

A PITCHING PIPELINE TO THE MAJORS

by Eddie Hughes



Matt Garza pitching against the Oakland Athletics.

Cary Edmondson



MATT GARZA, SP TEXAS RANGERS

9-6, 4.06 ERA, 128 SO, 39 BB

2003-05: Fresno State

Honors: Western Athletic Conference Pitcher of the Year (2005)

2005: Drafted by Minnesota Twins (Round 1, Pick 25)

2006: MLB debut with Twins

2008: Traded to Tampa Bay Rays

2008: Earned ALCS MVP, started Game 3 of World Series

2010: Pitched first no-hitter in Rays history

2011: Traded to Chicago Cubs

2013: Traded to Texas Rangers



TANNER SCHEPPERS, RP TEXAS RANGERS

6-2, 2.05 ERA, 49 SO, 22 BB, 1 SV

2006-08: Fresno State

Honors: WAC Pitcher of the Year (2008), first-team all-WAC (2007-08)

2009: Drafted by Rangers (Round 1, Pick 44)

2012: MLB debut with Rangers



DOUG FISTER, SP DETROIT TIGERS

12-9, 3.67 ERA, 141 SO, 42 BB

2005-06: Fresno State

Honors: ESPN the Magazine Academic All-District Team, first-team all-WAC

2006: Drafted by Seattle Mariners (Round 7, Pick 201)

2009: MLB debut with Mariners

2011: Traded to Detroit Tigers

2012: Started Game 2 of World Series



Five summers ago, the “underdogs to wonderdogs” mantra was all the craze as Fresno State charismatically played its way to a baseball national championship.

But calling a Bulldogs baseball team an underdog doesn't really fit a program with as much tradition as Fresno State has sending players to baseball's top echelon.

Justin Wilson took the mound for the Bulldogs in the final game of the 2008 College World Series, pitching a gem on short rest and showcasing his professional potential. In 2013, his first full season as a Pittsburgh Pirates reliever with a 100 mph fastball, Wilson was one of four former Fresno State pitchers in Major League Baseball, joining Tanner Scheppers (2008), Doug Fister (2006) and Matt Garza (2005).

Fresno State tied for third among universities with the most alums pitching in the big leagues.

“It speaks a lot for [Fresno State] Coach Mike Batesole,” Wilson says. “Regardless of win or lose, he teaches you the game and prepares you for the next level. And if the next level is not in your future, he'll make you the best college player you can be.”

That's a common theme when talking to all the former Bulldogs.

Scheppers, a relief pitcher for the Texas Rangers, was the ace of that 2008 Fresno State team until he was injured just before the end of the regular season and missed the entire postseason. But he battled back from the injury and was chosen in the first round of the 2009 Major League draft. Scheppers said that competitiveness is common among former Fresno State players.

“Batesole does a really good job of breeding winners,” Scheppers says. “I saw that competitive drive from a lot of players coming out of Fresno State. They're just Bulldogs, coming out wanting to compete, wanting to win.”

Garza, a first-round draft pick of the Minnesota Twins in 2005, has proven his ability at the highest level. He earned MVP honors in the 2008 American League Championship Series when he was with the Tampa Bay Rays. Garza started Game 3 of the 2008 World Series, allowing four runs and six hits in a no-decision. He was traded halfway through the 2013 season by the Chicago Cubs to bolster the Texas Rangers starting rotation.

Fister started Game 2 of the 2012 World Series for the Detroit Tigers, allowing just one run and four hits in six innings in the eventual 2-0 loss. Fister says taking the mound that day was a whirlwind of emotions.

“It was a very special moment, realizing what was going on and what it meant,” Fister says. “There were a few moments when I had to take a minute to look around and soak in the unbelievable feeling of being on a stage doing something that I love.”

Fister's career path is a unique one in a baseball landscape where standout college players often turn pro after their junior years, as Wilson, Scheppers and Garza did. Fister had the same opportunity. He was drafted by the New York Yankees in the sixth round in 2005 but chose to return to Fresno State to complete his liberal studies degree and play his senior season.

“It is something I am very proud of, standing my ground and continuing on the path of education, growing closer to where I needed to be,” says Fister, who was an ESPN the Magazine Academic All-District selection his senior year. “I try to help by giving back to the kids, by telling them my story and giving them insight into what my journey has taught me and how it may pertain to their lives.

“I love seeing the local kids get the chances they deserve, whether it's in sports, education, theater or any aspect or talent that a child can show.”

Fister, the son of former Bulldog football player Larry Fister (1976-77), makes his offseason home in Merced, where he grew up. He was back in Fresno in February to be inducted into Fresno State's Dugout Club Wall of Fame.

“Being a Bulldog is much more than a name,” Fister says. “It's being part of a great tradition and it's such a great honor to be a 'Dog. Being an inductee to the Wall of Fame was such a humbling experience, and it's something I attribute to the many great teammates and coaches I had. None of the achievements I have had the opportunity to be a part of would have happened without those great men.”

Producing Major Leaguers is nothing new at Fresno State, which tallies 36 collegiate All-Americans and 13 first-round MLB draft picks, including outfielder Aaron Judge, a 2013 New York Yankees draftee.

Garza credits another one of those first-rounders, 1991 NCAA Player of the Year Bobby Jones, with giving him a memorable piece of advice. Jones, who made the 1997 All-Star Game with the New York Mets, was later an interim assistant coach for the Bulldogs when Garza was a sophomore struggling to control his fastball.

“He told me to quit messing around and just throw the darned thing over the plate,” Garza says. “I threw a shutout my next start.”

The impressive lineage of pitchers at Fresno State also includes San Francisco Giants bullpen coach and former standout player Mark Gardner (1985), first-round pick and World Series winner Jeff Weaver (1998), and first-rounders Ben Fritz (2002), Steve Soderstrom (1993), John Hoover (1984) and Dick Ruthven (1972).

“When you come from a school with a lot of pro athletes, it feels good to say, ‘Yeah, I went to Fresno State and I represent it,’” Scheppers says. “It speaks for the talent in the program.”

Wilson, a communications/criminology major who grew up going to Fresno State games with his dad and still lives in his native Clovis in the offseason, says the confidence he gained from his team's 2008 College World Series championship gave him momentum starting his pro career.

“That dog pile on the field, I don't think you can top that really,” Wilson says, remembering the postgame celebration. “It was an unreal experience; absolutely outrageous support we got from the city of Fresno and all around. I can speak for every one of those players on that team: they'll remember it forever.”



JUSTIN WILSON, RP
PITTSBURGH PIRATES
6-1, 2.15 ERA, 55 SO, 26 BB

2006-08: Fresno State

Honors: Started and won Game 3 of the 2008 College World Series

2008: Drafted by Pirates (Round 5, Pick 144)

2012: MLB debut with Pirates

