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## From the outfield to the pros

***At GCC, Eddie Camacho moved from the outfield to the pitching mound and it's led to a pro career***

**By Charles Rich**

Published: Last Updated Monday, June 30, 2008 10:30 PM PDT

In one snap decision, Eddie Camacho opted to leave the crowd.

Originally an outfielder for the Glendale Community College baseball team during the 2001 and 2002 seasons that saw the Vaqueros rule supreme in the Western State Conference's Southern Division, Camacho figured he would remain content chasing down fly balls around spacious Stengel Field.

Then he had a decision to make after chatting with then-Glendale college Coach Jon Strauss: Remain in the outfield or learn to pitch?

"It was more of Coach Strauss' idea," Camacho said. "He told me that we had a crowded outfield and not enough pitching.

"I told him that I would do whatever would be best for the team, and I'm glad that I became a pitcher."

Camacho chose to become a pitcher before the 2001 season, and it's likely the best decision he's made in his career. He moved on to play at Cal State Northridge and was a non-drafted Major League Baseball free agent in 2004.

His decision to become a pitcher has certainly paid dividends. Camacho has thrived throughout this season with the Binghamton Mets, the Double-A affiliate of the New York Mets in the Eastern League.

Life has been good for the 25-year-old Camacho, who is Binghamton's primary set-up guy and bridge to closer Eddie Kunz. It's exactly what Camacho wanted.

"This has been great so far," said Camacho, who is 3-2 with a 2.25 earned-run average through Sunday. "I'm showing them that I can pitch well and get people out, and I'm happy that I can continue to play ball.

"Hopefully, I can continue to pitch well."

Strauss, who now serves as pitching coach at Long Beach State University, had very little information about Camacho. Chris Zavatsky, Strauss' predecessor at Glendale college, recruited Camacho with the idea that he would be a legitimate candidate for a starting outfield spot with the Vaqueros.

Strauss, a 1990 Glendale High graduate and a two-time Western State Conference Coach of the Year pick, figured Camacho might be useful handling the role as pitcher.

"I saw that he had a good arm and that he could throw a great change up," said Strauss, who went 66-25 at Glendale college before resigning following the 2002 season to accept an assistant coaching position at Loyola Marymount University. "He had a good arm and that's a strength that we saw.

"Any time you've got a left-hander with arm strength that you can put on the mound, it's a good thing. We cleared up his mechanics and put his body in position to throw strikes."

Over the course of the next two seasons, Camacho flourished pitching against quality teams such as College of the Canyons, L.A. Pierce and Bakersfield colleges.

Camacho, who secured all-conference first-team accolades after winning nine games for Glendale college in 2002, gave the Vaqueros quality efforts.

After a two-year stint at CSUN, Camacho briefly found himself in the crossroads of his career.

On a tip from a friend, Camacho went to Pierce for an open tryout for those seeking to make it to the professional level.

"My buddy said to go over to Pierce and I had to throw to five hitters," Camacho said. "I got all of them out.

"Then I was filling out some paperwork. I almost went to the Philadelphia Phillies, but then the New York Mets came in and said they had a job [opening] in the minors."

Camacho, who has made 27 appearances this season, didn't hesitate taking the Mets up on their offer.

Camacho reported to the Gulf Coast League in 2004 before moving on to the Florida State League in 2005, when he picked up 10 saves. In 2006, he spent the season with Binghamton before starting last season with the St. Lucie Mets in the Florida State League, the Triple-A New Orleans Zephyrs and eventually ending up back in Binghamton on Aug. 20, where he threw 11 2/3 scoreless innings in five appearances.

Binghamton Manager Mako Oliveras and pitching coach Ricky Bones like what they've seen so far, while trying to work on Camacho's weaknesses in the hopes that he can continue to further his career.

"He's not afraid because he knows how to pitch," Oliveras said. "He's been an outstanding set-up guy for us, and we have the bridge to get to Kunz.

"He just needs to do a little bit better [facing] the left-handed batters. If he can do that, then that's his ticket to move up."

Bones, a former Major League Baseball starting pitcher from 1991 to 2001, has worked closely with Camacho to refine his skills on the mound.

Bones, who went 63-82 with 584 strikeouts while performing for the San Diego Padres, Cincinnati Reds, and Florida Marlins, Milwaukee Brewers, Kansas City Royals, New York Yankees and Baltimore Orioles, said Camacho is continuing to show signs of improvement.

"It takes a lot of hard work, but he's on the right path," Bones said. "The [New York] Mets think real highly of him, and he can pitch in different roles.

"He's got some value. It's just going to be about being able to maximize those abilities."

Camacho said he's continued to have an open mind on learning a difficult, yet important craft. It's just a matter of being able to properly handle each situation and assignment given to him.

"I want to continue working with Ricky, working on my slider and getting left-handers out," Camacho said. "Ricky said that can get me to the big leagues.

"Hopefully, I can continue to pitch well. I would love to help us win a championship."

Apparently, leaving the crowded outfield in 2001 proved to be a wise decision after all.