

PEORIA'S PIPELINE

BY JOHN BALDRIDGE

FOR ANYONE THAT PLAYED BASEBALL, REACHING THE MAJOR LEAGUES IS TRULY A DREAM COME TRUE. PLAYERS OF ALL AGES IMAGINE COMPETING AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL ALONGSIDE THE BEST TALENT IN THE WORLD. FOR A LUCKY AND DETERMINED FEW, THIS DREAM BECOMES A REALITY. IN PEORIA, FANS ARE TREATED TO THE EARLY STAGES OF THAT JOURNEY EACH SUMMER. FOR 43 SEASONS, THE PEORIA CHIEFS HAVE HELPED LAUNCH THE CAREERS OF FUTURE BIG-LEAGUE STARS. NAMES LIKE ALBERT PUJOLS AND YADIER MOLINA ONCE DROPPED THE CHIEFS UNIFORM BEFORE RISING TO STARDOM WITH THE ST. LOUIS CARDINALS.

THE CARDINALS, KNOWN FOR DEVELOPING TALENT FROM WITHIN THEIR SYSTEM, HAVE MADE THAT PIPELINE A KEY PART OF THEIR SUCCESS. WITH 11 WORLD SERIES TITLES, THEIR ABILITY TO CULTIVATE TALENT IS SECOND TO NONE, AND RECENT SEASONS ARE NO EXCEPTION.

THIS YEAR, THE CARDINALS' OPENING DAY ROSTER FEATURED 14 FORMER CHIEFS. THE LIST INCLUDES RYAN HELSLEY (2016), LUKEN BAKER (2018), NOLAN GORMAN (2018-19), IVÁN HERRERA (2019), KYLE LEAHY (2019), LARS NOOTBAAR (2019), BRENDAN DONOVAN (2019, 2021), MILES MIKOLAS (2021 REHAB), PEDRO PAGÉS (2021), ALEC BURLESON (2021), JORDAN WALKER (2021), MASYN WINN (2021-22), CHRIS ROYCROFT (2022-23), AND VICTOR SCOTT II (2023).

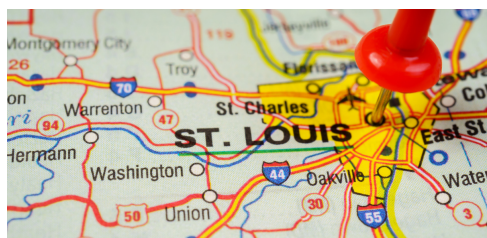
THESE PLAYERS HAVE REACHED THE PINNACLE OF PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL THROUGH HARD WORK AND DEDICATION. AND WHILE THAT GROUP IS IMPRESSIVE, PLENTY OF OTHERS ARE STILL CLIMBING THE RANKS WITH HOPES OF ONE DAY JOINING THEM.

ONE OF THOSE RISING STARS IS QUINN MATHEWS, A PROMISING LEFT-HANDED PITCHER CURRENTLY RANKED THE NO. 2 PROSPECT IN THE CARDINALS ORGANIZATION. DRAFTED IN THE FOURTH ROUND OF THE 2023 MLB DRAFT, MATHEWS WASTED NO TIME MAKING HIS PRESENCE FELT. HE PLAYED FOR FOUR DIFFERENT TEAMS IN HIS FIRST PROFESSIONAL SEASON, FINISHING THE YEAR IN TRIPLE-A MEMPHIS BUT MAKING A KEY STOP IN PEORIA ALONG THE WAY.

IN SEVEN STARTS WITH THE CHIEFS, MATHEWS POSTED A 3-1 RECORD WITH A 2.68 ERA AND STRUCK OUT 58 BATTERS IN 43.2 INNINGS OF WORK.

ADJUSTING TO LIFE IN THE MINORS, ESPECIALLY BOUNCING BETWEEN TEAMS AND CITIES, CAN BE A CHALLENGE, BUT MATHEWS CREDITS HIS TEAMMATES AND COACHES FOR HELPING HIM FIT IN.

"EACH TEAM IS LIKE ROLLING INTO A NEW FAMILY," SAID MATHEWS. "THE TEAMMATES, COACHES, AND STAFF REALLY MAKE THE EXPERIENCE. THEY'VE BEEN FULLY ACCEPTING OF ME AND THE OTHER PLAYERS I CAME UP WITH. THE WINS AND LOSSES WILL COME, BUT THE BIGGEST THING IS STAYING CLOSE TOGETHER AS A GROUP."



MATHEWS ALSO REFLECTED ON HIS TIME IN CENTRAL ILLINOIS.

"PEORIA WAS A GREAT TOWN," HE SAID. "I REALLY ENJOYED MY TIME IN PEORIA HEIGHTS. THE HOUSES UP ALONG THE HILL OVERLOOKING THE LAKE WERE BEAUTIFUL."

AS WITH MANY MINOR LEAGUERS, THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE ISN'T ALWAYS ON THE FIELD, IT'S STAYING HEALTHY THROUGH THE GRIND OF A LONG SEASON.

"KEEPING THE BODY IN CHECK IS SUPER IMPORTANT," MATHEWS SAID. "YOU GO FROM A COLLEGE SEASON THAT ENDS IN JUNE TO PLAYING 130-PLUS GAMES. WORKING WITH THE STRENGTH COACH AND TRAINER IS PROBABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT THING. I'VE ALSO FOCUSED ON LEARNING AND GROWING FROM EVERY OUTING, FINDING NEW WAYS TO GET GUYS OUT IN DIFFERENT WAYS AND CONTINUE EVOLVING."

"WITH THE RETURN OF BASEBALL, THAT FAMILIAR EXCITEMENT IS BACK, AND THE PEORIA CHIEFS CONTINUE TO PLAY A VITAL ROLE IN SHAPING THE FUTURE OF THE ST. LOUIS CARDINALS. WHETHER IT'S A TOP PROSPECT LIKE QUINN MATHEWS OR AN UNDER-THE-RADAR NAME WHO FINDS THEIR STRIDE, THE CHIEFS REMAIN A CRUCIAL FIRST STEP ON THE ROAD TO THE BIG LEAGUES.