

Birthplace of a Brewer: Jacob Barnes

By Greg Mroz

Being in the Pioneer League, the Helena Brewers are the first step to the majors for many future Milwaukee stars. Whether for a few games or an entire season, Kindrick Legion Field is the first place the stars of tomorrow see in professional baseball. One Brewer who cut his teeth for an entire season in Helena is reliever Jacob Barnes.

Barnes was a 14th-round selection by the Brewers in the 2011 draft out of Florida Gulf Coast University, where he was teammates with future All Star Chris Sale. Upon signing with Milwaukee, the Florida native was sent to Helena.

“It was definitely a new and different experience,” Barnes said. “With the elevation in Helena it took a little getting used to, but I really enjoyed the couple of months that I was there.”

It was in Helena where Barnes first started to shine. In 18 appearances, Barnes posted a 2-1 record with a 2.12 ERA over 29.2 innings. He allowed only seven runs the entire season and struck out 43 while walking only six.

“My season in Helena was huge for my development,” Barnes said. “It was the place where I really felt that I could pitch in pro ball. That season was when I finally realized that I have a good chance at this. “

Barnes’ manager that season, Joe Ayrault, quickly saw how good he could be.

“When he came in you could tell he was a specimen,” Ayrault said. “He was a great kid and a great teammate. Barnes had great stuff back then but you could tell that there was more in the tank.”

Yet for Barnes, it was Ayrault who got him comfortable with professional life.

“Joe showed me how to be a professional and treated me like a man,” Barnes said. “How he taught everyone how to do things was beneficial to me.”

In 2012, Barnes debuted in Class A Wisconsin, and toward the end of the season the Brewers organization tried to make him a starter. To progress that effort, he began the 2013 season in Advanced A Brevard County as a part of a tandem, where he would alternate appearances between starting and relieving. More importantly, he was reunited with Ayrault, who quickly saw the progress Barnes had made in his development since his season in Helena.

“He was still a big presence on the mound, but I would say his confidence was the biggest difference from his first season in Helena,” Ayrault added. “He really bought into the program.”

“At the time you don’t really understand a lot of what they want you to do,” Barnes said. “In the low minors they’re trying to get you developed into the best player that you can be. When I got to Helena, I didn’t really throw any off-speed, so them making me do it and not worrying about the outs really helped my overall development.”

Developing his breaking stuff was one of the bigger challenges for Barnes, who entering college only knew how to throw a fastball. Pete Woodworth, who is currently a pitching coach in the Seattle Mariners minor league system, was one of Barnes’ teammates in college. He spotted the effort from Barnes to develop a true secondary pitch from day one.

“I remember him trying to develop a slider, and it was the first time he had ever tried to throw a breaking pitch,” Woodworth stated. “Every day his focus was to get that pitch better.”

With a more refined off-speed arsenal, Barnes’ results in 2013 were a big improvement from his 2012 campaign in Wisconsin. He notched a career high 105 innings that season while posting a 3.08 ERA. With success in the tandem, the Brewers made Barnes a full-time starter in 2014 at Double A Huntsville, but the results weren’t as fruitful. He went back to the bullpen full time in 2015, making a career-high 39 appearances while logging a 3.36 ERA over 75 innings. He earned a promotion to Triple A Colorado Springs in 2016 and -- after allowing just three runs over 22 innings -- got the call to Milwaukee, making his major league debut on June 3, 2016. Talent is one reason Barnes got to the top, but work ethic played a major factor.

“He has that work ethic that you always hear about,” Woodworth said. “He was gifted with a big arm and the body of a Greek god, but he was in the gym more than anybody. Nobody could keep up with his long toss regime. He threw every single day.”

Years in hindsight, Barnes looks back fondly on his time in Helena, not only for what it did for him professionally but for the experience as a whole.

“My time in Helena was big for me personally,” Barnes said. “It was one of the biggest years of my life.”