

Vancouver a valuable stepping stone for Marcus Stroman and Aaron Sanchez on road to Toronto

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By Israel Fehr

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SEATTLE – It wasn't long ago that Blue Jays pitchers [Marcus Stroman](#) and [Aaron Sanchez](#) were just getting started, learning what it takes to survive and thrive in professional baseball while playing in the Northwest League for the Vancouver Canadians.

Their time in Vancouver was brief but the 23-year-old Stroman and 22-year-old Sanchez both have fond memories and gained valuable experience from their tenure there that has helped them on their road to Toronto.

"I'd never been to Canada before and I specifically remember just how gorgeous the city was. Being in a downtown atmosphere and still being able to look out and see mountains, that was so cool," said Stroman. "I love that city, man. It holds a special place in my heart and I'm definitely looking to get back there at some point in the future."

Heading into the 2014 season, Stroman and Sanchez were regarded as the two top pitching prospects in the Blue Jays organization. Their names were thrown around in numerous trade rumours, but in the end, they were deemed too talented and too valuable to the future of the franchise to give up for a short-term swing.

Vancouver was Stroman's first stop in the minors after he was drafted in the first round of the 2012 draft after three years at Duke University. It was there where he took a big step towards realizing his big-league dreams.

"I'm always going to remember it because it was my first experience in pro ball. It was a great way to start my professional career and I had a blast out there," said Stroman. "It's a great city and it just showed you the support Canada has for the Blue Jays, even at the lower levels of the minors."

Sanchez came through town the year before, as a raw 19-year-old in 2011. He was called up late in the season as the Canadians were making a late run towards the playoffs. Vancouver squeaked in and didn't look back. When his opportunity to make an impact came up, Sanchez pitched 4 2/3 shutout innings in Game 3 of the division series against Eugene to help send the Canadians to the Northwest League championship series, which they won.

"The year I played there was the very first year that Toronto was affiliated with another Canadian team and it was just a blast being there," said Sanchez. "We get [to the playoffs] and we play Eugene and they beat us in the first game. Then we went to Eugene and we win two [on the road, which is pretty tough to do in baseball in general. It kick-started everything for the back-to-back-to-back championships that they've won up there. The partnership that we have with those guys has been unbelievable."

The Blue Jays' front office have made it a priority to have their top prospects go through Vancouver. It allows young players, many who have never been to Canada, to familiarize themselves with a foreign country without the pressure of playing and living in Toronto. It's also a thrill for the players to take the field at Nat Bailey Stadium, which is rapidly gaining a reputation for having one of the best ballpark environments in the minor leagues.

"They pack just over five thousand people in there and it feels like there's twenty thousand people in there. It's super loud and the atmosphere is awesome," said Stroman.

With the Blue Jays chasing their first playoff appearance since 1993, Stroman and Sanchez are sure to be pitching in front of their fair share of passionate crowds again as each passing game and series gains importance. Stroman is being counted on to continue what he's been doing since he joined the starting staff at the end of May. In 13 starts, he's posted a 2.59 ERA and earned 10 quality starts. For a staff without a frontline ace, the 5-foot-9 right-hander has provided a much-needed boost during his 2 1/2 months in Toronto.

"Stroman's been that guy for us in a lot of ways," said Jays manager John Gibbons. "He's had a couple tough ones but other than that he's been dominant."

Sanchez is going to have to wait until at least next season before he can join his good friend in the rotation. Right now he's taking on a role he's slightly unfamiliar with as a shutdown reliever who can pitch multiple innings. He's made seven appearances and has only given up three earned runs in 12 1/3 innings.

"It's my first time coming out of the bullpen. I know we did it in Lansing but it was every five days and you're on a starter's routine," said Sanchez. "It was a little different at the beginning but it's still baseball. It's about going out there and trusting your stuff and keeping your team in the game."

The next month and a half of baseball promises to present a new set of challenges for two rookies that have shown every sign that they have bright futures ahead of them with the Blue Jays.

"We're in a playoff push and it's the closest this team has been in a while. You definitely feel the buzz in the city," said Stroman. "We've got a great team and I'm looking forward to doing everything I can to put this team in a position to win."

Even as they get accustomed to the big-league lights and deal with the demands of a playoff race, it's clear they both remember what brought them to where they are, and they're not soon to forget it.
