

Miller Continues His Comeback

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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Cleveland Indians right-handed pitcher Adam Miller just put the finishing touches on a successful seven months of tedious rehab on his right middle finger out in Goodyear, Arizona. He is as healthy as he has been in a long time, and once again will embark on another quest this spring to finally achieve his dream of pitching in the big leagues.

This will be Miller's third attempt this spring at making a comeback from a career threatening injury to his right middle finger. In two previous attempts at a comeback in the springs of 2009 and 2010 he looked to be on the road to recovery, but both times he had a serious setback shortly into spring training.

Hopefully the third time is the charm.

Since the injury first came about in May of 2007, Miller's complications with his right middle finger have kept him out of action for all of the 2009 and 2010 seasons as well as large portions of the 2007 and 2008 seasons. So many times he has seemed so close to coming back only to have another setback.

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The question now is whether his restructured finger will once again flare up and shut him down, this time possibly for good. Only time will tell, but for now it is full speed ahead for the pitcher who up until this season was the top prospect in the Indians minor league system for half a decade.

"I feel good," said Miller who has been pain free since being shutdown in March. "I can't complain right now and I have had no setbacks. I guess you could say I have been cleared to go into the offseason as a normal person."

This of course is music to the ears of many Tribe fans.

For the longest time Miller was a pitcher that Indians brass and fans salivated at the thought of him anchoring the Indians big league rotation for a long time. Armed with an upper 90s fastball, wicked slider, and all the intangibles that go into being a front of the rotation starter, he seemingly had everything to become the next superstar pitcher in the major leagues.

Everything that is except for cooperative right middle finger.

The finger injury has dealt a huge blow to Miller's career aspirations as even if he is able to pitch again at a competitive level he will no longer be viewed as the future in the starting rotation. He has all but fallen off the map and is largely a forgotten man to many, but that is what happens when you miss so much time the last four years and have only pitched 94.0 innings since 2006.

In fact, if not for the fact that Miller was a former first round pick and was so highly thought of as a prospect he would probably already be out of baseball. But considering the investment the Indians have in him as a high draft pick and how talented his right arm is, he and the Indians are seeing this thing through until whatever end it takes them to.

The end appeared to be near this past spring when Miller went into big league camp seemingly healthy and a legit option for a big league bullpen job. The Indians even went so far as to name him in the bullpen if he could remain healthy and was effective in the spring. Unfortunately, just

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as it had unraveled for him in spring training the previous year, the finger acted up again and he was shut down for the rest of the season. There were many who thought his career was over.

But true to his outstanding work ethic, determination, and perseverance, Miller worked hard against all odds through a long summer in the hot Arizona sun and once again is on the radar.

"I wouldn't say it was terrible," joked Miller about the grueling rehab process this year. "I mean last year (2009) was long as I had the three surgeries and after the first surgery I literally rehabbed just to have the next surgery just so I could pick up a ball and throw. I only threw a couple of times. But this year I came in and they tried to work on breaking up the scar tissue. It got better, but it is now more about the strength of the finger and not necessarily the motion of the finger. Eventually I started throwing [this spring] and everything was good, and then moved into long toss and then to bullpens [in the summer], and then threw in a game [two weeks ago]."

Miller still just rents a place in Arizona and goes back "home" to Texas in the offseason and during the season when he gets time off. But time off has been rare as he has worked hard through a tough rehab process where no one really knows what to expect since the surgery is really one of a kind and so many unknowns still exist.

After having three surgeries in 2009 – one in May, August and November – things have started to slant in a positive direction since the hiccup with his health in the spring. He has had no surgeries since the one in November of last year, and after all the rehab this summer the Indians actually considered having him pitch for one of their affiliates at the end of the season.

"I was throwing bullpens here [in Arizona], and right before I left at the end of August there was a chance I would go to Mahoning Valley or Lake County to throw in a game, but they just felt I would not benefit enough from it," said Miller. "I threw one simulation game for one inning and 20 pitches before I left in August and then I just took the two weeks off and came back here and threw some more simulation games and then threw in the game [two weeks ago]."

That one outing Miller made came on Friday October 8th during Instructional League. It was his first trip to the mound in a competitive pitching environment since spring training in 2009. He pitched well throwing 12 pitches in one inning of work allowing no runs, one hit, and had one strikeout.

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Even with the promising outing, the Indians saw what they needed to see from Miller and decided to shut him down for the rest of the offseason. He won't pitch again until spring training.

