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## Jackson toes the rubber as one of Cubs' hot prospects

It wasn't an easy decision for Jay Jackson to leave Furman after three years and pursue a career in professional baseball. He enjoyed the university and the time he spent playing baseball, and he knew there was a lot he could do to help the Paladins have a strong season his senior year.

But he also knew he wanted to play baseball for a living, and there were plenty of indications that he was ready to take that step.

"After talking with my parents, agent and coaches, they thought I was ready," Jackson says. "But it was hard leaving my teammates and friends."

So, in the summer of 2008, Jackson declared himself eligible for the major league draft and was selected in the ninth round by the Chicago Cubs. And the results of his first season in the minor leagues proved that Jackson was more than ready.

The right-handed pitcher started at Boise in the Northwest League and performed well enough to earn a quick promotion to Peoria, the Cubs' low A affiliate in the Midwest League. He excelled there as well, and then was promoted to high A Daytona of the Florida State League, where his 2-0 record and 1.59 earned run average helped the team capture the league championship.

Overall, Jackson went 4-2 with a 2.88 ERA in 2008. He allowed only 40 hits and 13 walks in 50 innings of work, recorded 72 strikeouts and limited hitters to a .222 average.

As a result of his outstanding play last summer, *Baseball America* rated Jackson the ninth best prospect in the Cubs' organization. Of the players selected by the Cubs in the 2008 draft, Jackson was ranked behind only first-round picks from Texas Christian and Vanderbilt.

Of course, Furman baseball coach Ron Smith would have enjoyed having Jackson around this year to throw those kinds of numbers at the Paladins' Southern Conference competition. But Smith understands that Jackson is a special talent who was ready for professional baseball.

"Most juniors aren't ready to make that step, and Jay was only 20 at the time," Smith says. "But I felt like he was ready for the challenges of professional baseball. He not only had all the physical tools, but I thought he could handle adversity

and be smart in the use of his time. He grew up a lot at Furman."

Jackson, a native of Greenville, was recruited by schools like South Carolina, Kentucky and The Citadel, but decided on Furman because of academics, potential playing time and the chance to stay close to his family.

"I knew I could make an impact right away," he says. "I wouldn't have to sit on the bench."

He did play right away, both on the mound and in the field, and got better every season. In 2008 he was 9-2 with a 3.17 ERA, batted .336 with eight home runs and a team-leading 41 RBI, and was named first-team all-Southern Conference.

"Jay's a five-tool guy, which is very unusual," Smith says. "He can hit, hit with power, run, field and throw. But as his career progressed at Furman, it became obvious that he was special as a pitcher."

And that's what Jackson is doing on the professional level. His two best pitches are his fastball (90 to 94 miles per hour) and a slider that can reach 86 mph.

"I've learned to better locate the fastball and work the count to my favor to get people out," he says.

While it's certainly to Jackson's favor to throw fastballs and sliders that are difficult to hit, one aspect of his game doesn't show up on a speed gun. And, according to Smith, it might be the most important thing Jackson has going for him.

"He has a tremendous amount of confidence and competitiveness," he says. "He wants the ball in a tough situation, and you've got to love that about a pitcher."

Jackson started the 2009 season with the Tennessee Smokies, a AA team based in Kodak, near Knoxville. Where he's ultimately headed is still to be determined, but don't be surprised if it's on a more vertical than horizontal plane.

— VINCE MOORE

