

Published Saturday May 16, 2009

Baseball: Reivers' aces tough to trump

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WORLD-HERALD NEWS SERVICE

COUNCIL BLUFFS — Sophomores Brian Feekin and Mike Strong came to Iowa Western looking to improve their status as collegiate pitchers. With NCAA Division I scholarships awaiting them this fall, it's safe to say they've accomplished that.



Iowa Western left-handed pitchers Mike Strong, left, and Brian Feekin have had strong springs. Strong is 6-1 with an ERA of 3.23, and Feekin is 8-1 with a 1.88 ERA.

Feekin is on his way to Louisville. Strong has signed a letter of intent with Oklahoma State. And both are likely to be selected in this summer's Major League Baseball draft.

The future looks bright for the Reiver left-handers. But their focus right now is getting IWCC back to the NJCAA College World Series. Iowa Western will attempt to earn its third straight berth this weekend at the Northern District Tournament in River Grove, Ill.

"It's just been the experience of a lifetime, especially if we get back to the College World Series," Strong said of his two-year stay in Council Bluffs. "This is kind of what the whole college experience is (about) — to set up your future."

Feekin and Strong have certainly done that for themselves with an outstanding spring season. IWCC has been virtually unbeatable when either is on the mound.

The duo has posted a combined record of 14-2 while giving up fewer than three runs a game on average. Feekin and Strong have fanned 110 total batters in fewer than 80 combined innings, and offenses have struggled to put rallies together against the two lefties.

"They're two talented sophomore arms that have worked hard to get where they're at," Iowa Western coach Marc Rardin said. "When you can run guys out there that can slow down the other team's offense, you feel comfortable that you've got a chance."

Feekin, in particular, has been dominant this spring. He's posted an 8-1 record with a 1.88 ERA and has struck out 74 batters in only 56 innings. This week, he was named to the All-Region XI team for the second straight year.

The 6-foot-6, 220-pounder from Papillion has the type of frame professional scouts love. In fact, he was drafted in the 41st round last year by the Texas Rangers but decided to stay in Council Bluffs for another year to sharpen his skills and lift his draft status.

"The biggest thing was that last year I didn't have the greatest year," Feekin said. "I knew if I'd come back for another year, put up good numbers and pitch better, then better opportunities would come from it. Another whole year of baseball and another whole year of learning, it's really helped out."

Feekin is three years removed from his prep days at Papillion-La Vista. He originally went to the University of Nebraska after high school, but transferred to IWCC prior to last season after redshirting his freshman year. He's come into his own with the Reivers, saying he's learned how to become a strike thrower who controls damage instead of a live arm that overthrows.

"There's always certain things I could've done better," he said. "But as far as improvement from last year, I think I've made great strides."

Strong said he has accomplished many of the same things. The sophomore from Afton, Minn., admitted that he'd often "just throw it as hard as I could and hope they swung" while at Stillwater (Minn.) High School. He'll head to OSU as a wiser pitcher.

"I knew (Iowa Western's coaches) would bring me a long ways," he said. "They kind of showed me how to pitch. I've added maturity, knowing to pitch instead of light up the gun every time. You need to learn how to spot up. Control is the biggest thing."

Rardin calls Strong "lightning in a bottle."

The 6-foot, 170-pounder doesn't have the size of Feekin, but he makes up for it with what Rardin described as his "buggy-whip" arm.

"His arm works so well," Rardin said. "As a coach, if you were going to set the way you'd want people's arms to work to be the ideal situation, Mike Strong's is it."

Strong is 6-1 this season with an ERA of 3.23. He's fanned 46 hitters in fewer than 35 innings after allowing opponents to hit only .204 against him a year ago.

Rardin said he's not surprised that pro scouts have both of his pitchers on their radar.

"You can't deny Feekin's size. Baseball's full of bodies like that — big, strong kids that have a chance for longevity," he said. "And Strong is one fast-twitch muscle, from toes to nose. His arm works that way. He's just been blessed."

Both pitchers said they have fastballs in the upper 80s to low 90s. Feekin's second pitch is a slider, but Strong prefers to throw a slower curve. They both also have changeups that they rarely use.

"All you really need is two pitches at this level," Strong said.

Rardin said he believes that both of his pitchers have the potential for success after IWCC. He said he's seen them grow up through

adversity while learning "pitchability." And, in addition, they have the one thing seemingly every scout is looking for.

"The scary thing is that they're both left-handed," Rardin said. "That's the one thing that scouts have an interest in. It's coming from the left side so it's more intriguing."

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