

THE ROAD BACK HOME

Tyler Pike returns to Central Florida area in first season with Braves

KISSIMMEE, Fla. – Tyler Pike grew up in Central Florida and made his return to the area for the 2017 season, but the 23-year-old has had his share of trials to conquer over the course of his five-year career.

At the age of 18, the left-handed pitcher from Winter Haven High School took his first step to becoming a Major League player when he was drafted on the day of his high school graduation by the Seattle Mariners.

“It was a pretty crazy day,” Pike said of his draft day experience. “At first, I didn’t think it was going to happen. I almost made up my mind and was going to go to Florida State and start my college career. Then the Mariners called and gave me over what I wanted. It was a pretty memorable day for me.”

The lefty’s career took off through his first two professional campaigns, as Pike posted a 9-5 record and a 2.18 ERA in 33 starts between the Rookie-level Arizona League Mariners and the Clinton LumberKings.

His third season in 2014 saw the then-20-year-old get off to a hot start in April, but things started to cool down a bit for the southpaw heading into a matchup with the Rancho Cucamonga Quakes on May 28 of that season.

“I had been struggling a little before that start,” Pike explained about his performance before that Wednesday night contest. There was something a bit different about the young pitcher’s feel before the game, however, as the Winter Haven High School product took part in a historical outing for the High Desert club, as three pitchers, including Pike, combined to toss a no-hitter against the Quakes.

Like most pitchers will say, Pike did not notice the historical feat was taking place while the game was happening until deep into the contest. “I didn’t really know until about the fifth and just made my pitches.”

High Desert would plate five runs in the eighth for the only tallies of the game, ensuring the Mavericks would have a chance at history going into the ninth. “[Blake] Hauser closed out the game and it was pretty awesome,” the left-hander said. “High Desert is a launching pad, so even just having that is just unbelievable.”

The 2012 Compensation B pick found himself in Double-A with the Jackson Generals less than a month after the combined no-hitter, and finished out the season in Tennessee with a 3-4 record.

Pike made three starts with the Generals at the beginning of 2015 before being transferred back to the High-A level, this time to the Bakersfield Blaze, where he would finish out the campaign and pitch all of the following year.

During the 2016 offseason, Pike was going about his typical routine before receiving a phone call that would change the course of his young career.

“I was on my way home from the gym, and a guy from the Mariners called me and told me he was going to turn my world around,” Pike recalled. “I wasn’t sure what he was going to say, and he just said I had been traded to the Braves and wished me the best of luck.”

That day was December 9, 2016, when Pike would be the final part of a trade between the Atlanta Braves and Seattle Mariners that occurred on November 18. The exchange featured the swap of prospects for both clubs, with Atlanta turning over right-handed pitchers Rob Whalen and Max Povse, and Seattle dealing Alex Jackson and Pike.

“I was kind of shocked. I wasn’t expecting it,” Pike described of his initial reaction to the news. “I knew right off the bat I was going to be close to home. I was going to be home when my wife had the baby. Coming back to the east coast, it was nice to be close to home.”

Now, at age 23, Pike will be in his fourth year at the High-A level. Despite having 337 innings under his belt at the Advanced-A stage, the young veteran understands the process of working his way through the farm system. “There’s a plan with everything and I’m trusting the Braves have a plan for me, just like I know I have to iron some things out. I just do what I can on the field and hopefully I get a chance to move up.”

Pike got off to a nice start in his first outing as a member of the Atlanta Braves organization. The starter lasted just four innings, but was relieved due to pitch count more than ineffectiveness. The Winter Haven native scattered three hits and allowed two runs – one earned – with one walk and four punchouts.

The 6’0” hurler relished the opportunity to perform in front of his friends and family on April 7.

“My parents, my wife’s parents, my grandparents came through,” Pike mentioned of those in attendance for his first start. “It was nice. My dad hasn’t seen me throw in about three years and neither has my mom. It was the first time my wife’s parents got to see me throw, so it was good to have them there.”

The local pitcher has come out to another strong start in the 2017 season, posting an ERA of just 2.63 in the opening month to go along with 29 strikeouts in 27.1 innings of work. His first month, however, had a bit of a different atmosphere.

“It’s a totally different ballgame,” Pike laughed when comparing Florida to California. “The fields even seem bigger here. Mostly, we’re playing on Spring Training fields and big-league fields are bigger. The ball doesn’t go as far. It’s definitely pitcher friendly, so I try to make the most of that.”

Pike has also noticed a considerable difference in the way his pitches move on the east coast compared to the golden coast.

“I’d throw bullpens at home before Spring Training and the ball’s moving. I go out there and the ball doesn’t move anywhere. It’s a lot better, for sure.”

If Pike continues throwing out numbers the rest of the first half as he has through April, he could find himself back in Double-A. This time, he would sport the colors of the Mississippi Braves in the Southern League.