

Jon Keller off to strong start for Huskers

Written by Jim Ecker

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Jon Keller tossed six scoreless innings, struck out the side on 10 pitches and allowed only one hit.

No, those aren't his statistics from a high school game for Xavier last year. Those are his stats from his start for Nebraska against fifth-ranked UCLA on March 4, the day he matched All-American Gerrit Cole pitch for pitch.

Keller threw 107 pitches against the Bruins and left after the sixth inning of a scoreless game. UCLA prevailed, 1-0, in 11 innings, but the rookie from Cedar Rapids proved he can pitch against anyone in the country that day.

"I was pretty nervous before the game," Keller said. "I just did my best to pound the zone and good things happened."

He struck out eight batters and fanned the heart of the UCLA order in the third inning, but the Cornhuskers lost and Keller got a no-decision.

"I was upset after we lost," he said. "I wanted to win so bad. I was numb after the game. Looking back on it, it definitely has boosted my confidence a lot. If I can do that against them, I can do it against anyone."

Cole pitched nine shutout innings against the Cornhuskers on a frigid day in Lincoln, Neb. He allowed only two hits, struck out eight batters (the same as Keller) and walked two.

Cole was a first-round pick of the New York Yankees in 2008, but enrolled in college instead.

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He's now a junior and eligible for the draft again this June.

Keller was an 11th-round pick by Seattle last June, but they couldn't come to terms and he enrolled at Nebraska. He won't be eligible for the draft again until 2013.

"I'm happy to be here," he said. "I'm getting better, and after my junior year rolls around (I'll) get drafted again. I'm working for that and looking forward to that."

He said he feels attending college was the right decision.

"I definitely do," he said. "You grow up a lot more. Within a month here, I've learned so much stuff that I had no idea about in high school. I think that is key for me."

Keller, a 6-foot-5, 230-pound righthander, got off to a torrid start at Nebraska. After his first three outings, he had a perfect 0.00 earned run average with 15 strikeouts in 14 1/3 innings.

Keller's record is now 2-3 with a 2.36 ERA, with 35 strikeouts in 34 1/3 innings. He's allowed only 28 hits and opponents are batting just .228 against him.

He's got an 0-2 record in the Big 12, but has pitched well enough to win. He allowed three runs in five innings in a 3-0 loss at Texas Tech, then was locked in a 0-0 battle after four innings against Oklahoma State before the Cornhuskers committed two errors that led to five unearned runs in a 10-0 defeat Saturday (April 2).

Keller has been the No.2 pitcher in Nebraska's rotation and is scheduled to throw against Kansas this weekend.

Keller had a rough outing against Northern Colorado on Feb. 26 when he walked five batters in

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2 1/3 innings, but he pitched in adverse conditions that day. A diabetic, his blood-sugar level dipped too low and he didn't feel well.

"I was scrambling to get sugar and drink a ton of Gatorade," he said. "That was a learning experience, for sure."

He still injects himself with insulin in the dugout at times, just like he did at Xavier. "Sometimes I will get weird looks," he said.

Keller collected his first victory in college in his very first game on Feb. 19, when he pitched six scoreless innings in an 8-1 victory over the Air Force Academy in San Marcos, Texas.

"Jon was great," Nebraska Coach Mike Anderson said after that game. "The key was being in the strike zone and he threw a lot of strikes.

"That was a really good showing for a freshman for his first time out. That's pretty exciting. It's got the team buzzing a little bit because it was so good."

Keller got his other victory in a 6-0 verdict over North Dakota on March 19, when he pitched seven shutout innings with eight strikeouts.

He's thrown 107, 105 and 101 pitches in games this season and has hit 94 mph on the radar gun. He's throwing a fastball, slider and changeup. "My arm is feeling good," he reported.

Keller said he's learning how to pitch.

"In high school I would just blow guys away with my fastball. Now it's not the same," he said. "You have to hit your spots with off-speed (pitches) so you can set up your fastball. You can't

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just throw any more, you definitely have to pitch."

He said he's also working on his approach to pitching. "I'm just learning to keep my composure, no matter what happens," he said.

Keller is still only 18 years old and won't turn 19 until August. "I should be a senior in high school," he noted.

He's not the only Cedar Rapids product on the Nebraska roster. Chad Christensen, a Cedar Rapids Washington graduate, is starting at shortstop and hitting .322 for the Cornhuskers, who are 18-11 overall and 1-4 in the Big 12. Austin Christensen, Chad's younger brother, is a senior at Kennedy and plans to join Nebraska next season.

Nebraska is leaving the Big 12 and joining the Big Ten Conference after this year, which will mean different trips and different opponents in 2012.

"Obviously it's going to be a lot colder everywhere we go," Keller said. "The competition is still going to be good, but it's not going to be as strong as the Big 12. But we're looking forward to it and going over there and just dominating the Big Ten."