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New pitcher is ready to work hard, learn his craft

BY JOE ADELIZZI

Staff Writer

Joe Rocchio doesn't like hearing that 90210 stuff, you know, the jokes about being a Beverly Hills kid, born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

No, Rocchio doesn't like to hear any of that. He'll tell you that he went to Beverly Hills high because his mom, Elaine, was a teacher there. He grew up in Venice, where blue collars are the norm, as are hard-working families. Mom is still at the school. Rocchio is as far away from Hollywood types as he can be as a member of the Lakewood BlueClaws.

But he says that making it to the Major Leagues isn't a dream.

"That would make it a fantasy. I think it is more a matter of when, rather than if," Rocchio said last week as the 6-foot-4, 200-pound right-hander finished his pregame work for the Claws, the low Class A affiliate of the Philadelphia Phillies in the South Atlantic League.

While Lakewood is about 60 miles from Philadelphia, it is an eternity from the big leagues and the pay check that comes from making your way to the best brand of baseball in the world.

But Rocchio thinks he has the right stuff to make the climb, one step at a time.

He knows he is a long way from Beverley Hills where he once dazzled opposing hitters with a 90 mph fastball. He once struck out a record-setting 19 batters against Compton Centennial and still holds the school record for career strike outs.

But he knows that is a bit deceiving.

"We weren't in a top conference so we didn't see the best teams," Rocchio said.

By the time the Division I teams were recruiting, he had a stress fracture in his back. Cal State Northridge was the only school calling.

He took the offer and ended up there for four years, never quite being the pitcher he thought he could be.

"I was inconsistent. I never really put a long run together the first three years," he said.

When the draft came after his junior year, the phone never rang.

"Turned out I had an injured wrist, so it was probably the best thing for me. My senior year was my best. I started to learn how to pitch," Rocchio said.

He was pretty sure he'd get a call on draft day.

"I was hoping to go between the 10th and 15th round," he said.

The Phils took him on the 10th round.

He got \$10,000 and a ticket to Williamsport, Pa., to play in short season Class A ball.

"I'd been away from home before. I spent six weeks in Hawaii playing summer ball, so I was able to handle that. Williamsport introduced me to life on the East Coast. But it's a lot nicer here," he said about being at FirstEnergy Park, the 8-year-old stadium that is a showplace for Class A teams. Lakewood has led the SAL in attendance since the stadium opened, averaging about 6,500 fans for their 70 home games.

Rocchio is living with a host family about 10 miles from the park with Chance Chapman, another pitcher for Lakewood.

"They tell me that this place really wakes up in the summer," Rocchio said. "I've made a few trips to the oceanfront, and it seems real nice."

Rocchio, who pitched in 12 games for Williamsport last season with a 2.87 earned run average in 31 innings pitched, has been used in relief with Lakewood. He picked up his second win (2-3) on the last BlueClaws road trip with three shutout innings, giving him 21 innings of work in 11 outings.

"I'm getting in at the end of games, setting up (Jared) Simon, who is closing games," he said.

Like any young pitcher, he'd still love to start, but he's learning his craft.

"He still has to work on consistency," said Dave Lundquist, the pitching coach for Lakewood. "One thing pitchers have to learn is to pitch to contact in pro ball. When they pitch in college where hitters have aluminum bats, they try and strike people out because of the damage hitters can do. In the pros, with wood bats, you want them to hit the ball when you make a good pitch."

Rocchio said that he has learned a lot about the work ethic needed at the pro level.

"Every day you have to do your work. I learned that at spring training this year. I was hoping I'd end up here, and I did," he said. "I've taken what I learned there with me. At this level it's all about hard work."

He still throws the fastball, but he has developed a sinker that is getting people out, and he is working on improving his breaking pitch.

"I need the most work with my changeup," he said.

He said that pitching at this level hasn't left him in awe.

"Most of the guys I'm facing are similar to the guys I pitched against in college," Rocchio said. "But as you climb through the system only the best survive, so I'm sure it's tougher."

He's looking forward to those next steps. It's where he expects to be, and right now, there's nothing that says he won't be there.
