting pitching prospect Joe Gardner.

After being chosen by the Indians in the 3rd round of the draft last year out of UC Santa Barbara, Gardner, 22, signed with the Indians quickly and was expected to make his professional debut with short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley when their season started up in mid-June. Unfortunately, an oblique injury suffered in his last start at UC Santa Barbara in May was still bothering him and those plans were nixed as he instead began his pro career on a rehab assignment at the Indians new Player Development Complex in Goodyear, AZ.

"I don't know how it happened," said Gardner in an interview at Classic Park in Eastlake, OH earlier this week. "It was my last start and it was tightening up so we shut it down. The Indians knew about it before they drafted me. I thought I was going to be back real soon and play for Mahoning but it didn't pan out that way."

As time went on over the course of the summer the oblique issue continued to linger and Gardner was never healthy enough to get to Mahoning Valley as initially hoped. He was finally healthy and cleared to pitch in the Fall Instructional League and that is where he opened up

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some eyes as he showed what made him such an intriguing pickup for the Indians in the 3rd round. He only pitched in one game, but he was dominating in going four shutout innings without allowing a hit or walk and piling up seven strikeouts.

Gardner used that performance in Instructional League as a springboard into his 2010 season where he came into spring training completely healthy, had a good camp (1.29 ERA, 14 IP, 12 H, 4 BB, 14 K), and was assigned to Low-A Lake County to start the 2010 season. Over the course of the first few weeks of the season he has officially started his pro career and earned his first win.

"It feels good to get back out there and be back on the hill and do what I do," said Gardner. "I missed it for awhile and I am starting off pretty good too."

In three starts for Lake County this season Gardner is 1-0 with a 3.86 ERA, though the ERA is deceiving as he has been flat out dominating in all three starts. Midwest League hitters are only hitting .140 against him, he has 26 strikeouts in 14.0 innings pitched (16.7 K/9), and has a ridiculous 15.00 GO/AO ratio. His early season success is a byproduct of his excellent sinker which is just eating up hitters. The sinker is hard and heavy, often coming in at 91-94 MPH, and no one has been able to lift the ball off him. It's also a testament to how well he has pitched in keeping the ball down in the zone and not leaving his sinker up or his secondary stuff (slider, changeup) out over the plate.

"I'm just throwing fastballs until someone can hit it," said Gardner. "Especially down here I can command the fastball pretty well and not worry too much about being hit and hammered around the ballpark. I think as I keep going up I will continue to use the fastball to get ahead and keep using it as a ground ball pitch."

In three starts Gardner has really only made one bad pitch. Unfortunately, he paid dearly for it as that one mistake cost him four runs via a grand slam home run. The home run is one of only two balls to be hit in the air against him so far this season, which is an astonishing number over the course of three starts and 14.0 innings.

"That was a big time mistake on a changeup there," said Gardner about the grand slam he gave up last Monday night. "Man, I shook off [the sinker] and that was my call. I learned from it and

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won't do it again, and we are over it."

In the early going Gardner has relied on the hard, boring action of his two-seamer as the primary weapon of choice. It is hard to hit as it sinks a lot and is hard and heavy, so batters have a tough time making good contact with it and if anything gets in the air it is most likely because of a mistake.

"I think my first outing I threw a lot more sliders to get a lot more strikeouts as that is more of a finish pitch," said Gardner. "But now I throw more two-seamers to get more groundballs and get in and get out and keep the defense moving. They are working good back there behind me turning a lot of double plays."

Gardner's sinker has certainly caught the attention of his pitching coach in Lake County, Mickey Callaway.

"There is no doubt that he has a big league sinker," said Callaway. "We are just trying to work with him on his secondary pitches and just do the little things holding runners on and stuff like that to just tighten up his game that way."

Yes, the secondary stuff. His slider and changeup are not projected to be plus pitches, but if he can get them both to where they are average to a tick or two above average major league pitches, they will go a long way at making his sinker so much more effective as he moves up the ranks in the minor leagues. He can get by with his sinker alone at the Low-A level against young, inexperienced hitters, but as he gets to High-A and Double-A where hitters are much more patient and have much better plate discipline, his changeup and slider will become big keys to what kind of pitcher he ends up being and how far he goes.

"[The secondary stuff] is there, as I can go to it whenever I want as I can go to a 3-2 slider or changeup anytime I want," said Gardner. "I'd say the slider is my best secondary pitch as I can use it against righties more. I think that the changeup is my third best pitch, but not by much. I can throw changeups to righties and the slider to lefties, so everything is there. I just gotta find the consistency a little more and just get back out there in pitching shape as I was out for six months. That's what I need right now, to get my feet wet and hopefully be doing big things here really soon."

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If Gardner keeps up with his current torrid start over the first few weeks of the season he may not be in Lake County for long. Being that he is a college pitcher and had he pitched in Mahoning Valley last year he may have opened at High-A Kinston this year, it could be a matter of another four to five starts or even less before he is summoned to Kinston in order to provide him a greater challenge. No matter where he ends up this season, it is all about developing as a pitcher.

"I just need to go out there and be myself," said Gardner. "I kind of set some goals for myself like commanding the fastball down in the zone more consistently, and throwing my offspeed whenever I want more often throughout this season. That's what I am really working on the most this season."

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