

Pirates' top two picks enjoy time at State

By Jake Kaplan
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

Just days removed from signing their first professional contracts, the top two Pittsburgh Pirates' selections in the 2010 draft have already been deemed the top prospects in the entire organization by Baseball America.

And they are getting their first exposure to professional baseball in none other than State College.

Jameson Taillon, the No. 2 overall pick in this June's Major League Baseball Amateur Draft, and Stetson Allie, the Pirates' second-round selection (52nd overall), arrived at Medlar Field at Lubrano Park last week to work out with the Spikes for the remainder of the season.

Though Taillon and Allie will not pitch in actual games for State College, they will work out with the pitching staff as an orientation to professional baseball.

The highly touted pitching duo inked their first professional contracts shortly before the Aug. 16 deadline.

Pirates President Frank Coonely said the team decided to send the two right-handed pitchers to State College, the club's short-season Class A affiliate, in part because the major league

club's pitching coordinator, Jim Benedict, was in town.

"It was a great opportunity to bring these two players down, get them acclimated to a professional setting and work with Jim Benedict for the four days that he's here," Coonely said during Friday night's Spikes' game.

Taillon, a recent graduate of The Woodlands High School outside of Houston, Texas, said Neal Huntington, the Pirates G.M., informed him of the club's plan to send him and Allie to State College right after he signed. It was an idea Taillon, a 6-foot-6 right-hander, said he was in favor of.

"We're doing everything [the rest of the Spikes pitchers] are doing for right now," Taillon said. "We're doing everything a little lighter, taking kind of a step back, just to get our feet wet is the way they put it."

He did admit, however, that he would rather be pitching in games, something he hasn't done since his high school playoffs in May, when he concluded a superb senior season. Taillon posted a 8-1 record and a 1.78 ERA, striking out 114 batters in 62 innings.

Allie, who was ranked the eighth-best prospect in the country entering the draft by Baseball

America, also had an excellent senior campaign. He went 9-1 with a 1.29 ERA and helped St. Edward High School win the Ohio Division I state title.

Taillon thinks the stay in State College, though only a couple of weeks, will benefit him and Allie. He said the Pirates, many of whom are only one or two years older than Taillon and Allie, have already taken them under their wing.

Allie, a 19-year-old, echoed similar sentiments.

"It's pretty easy playing with kids my age. They're just as immature or mature as me," Allie joked. "It's pretty great."

Spikes G.M. James Dambach said he is flattered the Pirates sent the young hurlers to State College, and he thinks the experience will be beneficial.

"It's a nice, healthy environment, lots of fans in the stands," Dambach said. "You're going to have some road trips that are going to get you in at 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning. So I think all of that is positive."

The two have not been told where they will start next season, though Taillon said he would be "all for" starting his career in State College next June.

The two will take part in fall



Mark Olson/Courtesy Art

Stetson Allie (left) and Jameson Taillon (right) sit in the dugout as members of the State College Spikes. The duo was drafted by the Pittsburgh Pirates in the 2010 draft and recently signed contracts.

instructional league, and Taillon said his goal is to rise through the minor leagues and make it to the majors by the time he is 21.

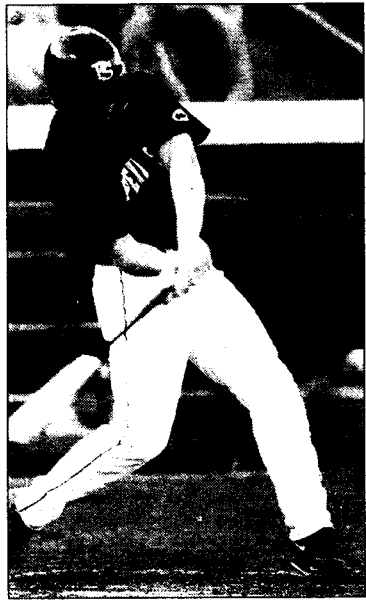
"It's all up to them and how they

move me," Taillon said, "but I know my performance will help that, too."

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Former Lion slugger finding success in minor leagues

By Ryan Loy
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER



Asit Mishra/Colegian

Ben Heath bats during Penn State's game against Kent State last season. Heath now calls the Lexington Legends, a Houston Astros affiliate, home.

Ben Heath may look back and remember 2010 as the year he crossed off several goals for his baseball career.

The Huntersville, N.C., native started the year preparing for his junior season as catcher for Penn State after seeing limited time in his first two years with the Nittany Lions.

Now, after a breakout spring with the Lions, he is playing nearly every day as a member of the Lexington Legends, a Class A affiliate of the Houston Astros.

Heath said he is happy to be in the position he's in, considering it's tough to predict how a baseball career will unfold.

"It's kind of hard to imagine what's going to happen in a whole year, but for me, [getting to this point] was definitely a goal," Heath said.

"I wanted to get the opportunity, but you can never imagine all of

this was going to happen."

On June 8, the Astros selected Heath in the fifth round of the MLB First-Year Player Draft with the 153rd overall pick.

That was thanks in large part to his junior season, one of the best statistical years in Penn State's history. He hit for a .369 batting average and belted a single-season, school-record 19 home runs.

The former Lion began his professional career with the Tri-City ValleyCats before being promoted to the Single-A Lexington Legends.

The call-up came at an interesting time for Heath, who was set to begin a series against the State College Spikes at Medlar Field at Lubrano Park, his home collegiate stadium.

"To play there again would have been fun, but it was just one of those things that wasn't meant to be," Heath said.

"I was excited to get the call-up, but it was bittersweet because

there were a lot of people I know that would have been there."

The former Lion said there's always nervousness when a player advances to another level because it's tough to tell how a player will stack up with the talent at a higher level.

So far, Heath is matching up well with his competition. In 11 games with Lexington, he is batting .300 — a .52-point increase from his average with Tri-City.

In only his fifth game with Lexington, Heath hit three home runs and drove in seven runs. That display of power played a large part in the former Lion being named South Atlantic League Player of the Week on Aug. 16.

"We have had some tremendous individual performances this year," Lexington General Manager Andy Shea said in a press release.

"Heath's three-home run game was incredible."

Heath said he enjoyed that

night, but he knows he cannot dwell on the success of the past.

"Those games don't come along very often, and I might never do it again," Heath said. "It was a fun night, but you have to get up and play the next day and put it behind you."

Off the field, Heath said he's enjoying the experiences that come with playing in the minor leagues.

The catcher said it's an unbelievable experience traveling with the team and running into guys from high school and college who he hasn't seen for a long time.

Though the road to the major leagues is a tough one, Heath is ready to take on the challenges and continue to improve.

"This is just the beginning for me," Heath said. "I haven't even played a full season. I'll be going to instructional league in the fall, and hopefully I'll have a good first full season next year."

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