

James Paxton showing signs he's the real deal on the mound for the Mariners

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By Israel Fehr

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SEATTLE – Armed with a sizzling fastball, a devastating curveball, and a rapidly growing list of impressive results at the major-league level, Seattle Mariners pitcher [James Paxton](#) has people around baseball paying attention.

In 14 career starts in the big leagues, Paxton has a 1.73 ERA and appears to be getting more comfortable each time he steps on the mound. With the Mariners fighting for a wild-card spot in the American League, Paxton's contributions (he's slated to make three more starts) will play a significant factor in whether or not Seattle can make the playoffs for the first time since 2001.

"It's really fun baseball and the games are really important. It's great to go out there and have the opportunity to help the team win," said Paxton.

After making four starts as a September call-up last year, 2014 was set to be Paxton's first full season in Seattle's rotation. In his first start against the Angels on April 2, he struck out nine over seven shutout innings. In his next outing, he was forced to leave in the fifth inning with a strained lat. Just like that his major-league career was put on hold, with no precise timetable for when he would be healthy enough to return.

"That was tough. Being out for as long as I was hurt a lot," said Paxton. "I didn't expect to spend my first year in the big leagues mostly on the disabled list."

In all he missed about four months, but even though he couldn't be on the field, Paxton kept on looking for ways to get better. The time he spent out injured, while frustrating, was not wasted. He had a front-row seat to watch some of

the game's best and he made sure to take it all in.

"Being able to stay here and watch the games and pay attention and learn from the guys and watch guys like Felix [Hernandez], [Hisashi] Iwakuma, and Chris Young go out there and do their thing was awesome," said Paxton. "I've learned a lot from Chris Young this year as far as preparation goes. He's taught me a lot about how to look at video and look at charts and what to look at and focus on. Felix and Iwakuma, I love watching how competitive they are on the mound."

He wasn't about to let this opportunity slip away, after all he had been through in baseball, just getting there wasn't going to be good enough.

Growing up in Ladner, B.C., Paxton did not stand out on the diamond or the mound. In fact, he was [cut](#) from a local all-star team as a kid and could only watch as his friends got to play. That summer, with help from his dad, he went out and worked vigorously on his game to ensure he wouldn't be left out again.

Slowly but surely he improved and soon thereafter he joined the North Delta Blue Jays in the B.C. Premier Baseball League, arguably the top youth league in the country. From there he was selected to play with Canada's junior national team and eventually earned a scholarship to the University of Kentucky.

At Kentucky he made even more progress, adding nearly 10 MPH to his fastball and establishing himself as a bona-fide pro prospect.

In 2009 he was drafted in the first round by the Blue Jays but could not come to terms with Toronto and decided he would go back to school. However, when it was [alleged](#) that his contact with agent Scott Boras may have been a violation of NCAA regulations, he was ruled ineligible to return to Kentucky for what would have been his senior year.

Unable to continue his college career, Paxton played briefly in an independent league before the 2010 draft, where he was picked in the fourth round by Seattle and signed with the team before the 2011 season.

"I'm not going to lie – it was a very tough time for him," James' dad, Ted, [told](#) the Vancouver Sun. "But it almost made him more determined. It has been quite a circuitous journey. There have been stressful moments. He has just stayed focused with what he wanted to get done. He kept focused on that dream."

It's a dream that began to take shape when Paxton's main objective was simply to be good enough to play competitive ball with his friends.

"My favourite memories are from when I was playing with my buddies back when I was 12-13 years old," said Paxton. "We had this one summer-ball team where it seemed like every weekend we were on the road travelling to tournaments and that was a ton of fun. We had a really good team, so we were winning all the time, too, which of course makes it even more fun."

The stakes of each game and the size of the stadiums have changed a bit since those days, but Mariners manager Lloyd McClendon envisions plenty more winning in Paxton's future.

"I think this kid has greatness written all over him," McClendon [told](#) the Seattle Times after Paxton returned from injury in August. "He just needs to stay healthy."

Fellow Canadian and Mariners teammate Michael Saunders sees the same ceiling for the 25-year-old left-hander as his manager.

"I think he's got a chance to be the real deal. He's got a great arm and he pounds the zone," said Saunders. "He's polished beyond his years and I think he's only going to get better."

Despite the praise, Paxton stays grounded. He has high expectations for himself and he knows the only way to reach

his goals is to stick to a simple game plan and not look too far ahead.

"It's great to hear that. It's awesome that they think so highly for me and it's a great compliment," said Paxton. "I'm just trying to attack hitters, get ahead of them, throw strikes, and help my team win."

So far, that's exactly what he's done.

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