

No worries: Jonah Nickerson is immune to pressure

Contributed by Kevin Wright
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His high school pitching coach told him plain and simple: "You don't show any emotion to your opponent."

And that piece of advice has been the guiding light ever since for low Class-A West Michigan Whitecaps' pitcher Jonah Nickerson.

"Nothing really gets to me," Nickerson said. "Ever since I was growing up, I've been told not to show your emotions out on the baseball field or the mound because it shows weakness. Once the other team sees that, they've got you."

It's that attitude that led Nickerson to Oregon State, where he took home Most Outstanding Player in the College World Series and propelled the Beavers to a 2006 College World Series Championship.

It's that characteristic that attracted the Detroit Tigers to him in the 2006 MLB Draft when they selected the 22-year-old pitcher in the seventh round.

And it's Nickerson's philosophy that gave him the fortitude to help the Whitecaps earn their first victory after a three-game losing streak to start the season.

"Not too much seems to rattle him," Whitecaps manager Tom Brookens said. "If they get two or three hits off him, he's not the kind of guy that seems to get very flustered over it. He just gets the ball and goes right back to work."

Nickerson has had to carry that mantra off the field as well as when he steps on the mound.

Following his senior season of high school baseball, Nickerson figured he'd get drafted. But that wasn't the case, so he chose college baseball to help him reach the professional ranks.

"My decision was kind of made for me after I didn't get drafted," Nickerson said. "I would've had a tough decision if I was to get drafted. Now that I look back on it, I'm glad I got the opportunity to go to college."

But once again, it was the "nothing fazes me" attitude that helped Nickerson prepare for the difficult transition to professional baseball. The Casper, Wyo., native knew it wouldn't be easy going for Most Outstanding Player of the College World Series to the Detroit minor-league system.

He wound up with the Oneonta Tigers, the Detroit Tigers' Class A short-season affiliate, but he wouldn't see the field for just about a month and a half after he arrived.

Brookens, then the manager for Oneonta, was concerned about the pitch count Nickerson racked up in the college ranks and wanted to ease his arm into games. Nickerson ended up pitching just 13 innings and collecting two saves as a relief pitcher.

Heading into spring training this season, Nickerson, a control pitcher who relies more on movement and not velocity, knew he'd play for West Michigan.

With the Whitecaps, both Nickerson and Brookens hope to see the pitcher stay consistent throughout a full professional baseball season. Brookens said that Nickerson's arm is healthy right now, and Brookens wants him to continue his exercises so that he can pitch the entire season.

But to Brookens, Nickerson's best attribute on the mound isn't necessarily his demeanor as much as his control.

"One of the things he does as a pitcher, I see, is that he keeps the ball down extremely well," Brookens said. "Everything he throws is right around the knees. He doesn't throw too much of anything that's straight."

Nickerson's repertoire includes a fastball, slider, two-seam fastball and a changeup that he wants to improve. By the end of the season, he would like to feel confident throwing the changeup in any count.

Even though Nickerson has started just 1-2 with a 4.13 ERA for the Whitecaps, Brookens believes the 6-1 right-handed pitcher has the right qualities to one day make it on a MLB roster.

“I don’t think there’s any doubt about that,” Brookens said. “He has the potential to move up the ladder. You never can tell what anybody’s going to do as far as making it all the way to the big league level, but he certainly shows enough talent, just flat-out talent and ability to pitch, to move up the ladder.”

Using his pinpoint control and arsenal of pitches, Nickerson believes he can overcome his average velocity. His fastball has been clocked in the high 80s, but Brookens doesn’t see that as a problem.

“Being an ex-player and an ex-hitter, I’m very aware that some of the guys that don’t throw 93 or 94 miles per hour are some of the toughest guys to hit,” said Brookens, who played third base for Detroit from 1979-88. “Sometimes the speed gun is overrated.”

But with all the adversity facing Nickerson, the words of his high school pitching coach will never be overrated.