

Faith and fastballs lift Appel

Jeff Dahn, Perfect Game

Mark Appel was a talented right-handed pitcher from San Ramon, Calif., and a recent graduate from Monte Vista High School in Danville, Calif., when the Detroit Tigers selected him in the 15th round of the 2009 MLB First-Year Player Draft.

Appel had already signed with Stanford University – a prestigious school both academically and athletically – and sat down with his parents, Patrick and Sondra, to weigh his options. He ultimately decided to put off a professional baseball career for at least three years, and headed to Palo Alto.

To say he's never looked back would be insufficient in describing the impact the decision to attend Stanford has had on Appel's life in terms of his development as a both a ballplayer and a young man eager to contribute to society. And the decision also reaffirmed his strong religious faith.

"The people that I've met here and the relationships that I've made have really been great for me as a person," Appel said over the telephone on Tuesday (Feb. 7) shortly before he was to take part in a bullpen session with his Stanford Cardinal baseball teammates.

"I've been meeting with a spiritual mentor and my relationship with Christ has grown so much more," he said. "I can definitely attribute all the success I've been having here at Stanford and in my life to my relationship with Christ.

"All the great things that I've experienced I'm so grateful for, and I know that if I didn't have Christ I wouldn't be where I'm at right now."

The fact that he possesses an electric right arm that produces a fastball that has approached 100 mph has certainly done nothing to diminish his standing.

Appel has emerged as the leader on a talented Stanford Cardinal team that will appear in the No. 2 spot in Perfect Game's Preseason National Rankings. Appel and Cardinal third-baseman Stephen Piscotty are Perfect Game Preseason All-Americans and Appel is the PG Preseason Pitcher of the Year.

Stanford, led by 35-year head coach Mark Marquess, also has four players PG ranks in the top-75 of the 2012 draft eligible prospects, led by Appel at No. 2. Other probable first-rounders include Piscotty (No. 20) and infielder Kenny Diekroeger (No. 21), and left-hander Brett Mooneyham comes in at No. 75.

Appel is taking all the lofty rankings in stride.

"I feel great health-wise and I'm feeling as good as I've ever felt," he said. "I try not to look at this year as any different as any previous year – I'm still playing baseball and still having fun, and it's all the same, I guess. Some people can look at it as a big draft year but I can't control where I get drafted or who has interest in me. All I can do is control how I play on the field and that's all I really can worry about."

Appel got on campus ahead of the 2010 baseball season and his performance his freshman year fell short of expectations. He was used almost exclusively out of the bullpen (24 appearances, three starts) and went 2-1 with two saves and a 5.92 ERA. He allowed 44 hits and walked 19 in 38 innings, and struck out 26 by primarily using a fastball that was sitting between 91-95 mph.

"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 told PG's Kendall Rogers last year. "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."

Appel realized he had to make a lot of improvement ahead of his sophomore season in Palo Alto.

"I would say I did have expectations coming in my freshman year and they probably weren't very realistic," he said. "I was hoping to make a huge impact right out of the gate and be one of those guys, and obviously that didn't happen. So I went out the next summer and played in the New England Collegiate League and I just went back to the basics of baseball; I just tried to have fun and just focus on doing all the little things right and letting the results take care of themselves.

"I think having that mentality really helped me as I came back for my sophomore year and forward from there."

Appel pitched in the New England Collegiate Baseball League in the summer of 2010 and for the USA Baseball Collegiate National Team and in the Cape Cod League last summer. He said those summertime experiences taught him to relax and made him a better pitcher.

"It's just getting to go out there and not really worrying about coaches getting on you for doing anything and it's just more about you just learning yourself and figuring out what you need to do to succeed without your coaches being there or your parents being there," Appel

said. "It's been a great experience and I've made a lot of good friends out there, and I definitely feel blessed to be able to get out and play over the summer."