"That was my first game back," said Miller. "When the first batter came up I was aiming a little. I wasn't really nervous, but it had been awhile [since I pitched in a game]. Once I got past the first hitter, I felt pretty comfortable and I just let it go. The slider was iffy at first, but it showed it was normal so that gave me a good vibe. Obviously it was only one inning, and I could have gone out there the next time and it could have been inconsistent like it was in the bullpen and simulation games, but I was pretty pleased with the one inning. They told me that they didn't see the use of me throwing a couple of more innings, so they shut me down for the year and I am just going into the offseason getting ready for next year."

With almost four months to go until the Indians open up big league spring training in mid-February, there is a lot of time for Miller to continue to help ensure he comes back at 100%. He will continue to do a lot of weight training and conditioning in the offseason, and because his arm is so rusty from so little use the last couple of years he will start a throwing program very early.

"I am kind of done with rehab, and it is what it is now," said Miller. "I am cleared to go just like a normal offseason lifting and I will probably end up throwing earlier than I usually would in prior years just because I haven't really thrown in two years. This year I did quite a bit of throwing as far as building up, but the arm is still not caught up from the time missed. So I want to build it up quicker so the arm is a little more [further along] than it usually would be."

While the finger is still holding up well, it doesn't mean Miller is back to his old self. There is no telling when his command and arm strength will return to pre-injury levels, or if they ever will be at the level where they once were. At the moment, his fastball currently ranges from 90-94 MPH and his slider is progressing nicely and sitting at 83-85 MPH.

The key for Miller is not necessarily to see his velocity get back to where it once was, but to get his feel to pitch and command back seeing how he has been out of action for so long. If he can stay healthy and the command returns, he and the Indians feel a fastball sitting at 92-94 MPH combined with his excellent slider will still be very effective for him coming out of the bullpen.

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"That's the reason I want to start to throw earlier," said Miller. "I have been lifting and I am a little bigger now, but just with throwing there are muscles that I can workout that I can't by lifting. Now it is more just the strength of the finger holding the ball. The slider is a little bit tougher, but I have had no problem. I know it is there, but it is more kind of getting back into a rhythm on the mound and throwing. That was one of the reasons I have been inconsistent with it as I would rush a little bit and the arm would be behind or I would be trying to make it break instead of just letting it do it."

Right now Miller has been reduced to a two-pitch pitcher as he is concentrating only on throwing fastballs and sliders. He has yet to throw a changeup, though if the need for a changeup is there it is possible he could start to incorporate that pitch back into his mix this spring.

Miller's fastball-slider combination has always been his bread and butter combination, and with a future in the bullpen it is not necessary for him to be able to throw a changeup. His starting days are over mostly because the bullpen may be the best chance to keep him healthy and help prolong his career, but also because in order to make him a starting pitching option again it would take a long time to build him back up seeing as that he has not pitched in over two years.

Even with the reduced role, Miller is just excited to be back out there pitching with a chance to make that elusive big league debut.

"I am definitely excited," said Miller. "As long as I am throwing, I don't care where I am at. I am not really surprised to be throwing again, but I was not sure where I would be with my velocity after the time off and everything that went into it. To be where I am right now I am pretty pleased. Even if I don't go up anymore with my velocity, I still feel pretty good at 90-94 MPH and with my slider."

Miller was a minor league free agent this offseason, but quickly resigned with the Indians earlier this month. He is very comfortable in the organization, one where he has the longest tenure of any player in the organization outside of a handful of players such as Travis Hafner, Grady Sizemore, Rafael Perez, and Fausto Carmona.

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While he has been resigned and is back in the fold, since Miller is not on the 40-man roster it is possible if he is not added by the offseason roster deadline November 20th that he could spark some interest from other clubs in the Rule 5 Draft the first week of December.

"Most of that stuff I can't control, so who knows," said Miller about his roster status. "The part I can control is the Indians offering a contract. Obviously I did not go out and see what I could get from other teams, but it is not like I have really thrown enough to put myself in that position. And it's not like I even wanted to as they offered [me a contract] and we got it done. I felt comfortable here as I pretty much know everybody as I have been here since 2003."

If Miller can prove healthy and effective this spring, the Indians without a doubt will strongly consider him for their opening day big league bullpen.

"My main focus is to just get out there throwing," said Miller. "I do have to show that I am healthy and can stay healthy. Hopefully I can make my big league debut with the Indians. That would be good."

And it would make for one heck of a comeback story.

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