

New Cook in Training

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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Two years ago at this time, Low-A Lake County right-handed pitcher Clayton Cook was on top of the world after being selected by the Cleveland Indians in the 9th round of the 2008 Draft as a high school senior at Amarillo High School in Texas.

Cook, who turns 20 in July, was set to pitch at the University of Oklahoma on a full scholarship, but chose to sign with the Indians right away out of high school, a decision to this day he does not regret.

“I wouldn’t change a thing,” said Cook in a recent interview at Classic Park in Eastlake, Ohio. “I am living a dream right now, and my dream has always been to play Major League baseball.”

Cook’s decision to pass on the opportunity to go to college and instead pursue a career right away in pro baseball is one that high school draft picks go through every year. Do they sign now and get their career started right away, or do they go to school where they can grow more as a person and player and potentially increase their draft stock a few years down the road?

“It’s unbelievable how much I have learned,” explained Cook. “This is the only way you can do

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it by getting a head start and working with pro coaches, and I know I have learned so much more here than I would have in college ball. I feel like I was mature enough out of high school to do this, and I still feel that way. I am just going about my business every day and doing what I need to do to reach that goal. I feel like the Indians have taken care of me very well as I have heard some horror stories of guys in college being overthrown. So it has definitely been a good decision.”

The one thing Cook won't have to worry about is getting an education whenever his career ends, be it after a long career in the big leagues or a short stint in the minor leagues. No matter what happens he has a pre-paid four year college education waiting for him when he is ready to enroll into a school full time.

The reason for this is because as a signing perk for non-college seniors, the Indians as well as other Major League teams offer to pay for the years of college left that they would miss if they sign. In the case of a high school signing like Cook, he received a four year voucher to use toward any school, with the value of the voucher being determined by adjusting for inflation and what it would cost for him to attend Oklahoma for four years. According to Cook, the stipulation with the “college fund” is that it has to be used within five years of retiring from baseball and players cannot take one class at a time as they have to be enrolled as a full time student. The voucher pays for classes by semester, so whatever money is not used for the semester is lost.

But these days attending college is far from Cook's mind as he is concentrating on his professional career as a pitcher. Because he signed at such a young age he has often been one of the youngest players in the league he has played in the past two years, but has held his own. He has made a lot of strides in his first two years with the Indians, though struggled for most of the first half of this season with Lake County.

“I am definitely learning a lot right now,” said Cook. “Things are not going as smoothly as they have been the last two years. It may be that I am facing a little more advanced hitting [in the Midwest League] and hitters who have been around a little bit longer. I am also not as sharp as I was last year.”

Cook is still adjusting to full season ball, a transition which is typically a big adjustment for high school signees who get their first taste of playing 140+ games everyday over the course of five months. Last year he had the opportunity to stick around at the end of spring training and participate in extended spring training for a few months before short-season leagues started up

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in June. The extra work in extended spring training paid off as he went to short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley and in 14 starts went 5-3 with a 2.79 ERA.

“Last year spring training was longer, but I felt like when I came out from extended spring training I was game ready,” said Cook. “I was really sharp and when I went to Mahoning Valley I was in midseason form. This year, spring training was quick and I maybe threw four games for two to three innings, and then we jumped right into it. I wasn’t used to that, so I had to get back to being sharp in a game setting on the go. That was the biggest adjustment.”

Even though Cook has had his struggles in the first half of the season, he feels he is starting to turn the corner. The Indians had him add a two-seam fastball to his arsenal, a pitch he struggled with in the early going, but a pitch that he is now throwing with a lot more confidence and more consistently for strikes.

“The two-seamer kind of affected my four-seamer a little bit early on as I was not able to spot it up as well as I have in the past, but I am starting to get the feel of that to where I am able to carry the two-seamer and able to command the four-seamer,” said Cook. “I would have to say the last month and a half I have thrown a lot better. The first couple of outings I was maybe a little rusty coming out of spring training and I was kind of pressing a little bit trying to throw strikes and got a little wild walking guys, but here lately I have gotten my command back and feel like I am pitching better than the statistics show. I feel pretty good.”

Cook has been working on keeping his hands moving in his windup. Early in the season he got into a bad habit of stopping his hands which would cause his arm to drag and be late, which resulted in a lot of balls being left up in the zone. To counter the problem, the Indians worked with him to keep his hands moving so he is more out front, and the results have been promising.

At 6’3” 175 pounds (he looks bigger than the listed weight), Cook is also holding up well physically in his first full season. He has a nice strong frame and really worked hard in the offseason to come into this season in the best shape of his young career. The strength gained from the combination of his workouts and him continuing to mature has resulted in a spike in his velocity where he is now consistently hitting 91-93 MPH with his fastball every outing, compared to the 87-91 MPH he sat at prior to this season.

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“My body feels great,” said Cook. “My arm is actually as strong as ever and I am throwing as hard as I ever have. It is a matter of going out there and making pitches when I need to and getting outs.”

The secondary stuff for Cook is still a work in progress, which for such a young pitcher is not a big issue. He throws a curveball and changeup, with the curveball being the better of the two and one that is a solid offering already in his arsenal. Still, he is working on making it a more consistent pitch for him.

“It is good,” said Cook of the curveball. “It is just a matter of throwing it consistently for strikes and making sure I am not getting too close to my head and getting the rhythm I have so I get that sharp break with it. I am throwing it a little bit harder and throwing it for first pitch strikes the past two years.”

When all is said and done, Cook just wants to continue to improve as a pitcher and do whatever he can to help his team win. Given his age, he will likely be in Lake County all year, which is fine with him since after the Captains won the first half division title in the Midwest League he can maybe help them win a league championship this September.

“I just want to be where I can throw all three of my pitches for strikes consistently, I am keeping the ball down, and I am hitting my spots,” said Cook about his end of season goals. “The stats and all that other stuff will take care of themselves. Physically I feel like my body should hold up as I worked as hard as I ever have this past offseason. I just want to go out there and keep my team in games, and win a championship here.”

photo courtesy of Lianna Holub