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USC's Dyson caps slow return to top speed

Atop rotation, pitcher displays the stuff of a top pro prospect he once was

By SETH EMERSON
semerson@thestate.com

RALEIGH — Truthfully, it was on a lark that the USC baseball team signed Sam Dyson two years ago. He had a right arm coveted by the pros, so the Gamecocks' only hope seemed to be the honor-roll student's desire to go to college.

As it turned out, Dyson's arm forced the decision — in a bad way. Injuries slowed his fastball, dropped his draft position and eventually led to three surgeries in his first year at USC.

That finally seems like a distant memory for Dyson. He may not be in the pros — at least not yet — but his fastball is back, and he enters the NCAA tournament as the Gamecocks' ace.

The redshirt freshman will start today's opener of the Raleigh Regional against Charlotte. He also made the first start in last week's SEC tournament; he held eventual champion LSU scoreless until the bullpen blew the game in the ninth.

"He's got the best arm (on the staff) on a consistent basis," USC coach Ray Tanner said.

Yet two weeks ago, Dyson was a midweek starter. So what took so long?

Injuries were the key reason. The Gamecocks were careful in their handling of Dyson, who didn't throw off a mound until late in the fall.

Dyson made three relief appearances before getting his first midweek start. By the time he felt comfortable, a logjam had formed ahead of him. It disappeared only when the weekend starters began struggling in recent weeks.

A month ago, it wasn't realistic to think Dyson would start the first game of the SEC and NCAA tournaments.

"No, not at all. I thought I'd be in relief the whole time, if it kept going that way," Dyson said. "It's just unbelievable right now."

Dyson grew up in Tampa, Fla., where he attended Tampa Jesuit High School, a private all-boys Catholic school. He had to wear a dress shirt, pants and tie to school every day.

But baseball had a rich history at Dyson's school. It counts Lou Piniella as an alumnus, as well as former major leaguers Brad Radke and Dave Magadan, NFL kicker Jay Feely and Atlanta Falcons executive Rich McKay.

Dyson was headed down the professional road in his senior year, when he was throwing in the low 90s. But he sustained what he calls "tiny tears" in his labrum. While he never stopped pitching, his velocity decreased.

The Washington Nationals picked him in the 19th round — well below expectations. Dyson decided to try college.

Upon his arrival, Dyson's upper torso became a surgical delight: He had surgeries in December, March and August, respectively on his right elbow, right arm and left shoulder.

"Obviously, it's scary," Dyson said. "But with hard work you can get some of it back."

When deciding who should get the first-game tournament starts, Tanner never worried about Dyson's pitching. It was his composure and demeanor, and Dyson settled that.

"He thinks he's a guy who's worthy and deserving when healthy, and he had to fight his way back to good health. But I like that," Tanner said. "I'd rather have to pull a guy to a side and have to pull him in a little bit and have to tell him to control his emotions a little bit, than a guy you have to build up and think he's good."

"I definitely want the ball," Dyson said. "I want the ball a couple times a week, but it doesn't happen."

At a minimum, his days of midweek starting appear over. Tanner said with his velocity, Dyson could “look good on Friday nights.”

But for now, the Gamecocks turn to him on a critical Friday afternoon.

Reach Emerson at (803) 771-8676.

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