Appel became a full-time starter his sophomore season as he developed his slider and circle changeup, and went 6-7 with a 3.02 ERA while striking out 112 in 148 1/3 innings. The Cardinal advanced to the NCAA tournament for the 29th time – the 26th time since 1981 – and beat Kansas State, host Cal State Fullerton and Illinois to win the Fullerton Regional.

They then advanced to the North Carolina Super Regional where they lost a pair of games to the Tar Heels and missed out on a return trip to the College World Series. They were there as recently as 2008.

"Obviously we're going to be upset when we don't make it to Omaha, but I think our team took it as a huge learning experience," Appel said. "We realized how tough it was to win on the road at Fullerton and then go back on the road the following weekend to North Carolina.

"They deserved to host those regionals and super regionals, and one of our goals this year is to not take any game for granted because in the end it could determine whether you're on the road (in the postseason)."

Appel wasn't an unknown commodity while pitching for Monte Vista High and was ranked the No. 75 national prospect in his graduating class of 2009. He experienced his first Perfect Game event at the 2007 National Underclass Showcase-Session 1 in Mesa, Ariz., and was named to the Top Prospect Team.

He was at the PG National Showcase in Minneapolis a year later and also played in two PG WWBA tournaments in 2008, including the WWBA World Championship in Jupiter, Fla., as a member of the Braves Scout Team.

"I feel like the events that I did were just a huge blessing," Appel said. "In high school, I didn't really think I could play at a place like Stanford, and (he and his parents) prayed about it and decided to go to a Perfect Game showcase in Arizona. I played all right – well enough to get invited back to the (PG) National Showcase – and we just saw that as a huge blessing. It just kind of all escalated from there.

"I definitely see it as God working behind that and getting me to The Farm (Stanford), and I definitely feel very blessed for being able to do that."

Appel may have been selected higher than the 15th round in 2009 had he not been so adamant at the time about his desire to go to college.

"I was pretty set," he said. "We told all the scouts the same thing: 'I'm going to Stanford, Stanford is a very unique, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and if you feel like you can offer me something even more unique than Stanford then go ahead and draft me and we'll negotiate and see what we can come up with.'" The Tigers couldn't match Stanford's appeal.

Appel is majoring in Management and Science & Engineering at Stanford and is on pace to earn his degree. He boasted a 4.2 GPA in high school and academics have always been a priority.

"It's probably changed a little bit where I have to find a solid balance between baseball and school, but my degree is something that is very important to me because I know that I can't play baseball forever," he said. "Having a degree, and especially one from Stanford University, is a great insurance policy for the rest of my life."

The start of the 2012 NCAA Division I season is coming up fast, and the Cardinal will play six of their first seven games at home against highly regarded Vanderbilt from the Southeastern Conference (Feb. 17-19) and Texas from the Big 12 (Feb. 24-26). They will host traditionally strong Rice in non-conference play March 9-11 and open Pac-12 Conference play March 24 against USC at Sunken Diamond.

"We're obviously very excited with all the talent that we have down here and it's going to be a fun season," Appel said. "As far as expectations, I wouldn't put it past us to hopefully win a Pac-12 championship and go on to Omaha and potentially win a national championship."

All the talent on the Cardinal roster has Appel nearly jumping out his shoes with the possibilities the season ahead holds.

"I think it helps the rest of our team having a solid core group of guys where everyone is so motivated, and I think it just rubs off on the other guys," Appel said. "It also really helps us stay humble ... and it keeps us level-headed and really focused on getting better every single day and focusing on doing what we can do to help our team be successful."

Appel is certain to be made a millionaire in the weeks or months following June's 2012 MLB Draft. All the business of baseball is something he'll deal with when the time comes, but certainly not right now.

"It's not a huge focus," he said. "Sometimes my mind will drift and I'll think about it, but I can't really control what happens in the draft; all I can control is how I play this season and do the best I can. There's no sense in worrying about stuff you can't control."