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Notebook: Appel, Reckling shining

Kendall Rogers

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HOUSTON -- Stanford right-handed pitcher Mark Appel would be the top-ranked prospect in the sophomore class if not for TCU left-handed pitcher Matt Purke, so you'd assume he's very much used to being in the spotlight.

Actually, he's not at all.

Appel's story from the time he was a senior in high school until now as the Cardinal's ace pitcher is an intriguing one to say the least.

In his final season at Monta Vista High School in San Ramon, Calif., Appel was relegated to a bullpen role as other pitchers, perceived to be more talented, were in the starting rotation, including Oregon talented sophomore left-hander Christian Jones.

Appel's role didn't change in his first year with the Cardinal last season. He made three starts, but was a key cog in the bullpen with 24 appearances. He finished his freshman campaign with just 26 strikeouts in 38 innings, and opponents hit .295 off him.

The righty had a solid fastball that sat between 91-95 mph, but he was unable to consistently throw other pitches for strikes. He hadn't yet developed an actual arsenal to throw at hitters, and that cost him to the tune of a 5.92 ERA.

"He was a guy out of high school that people were just saying he had a good arm, but then you realize hey this guy didn't even start for his high school team," Stanford pitching coach Rusty Filter said. "In my system, we're always pitching to contact, and you have to throw strikes to be effective. He didn't have good command on his breaking ball and changeup as a freshman and that cost him dearly.

"Mark was a one-pitch guy as a freshman, and it's something we talked a lot about."

After a tumultuous freshman campaign, Appel went out last summer hoping to heed Filter's advice at the New England Collegiate League.

"I went into the summer focusing on getting a lot of innings and creating a starter's mentality," Appel said. "Everything I was doing all summer and winter, I was preparing to be a starter. I wanted to be the Friday night guy for this team."

Appel's summer strides were significant and noticed. Scouts suddenly began to salivate over his potential as he ended the summer with a 6-1 record and a 1.87 ERA in 43 1/3 innings, partly because of his mental development and expanded repertoire.

"I was discouraged with him so many times when he was a freshman because he would throw so many fastballs, so our plan last summer was for him to go out there and come back with an efficient changeup," Filter said. "The change is now a feel pitch for him. He still has a long way to go with it because he's new to throwing it."

Appel couldn't have been much more impressive in his 2011 starting debut against nationally ranked Rice. Though he allowed two runs in 5 2/3 innings and only finished the contest with four strikeouts, his composure and stuff was good enough to create smiles from scouts and keep fans buzzing.

The righty only walked one batter and was consistently 94-96 mph with his fastball, also touching 97 mph on several occasions. Appel also dropped down to 75-78 mph with his off speed pitches.

Filter believes Appel's solid start against the Owls was a huge step in the right direction, but more is needed to make everyone become full believers.

"I want him to understand the pitching side of things. When to change speeds when he's down in the count and little things like that," Filter said. "He's a smart young man and he'll figure things out."

"From a velocity standpoint, he reminds me a little of Stephen [Strasburg] in the sense that he wows people. But where Stephen was able to finish with that velocity, Mark is still working on that."

Being mentioned in the same breath as Strasburg by Filter, Strasburg's pitching coach at San Diego State, should catch everyone's attention.

Appel, meanwhile, better get used to the spotlight. It's only the beginning.

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