

Mariners' James Paxton growing on the mound with a tip from Felix Hernandez

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By Israel Fehr

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SEATTLE – With an improved arsenal and an increase in confidence, James Paxton entered the 2015 season as a more complete pitcher, thanks in part to a conversation he had with Seattle Mariners teammate Felix Hernandez over a year and a half ago.

Tabbed as the No. 2 starter in Seattle's rotation between Hernandez and Hisashi Iwakuma, Paxton was expected to break out after [showing flashes of brilliance](#) in his 17 big-league starts before opening day. The new season started off well with a strong first start, but Paxton was roughed up in his next three outings, giving up 16 runs, 13 of them earned in 13 2/3 innings. It certainly wasn't how Paxton envisioned kicking off the year, but he's finally settling in and pitching like the Mariners expected he would at the start of the season. The 26-year-old lefthander from Ladner, B.C., has bounced back in a big way with three consecutive quality starts and has lowered his 2015 ERA to 4.31.

"I struggled a little bit early, but the last few starts I feel like I've gone out there and competed and felt really good," said Paxton.

Paxton admitted that he was pressing early on and because of that his mechanics were slightly off kilter. He was [drifting toward third base](#) instead of powering toward home plate.

"I think it was trying to locate too much and trying too hard," said Paxton. "I just have to trust myself and my body and have the same mental process on every pitch."

It's the same process that he has had to go through to get more comfortable using his changeup, which has made him significantly more effective against right-handed hitters. [According to Brooks Baseball](#), Paxton has thrown a changeup close to 13% of the time this season, up from 8.65% in 2014, and is getting an above average swing-and-miss rate of over 15%.

"I worked on it a lot at spring training. It's a confidence thing. I feel like the changeup is a pitch that you have to throw a lot to get the feel for it," said Paxton. "It'll be a good pitch for me to get guys that are sitting fastball to ground out or pop up."

Paxton has always had the changeup in his pitching repertoire, but it wasn't quite at the same level of his mid-90s fastball or his knockout curveball. It wasn't until he received a few words of advice from Hernandez, whose changeup is considered one of the best pitches in all of baseball, that he really focused in on how to use the pitch to the best of his abilities.

"My first year when I came up [in Sept. 2013] I asked him about it. He said I was throwing it too far back in my delivery and that I needed to throw it a little more out front," said Paxton. "That helped me a lot. It took me a while but I kept on working on it and it's starting to come around now."

The results weren't instantaneous, but a tip from the King set Paxton on the right track. Here he is feeling better than ever, and with every reason to believe he's about to go on a run. Watch out American League, James Paxton is coming. And with his changeup, he's more dangerous than ever before.

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