

MILB

Yankees pitching prospect Brian Keller proving doubters wrong



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The Yankees farm system is stacked with pitching prospects like Justus Sheffield, Chance Adams, Dillon Tate, and Jonathan Loaisiga. With those guys throwing gas and thriving in the upper minors (and Loaisiga the other night with the major-league club), it's easy to not think about what Brian Keller, someone who you probably won't see on prospect lists, is doing in the farm system.

The 23-year-old right-hander barely had his moment in the 2016 amateur draft, getting selected by the Yankees with the team's 39th round pick out of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. Under the radar, since he was young, Keller has been exceeding expectations.

(Video - <https://youtu.be/cQE8XKlgIxQ>)

At first, Keller didn't think that he'd get the pleasure of hearing his name announced during the 2016 amateur draft, but if he did he'd make the most out of the opportunity.

"I wasn't showing high-velocity numbers or complete dominance, and especially being at a mid-major school, I never expected to be drafted at all," Keller said. "However, I was trying my hardest just to sneak my way into the draft, and all I really wanted was an opportunity.

"I got that, and I'm just trying to make the most of it."

Keller pitched in three levels after getting drafted in 2016 in the Yankees organization. In 41 innings mostly out of the bullpen, he compiled a 1.54 ERA, while striking out 51 batters and walking just seven batters. He moved up to Low-A Charleston and eventually High-A Tampa in 2017 and was phenomenal in 24 starts, compiling an 11-8 record and a 3.44 ERA in 144 innings pitched, along with a 157/28 K/BB ratio.

His 157 strikeouts in 2017 led the farm system.

Those numbers got him a promotion to Double-A Trenton... and a trip to big league camp this spring.

He got to pitch in two games this spring for the Yankees, including one outing where he threw two scoreless frames, as he struck out two batters and allowed just one hit. Even though his overall numbers during the spring weren't spectacular, as he struggled in his other big league spring outing, it was all about the experience for Keller.

“It was a great experience for me and a lot of fun competing against those guys and being around those major leaguers, especially the Yankees guys — so many quality players,” he said. “It was great learning from them and competing with them.”

Before going on the disabled list with a blister issue, he posted a 5-4 record and a 3.24 ERA in 58 1/3 innings pitched across 10 appearances (nine starts), along with a 46/16 K/BB ratio.

“There’s definitely been improvement from the beginning,” Keller said about his season to this point. “I’ve just been trying to get better every time out.”

Over his first four starts with Double-A Trenton, Keller got off to a rough start, allowing 12 earned runs over 20 innings, good for a 5.40 ERA, along with a 14/9 K/BB ratio. Opposing batters had a slash line of .316/.394/.392 (.786 OPS) against him.

It was apparent to Keller that he had to make an adjustment, as opposing teams in the Eastern League weren’t the same as the opposing teams in the Florida State League.

“The hitters are more advanced, and there’s more of an approach at the plate from most guys,” Keller added. “It’s pretty critical to not waste pitches, and you can’t miss as often.”

Over his last six starts for Trenton, he’s been exceptionally better, only allowing nine earned runs over 38 1/3 innings, good for a 2.11 ERA, along with a 32/7 K/BB ratio. He’d limited hitters to a .178/.221/.296 (.517 OPS) slash line against him.

He has found his feel for Double-A.

Pitchers who throw hard in the lower minor leagues tend to have lots of success in those levels because hitters are still trying to catch up to their fastballs, so they don’t really have to have solid secondary pitches. However, as you rise throughout the minors, you have to have better secondary pitchers, or you won’t be able to get outs.

Luckily for Keller, he’s never thrown hard, as he sits at 91-93 mph, so he’s had to rely on his secondary stuff from the beginning.

“That’s how I was growing up in high school and college,” he mentioned. “I didn’t have as much velocity as other guys had, but that forced me to learn how to actually pitch and use off-speed pitches to my advantage.”

“That was a big advantage for me growing up.”

For the rest of the season, Keller simply wants to improve every time he goes out to the mound to pitch.

“My goal is to try to get a little better each time out,” Keller said. “I’ve done a good job of that. I had a rough April, but then I locked it in and was a little more consistent. I just want to keep that going... trying to be as consistent as possible.”

“The end goal is to get guys out, get deep into games and to win some ball games.”