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Boys of Summer

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Furmanathletics

Boys of Summer

Pitchers Danny Rueckel and Tom Mastny do not appear to have much in common, other than that they are both young Furman graduates who are working their way through professional baseball's minor league system.

One is a reliever; one is a starter. One is 6 feet tall, the other 6-6. One has successfully traversed the path to Triple-A, the last stop before the major leagues; one has just finished an outstanding season in Class A. One has a nasty curveball that nobody has been able to hit consistently; the other works the plate with the precision of a surgeon.

But Rueckel and Mastny certainly have one thing in common. They have overcome the obstacles of being largely overlooked and underappreciated in college, of not hearing their names called until the latter rounds of the major league draft, and of being identified with a level of college baseball that is not known for producing major league pitching prospects.

In other words, they have had to rely on their talent and their determination to get where they are.

"There's no question it's tougher coming from a smaller school like Furman," says Rueckel, the 6-foot, Triple-A reliever with the wicked curve. "The scouts don't know much about you and nobody is expecting much from you. You have to prove yourself every day, at every level."

Which hasn't been a problem for either player thus far. Rueckel, who graduated from Furman in 2002, was drafted in the 12th round by the Montreal Expos. He began his career with the organization's Vermont club before being promoted to Class A Savannah (Georgia) in 2003. He was bumped up to AA Harrisburg (Pennsylvania) at the beginning of 2004, then promoted to AAA Edmonton in August.

That's a fast track for even the most heralded of prospects. At Harrisburg, Rueckel posted a 6-5 record with a 2.08 earned run average and recorded eight saves in 42 appearances. He was also

Rueckel, Mastny emerging as big league pitching prospects

BY VINCE MOORE

selected for the Eastern League All-Star Game. And even though he moved up to AAA late in the season, he was still able to display his pitching mettle. He appeared in seven games and posted a 1-0 record with a 2.89 earned run average and 10 strikeouts.

Mastny, a 2003 Furman graduate, was drafted in the 11th round by the Toronto Blue Jays. He began his minor league career with the Blue Jays' Class A "short season" squad in Auburn, N.Y., and then spent all of 2004 with Class A Charleston (West Virginia). A starting pitcher at Charleston, he finished with a 10-3 record, a 2.17 ERA and an invitation to pitch in the South Atlantic League All-Star Game.

Of course, it all began for both of them at Furman. And while it appeared early on that Mastny would likely have a chance to pitch beyond the collegiate level, Rueckel's emergence as a major league pitching prospect came out of left field — or at least the infield.

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Rueckel pitched in high school in Dunwoody, Ga., and was actually recruited by the likes of Georgia, Tennessee, Clemson and Vanderbilt as a pitcher. But he didn't want to limit his playing time to the mound, so he accepted Furman's offer to play anywhere he wanted.

"I guess I was stubborn or hard-headed or whatever you want to call it," Rueckel says, "but I wanted to do more than pitch."

Rueckel started at shortstop for the Paladins the first game of his freshman year — and remained there throughout his four years. He hit .282 with 17 home runs and 118 RBI for his career, but the closest he got to the mound his first season and a half was to run across it on his way from shortstop to the dugout. Then fate intervened.

He was playing around at practice one day while a teammate, pitcher Tommy John III, was rehabbing from an injury.

When John decided to take a break from throwing, Rueckel told the catcher to set up and he would demonstrate how he pitched during his "glory days" in high school.

Rueckel might have been horsing around, but the guys were plenty impressed, especially with his curveball. In fact, John told his father — former major league standout Tommy John, who was the Paladins' pitching coach at the time — that he needed to take a look at Rueckel. The shortstop, he said, might well have the best pitching arm on the team.

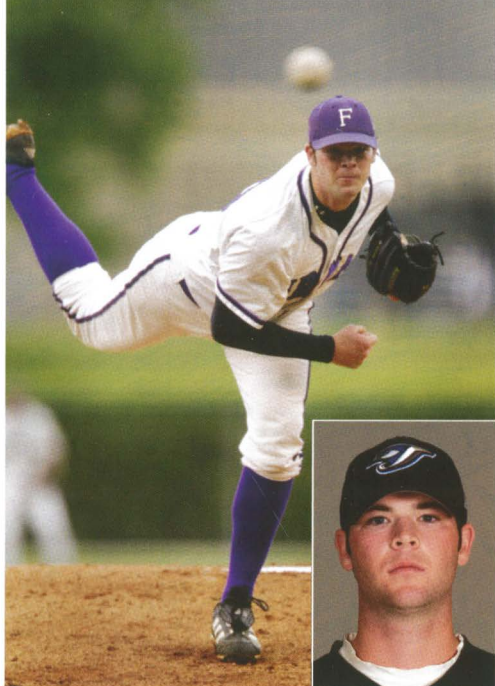
"Danny threw a couple of nice fastballs for me, and I wasn't surprised by that," says the elder John, now a coach in the New York Yankees' farm system. "I knew he had a strong arm because I'd seen him flat gun the ball to first base from deep, deep shortstop. I then asked him if he had a curveball."

Rueckel said yes, but added that he gripped the ball oddly and was afraid John might laugh at his technique. John told him it didn't matter as long as the ball spun and broke late.

