

In the Right Direction

By Josh Johnson

Every player goes through their share of growing pains. In 2010, that happened on a team-by-team basis. The Minnesota Twins Minor League system finished with one of the worst winning percentages in recent history, winning only 43% of their games. But no team's misfortunes could match that of the New Britain Rock Cats. With one of the most talented rosters in the Eastern League, the Rock Cats quickly discovered how big of a role experience plays when it comes to winning.

New Britain's roster was full of highly touted players, but the team also boasted the second youngest team in the league, with an average age of 23.4 (the league average is around 24.3). One of those young players was 22-year-old Chris Parmelee.

Parmelee grew up in Long Beach, California. He credits his father for helping him develop as a baseball player. "Whenever I wanted to hit more, he'd throw to me. And whenever I wanted more ground balls, he'd hit them to me. He worked with me a lot growing up."

Parmelee attended Chino Hills High School and was named an AFLAC All-American after hitting .407 with 11 home runs as a senior. He committed to play college baseball at Cal State-Fullerton, but he chose to sign with the Minnesota Twins after they selected him with the 20th overall pick in the 2006 draft.

Despite hearing from several teams that expressed interest in drafting him in the first round, Parmelee didn't want to get caught up in all the commotion and set up a back-up plan if things didn't go as expected.

"I had heard stories of players that got caught up in being drafted in the first round and it didn't pan out. Although I felt confident about my chances (of being taken in the first round), I didn't want to get too excited. If things didn't work out (on draft day), I would have gone to Cal State-Fullerton and majored in either fire science or criminal law." Parmelee added. "If I weren't playing baseball, I'd want to be a firefighter."

Parmelee signed shortly after the draft and quickly became one of the most powerful young hitters in the Twins organization. He showcased his power in his first professional at-bat, blasting a home run for the Gulf Coast League Twins on June 30th. All told, he hit eight home runs in his first year of professional baseball.

Over the next three seasons, Parmelee proceeded to hit 45 home runs and drive in 192 runs. He began drawing comparisons to Adam Dunn, one of the best home run hitters in the Major Leagues. Everything looked to be going as planned for the Twins and Parmelee. He was invited to participate in both the Arizona Fall League in 2009 and attended his first "Big League Spring Training" in the spring. "I really enjoyed the Arizona Fall League a lot. It has great competition and it's a great place to improve your skills. The experience was great, and I got to meet a lot of good guys and compete against a lot of great players. My first Big League Spring Training was great. It was fun being around the Major League guys and learning from the best."

But as we've come to find in baseball, momentum can change in a split second.

Parmelee began the 2010 season with Minnesota's Double-A affiliate (New Britain). Splitting time at first base, right field and designated hitter, he hit .270/.310/.514 over his first 37 at-bats (10 games) before

going on an 0-30 stretch that lasted two weeks. He ended up playing in just 28 games (hitting .186/.241/.333 in 102 at-bats) before the Twins demoted him to Advanced-A Fort Myers.

He found himself hitting in the heart of the Ft. Myers Miracle lineup, a place he succeeded in 2009. Despite being labeled a “pitcher-friendly” league, Parmelee managed to club 44 extra-base hits in 422 at-bats in the Florida State League in 2009. He also won the home run derby, despite being one of the youngest contestants.

Parmelee quickly became comfortable at the plate and in his three weeks with the Miracle, he hit .338/.430/.463 with five extra-base hits. But Parmelee knew what he needed to do.

“When I got demoted back to Fort Myers, I knew I had to do anything and everything to get back up to New Britain. I didn’t want the demotion to last the rest of the season.”

Parmelee doesn’t try to pay attention to statistics, but I’m sure he’d be able to tell you that his first stint in New Britain didn’t go too well.

“I do my best to try and stay away from the stat sheet as much as possible. Getting caught up in stats can really get into your head and to play baseball you can’t be thinking about what you’re hitting or ‘that’s strikeout number 100 on the year.’ You have to have a clear head.”

With a clear head, Parmelee returned to New Britain, and he never looked back.

From June 10 to the end of the season, Parmelee hit .304/.373/.408 with 19 doubles, two triples, three home runs and a 37/41 walk/strikeout ratio. He began making more contact, which zapped his power, but he also began fixing his high rate of strikeouts.

So how did he do it?

“Most importantly, I started having fun playing the game, and I took that back up to New Britain with me. This game is fun and you can’t let that get away from you.”

Over the same period, the Rock Cats proceeded to lose 55 of 84 games (winning percentage of 35%). Losing that many games must affect the players.

“It was a rough season for all of us on the New Britain roster this year, no doubt about it. But I feel like everyone, including myself, learned a lot over the course of the season.”

Parmelee added, “I don’t feel like the losses affected me at all (mentally) because every day is a new day in this game.”

Following the season, he carried his own success to the Arizona Fall League where he hit .339/.405/.477 and tied the league with 11 doubles in 29 games. To reward his progress, the Minnesota Twins added him to their 40-man roster in November, which protected him from being selected in the Rule 5 Draft in December.

As for what to expect in 2011 and beyond: “My goals for the 2011 season are to stay as consistent as possible. I’m going to hit the gym and work on my footwork and foot speed. I also want to shorten up my swing and stay quiet at the plate.”

In the future, “I see myself in the big leagues with the Twins, fighting for a World Series Championship.”

Through his own growing pains, Chris Parmelee is moving in the right direction.

Josh Johnson is the author of Josh's Thoughts (<http://joshsoption.blogspot.com/>). A lifelong Minnesota native, Josh is currently a senior at St. Cloud State University where he is a journalism major and may pursue a career in sports writing. Follow Josh on Twitter @JoshThoughts.