

Former New Caney pitcher moves along major league road

By **STEPHEN WHITFIELD**

These past two years have been a whirlwind for P.J. Dean.

Two springs ago, Dean was busy pitching New Caney High School's baseball team to levels it had never been before.

A month after graduating from New Caney, he was drafted by the Washington Nationals.

And now, with two years into his professional career, Dean has emerged as a rising star, one people will be watching for a long time.

Most New Caney fans remember Dean as the ace of the pitching staff, the guy who took the Eagles to the area playoffs in 2007.

For his efforts, Dean was named District 21-4A Most Valuable Player after the season. In June, the Nationals took him in the seventh round of Major League Baseball's amateur draft.

Dean said he what he learned at New Caney helped him get into the world of professional baseball.

"I think I had to become a leader," Dean said. "At New Caney, I had to get the bulldog mentality and take my hard work and talent and put it all together. That's why I am where I am today."

After the draft, Dean was sent to the Gulf Coast Nationals, Washington's rookie-league club. There he went 3-1 with a 4.06 ERA, striking out 26 batters in 31 innings pitched.



The jump from high school to the professional level was daunting. Dean said he was most surprised by the size and skill levels of the batters he had to face in the rookie league.

"Probably the difference is walking up the mound and seeing a 6-5, 230-pound Dominican up to bat," Dean said. "The hitters are bigger and stronger. You've got to be able to throw three pitches for strikes."

However, Dean said starting out in a rookie league helped make the transition easier.

"I wouldn't say I was nervous," Dean said. "I had more adrenaline pumped up instead of being nervous. Playing against other people my age made it easier."

Dean's second season saw him moving north to Vermont. Playing for the Lake Monsters of the New York-Penn League, Dean went 4-1 with a 1.97 ERA in 10 appearances.

Dean had never been to the northeast before. In fact, he said he was surprised by the pleasant summer weather and the rowdy minor-league fans. But during his summer there, Dean refined his pitching.

Lake Monsters pitching coach Rusty Meacham said Dean was one of the best pitchers in the rotation this year.

“He’s commanding all his pitches now. I got him to work faster on the mound and it has really made a big difference,” Meacham said. “From a coach’s standpoint, he is very approachable and that’s all you can ask of him.”

For now, Dean is in New Caney, helping his family recover from the effects of Hurricane Ike. He will try to relax for a month or two before beginning his off-season training.

Dean said he will try to get bigger and stronger in the offseason that he can relieve the stress on his shoulder while pitching,

“I want to get bigger and stronger,” Dean said. “If I don’t my shoulder will feel worse.”

As with any minor-league player, Dean wants to eventually make it to the majors.

Meacham said he thinks Dean will be a major-league player sometime in the near future.

“I look for him in the big leagues in three to four years,” Meacham said. “He’s getting better everyday and listens to everything. When he gets across those white lines he is locked in. He feels that when he is out there on the mound, nobody can beat him and that’s the way you have to be.”