

From FUTURE REDBIRDS BLOG

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Get to know a Future Redbird: Chris Swauger '04

Chris Swauger looks to be one of the hidden gems taken in last year's draft. Drafted in the 26th round out of The Citadel (a military college), the slugging outfielder was only the second player in school history to record 300-plus hits. He also leaves with the school record in triples (16), second in doubles (71) and third in home runs (38). In his first pro season, he overcame a slow start to hit .291/.348/.469 and helped Batavia win their first championship in 45 years. Chris was nice enough to take some of his time and talk with me about how he developed in his first few months as a pro.

What has been the baseball life story of Chris Swauger?

I started playing baseball when I was 4 years old. My step-dad, **Jim Parrish**, got me started and coached me until high school. I played 4 years at **Tampa Jesuit High School** for **Coach John Crumbley**, making it to two State Finals. I accepted a scholarship to play at the Citadel and played out my four years there. I was lucky enough to get selected by the Cardinals in the 26th round after my senior year and played my first summer of professional baseball in Batavia.

Why did you choose to go to The Citadel?

I chose the Citadel because I felt going there gave me the best chance to succeed in baseball and life. I earned an academic scholarship that covered all my expenses, which pretty much made my decision for me. In hindsight, it was the best decision I could have ever made. While it was not always the greatest place to be at because of the military aspect of the school, it has become a great place to be from. The intangible lessons I learned there were as valuable as the classes I took. Another big reason I went to The Citadel was the chance to play as a freshman. From the day I stepped (or marched) on campus I was a starter and it stayed that way until the last game I played. No other school promised me that kind of opportunity. I'm glad I took that opportunity.

Congrats on winning the NY-Penn League championship. What was that experience like for you?

Winning the NYPL championship was by far the best experience I've had in 18 years playing baseball. In little league, high school, and college I was fortunate to play for many championships however my teams never could win one. Being so close so many times makes finally winning a championship that much sweeter. This team (Batavia) was as close as any I have ever been on which is strange considering the nature of professional baseball. It was a pleasure coming to the field everyday and working and playing with the players and coaches on the Muckdogs. Since I was a kid, I dreamed of dog-piling on the mound and celebrating in the locker room like you see on TV. To be a part of something like that was almost surreal and it is a memory I will cherish for the rest of my life.

You started slow but your numbers improved dramatically as the season went on. Is there anything to which you would attribute the gains you made?

I just worked as hard as I possibly could every day. Working with Jeff Albert, our hitting coach, I made some adjustments to my swing and when I got an opportunity my swing just clicked. It was hard to get in a rhythm at the beginning of the year because we had six outfielders and we were all splitting time. Later on in the year, I began to get comfortable with the wooden bat and my swing so my numbers improved. A lot of the credit has to go to my teammates getting on base ahead of me and putting me in position to be successful. As our team was successful later in the year, so was I.

What was your experience working with Jeff Albert like?

Jeff was the best hitting coach I have ever worked with for many reasons. He knew what he was talking about, having been a player and a background in bio-mechanics. But more than that, he took the time to learn my swing and work with me on improving it. Every day we would go to the cage and work to get my swing going for the game that night. He helped me with my approach to hitting and as we made adjustments my swing and production got better. I give him the credit for making me the hitter I am because I learned more from him than from any other coach I have ever worked with.

How would you describe your hitting mechanics?

My hitting mechanics are very simple now that I have worked with Jeff. I keep my hands loose and start from a comfortable position with my entire body. I have a slight leg kick which works as my timing mechanism. Once my foot hits the ground (the ball is being released at this time) my weight is slightly shifted to my front leg, which helps me stay closed as my hips and shoulders begin to rotate. As I rotate my hips and shoulders my hands stay cocked. My head stays still so I can see the ball and recognize the pitch, its speed, and location. Finally, in the split second I have to decide to swing, my hands release last and I try to finish my swing high to produce line drives. This is my ideal hitting sequence but honestly it doesn't always happen the way I plan.

Baseball America recently graded the Cardinals draft and noted that you along with Brett Wallace have the best power in the draft. Do you consider yourself a power hitter?

I have never considered myself a power hitter. I try to hit line drives and sometimes they carry out. If you watched me take batting practice you would never think I was a power hitter because I just try to hit the ball hard and most of the time I work to hit it to the opposite field (left-field for me). I have had pretty good power numbers throughout college and my first pro season but I still don't consider myself a guy who swings for the fences. I just try to hit the ball hard.

What part of your game you would like to improve upon most?

I would like to improve every aspect of my game. I feel like in this game you don't stay the same, you either get better or worse. If I had to pick one area, I would say defense. My strength in this game is my ability to hit but I feel like if I could improve on my defensive skills I would be a more complete player. I am definitely working to improve them and will continue to do so, but if I could magically make myself better in one area that would be the one. I say that because some days it is tough to be a hitter, but I can be a good defender everyday no matter what.

I know it's pretty early in your career, but who is the toughest pitcher you've ever faced, including minors and college?

It's hard to say because I have faced so many new pitchers. Some of them have owned me and others I have had success against. I think the best pitchers are the ones who can get you out even after you have seen them a few times in different games. The one pitcher who was able to get me out consistently during my college career was a right-hander from Elon named Steven Hensley. He was a 4th round pick for the Seattle Mariners this year, and I faced him four separate times in college, none of which I had any success against him. He threw four pitches for strikes, a four-seam, a two-seam, a change-up, and a slider. He mixed his pitches well and was not afraid to throw any of them in any count. He was also a fierce competitor and I have more respect for him as any pitcher I have ever faced. I hope I get to face him again sometime in my career, because I love to compete and would enjoy the challenge of facing him.

Growing up, who were your favorite players to watch?

My favorite players to watch were Tony Gwynn and Chipper Jones. I liked Gwynn because he was such a good hitter and made it look so easy. I liked Chipper because growing up in Tampa the closest team to me was the Braves and we used to get all the games on TV. He was their best player and so he kind of became my favorite.

Anything you'd like to tell us about Chris Swauger, the person?

I'm just happy to be a player. It's been my dream for my whole life and I want to say thank you to everyone who reads your blog/website for supporting me. Go Cardinals!