

Freshman tosses two-hitter in first college start

by Matt Couture / Beacon Staff • March 22, 2017

Emerson pitcher Sam Knox hopes to be calling out the names and numbers of Red Sox players some day over the public address system. But for now, head coach Nick Vennoch is calling Knox's number on the ballfield, and getting results.

The right-hander led the Lions to two of their seven victories in Florida, picking up wins against Cazenovia and Wentworth.

Knox made his collegiate debut with a scoreless eighth inning in the Lions' opener against Iowa Wesleyan, setting him up for his first start against Cazenovia two days later. He pitched a seven inning complete-game, two-hit shutout in the front end of that day's doubleheader.

Knox said he wasn't his sharpest at all points in the Cazenovia game, walking five and hitting a batter, but he was able to bear down in the seventh inning to finish off the gem.

"Those last three outs—those three almost seemed so close yet so far away, because you still have to focus in and make the right pitches," Knox, a freshman journalism major, said.

"Danny Johnson, he was at first base, and he said, 'Just like the first inning,' and I treated it like that. Just went out there and knew that I could get these guys out."

Knox, reacting as Cazenovia shortstop Bobby Antonacci lofted a fly ball to conclude the shutout, threw both arms in the air, and then brought his pitching arm down in a fist pump as if it were a grandfather clock's pendulum.

Knox said wearing his emotions on his sleeve is the most important part of his game—he's become known as 'The Freak' among teammates after he used the description in fall ball. Captain Pablo Feldman said Knox doesn't behave like a typical starter when the Lions are at the plate, instead screaming encouragement from the bench and vacating the dugout to offer teammates a high-five.

"Most pitchers, when they're in the dugout between innings, they're sitting by themselves in the corner," Feldman said. "Not him—before the game, he was in the huddle yelling, pumping everybody up."

Feldman caught for Knox, who didn't shake off a sign once en route to the shutout. Knox's arsenal includes a fastball, curveball, slider, and changeup, but he primarily relies on the fastball and curve. Feldman said Knox's ability to control his off-speed offerings in addition to the fastball helped him get results in Florida.

"He's difficult to hit because every one of his pitches he can control," Feldman said. "As a hitter, I really don't know what's coming. They're all such different speeds, and he really can spot up every single pitch."

Knox's control was again on display in his relief appearance against Wentworth on March 11. He picked up the win after tossing 3 1-3 hitless innings, with 28 of his 38 pitches going for

strikes. Knox said he threw six straight balls after being called on in relief of Cal Laird, meaning he only missed the zone four times for the remainder of the outing.

Vennochi said Knox and the rest of the Lions pitching staff have been able to rely on defense this season, allowing them to pound the zone with strikes more consistently. Emerson committed only eight errors as a team over nine spring break games, down from 23 over eight games last year.

Knox's curveball doesn't have 12-6 breaking action, which Vennochi said makes it difficult for hitters to pick up before its late bite. Knox learned the hook from his uncle just as he was advancing to the big league sized baseball field between sixth and seventh grade.

"Its got good bend to it, especially late break; [I] get a lot of ground balls with it," Knox said. "I'm not going to blow guys away, I'm a small guy, so using that off-speed pitch to get guys off balance, especially late in the count, 1-2, 0-2, even 2-2, if that ball comes in looking like it's going to be a strike and then it just bounces or something, that's huge."

Knox's early showing as a starter and reliever bolsters an already deep pitching staff anchored by veterans Henry Schwartz and Laird. Feldman said Knox's ability to shut down Wentworth out of the bullpen was almost more impressive than the shutout, because he dealt with a steady barrage of jeers from the Leopards' dugout, and responded with poise.

Vennochi said he values Knox's appetite for the game.

"I think that kid would throw a rock if you gave it to him," Vennochi said. "That's kind of the guy we want, who's just going to want the ball whenever—start, finish, middle."