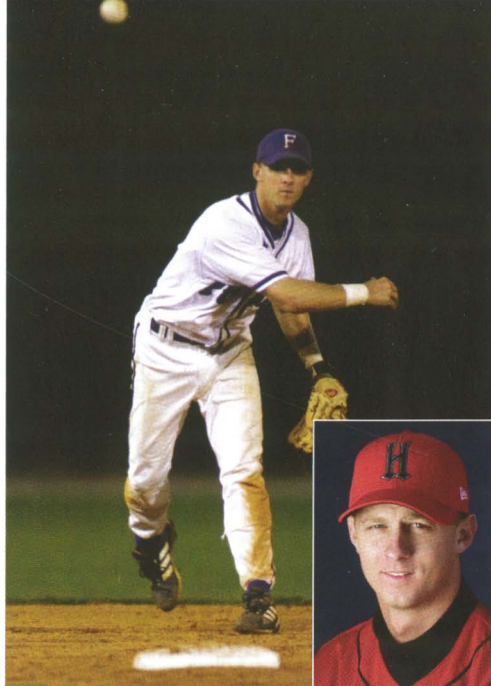
"I had never seen a grip like that — ever," Johns says. "But he threw it, and it spun really good and broke very late. It was definitely a pitch you could get people out with."

John went to head coach Ron Smith and asked him to watch Rueckel throw. To better make his point, he suggested that Smith step into the batter's box and watch Rueckel pitch from there. Unbeknownst to Smith, John had told Rueckel not to throw the curve until he signaled him.

"Ron watched a few fastballs, and you could tell he thought they were pretty good," John says. "Then I signaled for the curve, and the ball started right at Ron. He dove out of the batter's box and the ball broke right across the middle of the plate."



INSET: COURTESY CHARLESTON ALLEY CATS



INSET: CHRISTOPHER MILLETTE, HARRISBURG PATRIOT-NEWS

Tom Mastny (far left) was a 2004 South Atlantic League All-Star; Danny Rueckel's strong arm helped make him an effective shortstop at Furman. (Game photos courtesy Furman sports information)

The point was made, and Rueckel got his chance to pitch late in his sophomore season. In a game at the College of Charleston, he was summoned to the mound with the bases loaded and nobody out. He retired three batters in a row, striking out two and enticing the other to pop up.

When he returned to the dugout, he says, "Everybody had a weird grin on their faces. They were looking at me like, 'What is Rueckel doing out there?'"

In the next two seasons, primarily as a reliever, Rueckel would post an 11-9 record with a 4.64 ERA. He continued to start every game at shortstop, but word about his wicked curveball began to spread beyond the Southern Conference. And while he never made the all-league team as either a shortstop or pitcher, the Montreal organization decided he was worth taking a chance on.

Mastny, on the other hand, didn't sneak up on anybody. For one thing, at 6-6 and 230 pounds, he cuts an imposing figure on the mound. For another, he worked his way into the starting rotation early in his freshman year — and stayed there.

Mastny's improvement each season was dramatic, and he had the kind of senior year in 2003 that most college players can only dream of. He was 11-2, with an NCAA-best 1.09 ERA, and helped the Paladins to a school-record 32 wins, including victories over North Carolina State, South Carolina and Clemson (twice). He was also among the nation's leaders in

innings pitched. He was named Southern Conference Player of the Year and became Furman's first baseball All-American.

Although his size would suggest he challenges hitters with a fastball in the mid- to high-90s, Mastny is actually an artist on the mound. His fastball usually hovers in the high 80s and he keeps it down to the hitters, which induces a lot of ground balls. He also keeps batters guessing with a variety of off-speed pitches.

"Tom was always the best pitcher on the mound, no matter who we were playing," Rueckel says of their Furman days. "He threw that sinker, and it was nothing for me to field five or six balls a game at shortstop. Ordinarily, you might get two balls a game hit to you."

Tommy John, who coached at Furman during Mastny's freshman year, agrees. "I told Tom that he would be good in college, but I said he would be even better in professional ball with that sinking action on his pitches," John says. "He had great movement on the ball and he was accurate, and there's no substitute for throwing strikes."

Mastny, a native of Zionsville, Ind., has been a dominating pitcher for both minor league teams he has played for, which led one Canadian baseball publication to wonder: "Among life's many mysteries is the question of how a 6-5, 220-lb. starter who led the entire NCAA in ERA (1.09) his senior year and struck out 103 batters in 124 innings could have hung around until the 11th round."

Rueckel says that Mastny probably didn't get a better look because he didn't light up the radar gun with his fastball. "That's all they care about in college," he says. "But once you're in professional ball, all they care about is whether you can get somebody out. And Tom has proven he can get people out."

Both players can hear the siren song of the major leagues, and Rueckel is as close as you can get. Scouts believe he has the best curveball in the Montreal (now Washington, D.C.) organization, and he has been told that he could get his chance in the big leagues next year if he maintains his high performance level.

"I wasn't sure the batters would still swing at my curve ball in Triple-A," says Rueckel, who, at 24, was the youngest player on the Edmonton team. "But I keep throwing it in the dirt and they keep swinging at it. So now I know I can get people out at this level. I just want to keep living out my dream and make it to the major leagues."

Mastny also expects to move up next year, either to high Class A or AA ball. "After talking to my manager after the season and hearing from the roving instructors, it would suggest they're pretty high on me," he says. "I just have to wait and see what happens. But with the two seasons I've had, I hope they've noticed me."

Stay tuned. Danny Rueckel and Tom Mastny could be coming soon to a major league park near you.