

Christensen, Freese sit and wait

Written by Jim Ecker

Wednesday, 18 April 2012 20:58 - Last Updated Wednesday, 18 April 2012 22:48



Austin Christensen and Dakota Freese had high hopes when they joined their college baseball teams last summer, but it's turned out to be a season of disappointment for both of the talented ballplayers from Cedar Rapids.

Christensen, the Iowa Gatorade Player of the Year at Cedar Rapids Kennedy in 2011, hurt his left elbow this winter and probably will be redshirted at the University of Nebraska, which is competing for the Big Ten title this season.

Freese, who was picked in the 34th round of the 2011 major league draft after playing at Cedar Rapids Washington, is academically ineligible at LSU Eunice, which is the top-ranked junior college team in the country with a 38-3 record.

Their new clubs are successful, but neither player has been able to contribute as a freshman.

"It's pretty frustrating, but injuries are definitely part of the game," said Christensen, plagued by a strained ligament in his left (throwing) elbow. "It's what you have to deal with sometimes. It's been frustrating, but I'm trying to deal with it as well as I can."

Christensen, 6-foot-5, set Kennedy school records as a hitter and a pitcher during his all-state career and helped the Cougars win the Class 4A state title as a junior in 2010. He finished with 42 homers, setting a school record and tying his brother Chad's mark for most career homers in the Metro, and he set another school mark with 28 victories on the mound.

Christensen hit .555 with 19 homers and 52 RBIs last year, leading the state in batting average and homers, and he joined the Cornhuskers as a pitcher and first baseman, looking to help Nebraska in both departments. Instead, he hurt his arm in January and has fought an uphill

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battle ever since.

He thought he might begin playing for the Cornhuskers around April 1, but wasn't ready. "That's when I started throwing flat-ground bullpens (practice sessions for pitchers)," he said. "It felt pretty good, but it's a long process, I guess."



Nebraska is 25-13 overall and 7-5 in the Big Ten, good for third place in the conference standings, but time is running out and Christensen realizes it's probably better to take a redshirt at this point rather than losing a full season of eligibility by appearing in a few games.

"I haven't made a decision yet," he said. "I haven't talked to the coaches about it, but I think it's probably what I'll end up doing."

He said it's "highly likely" he'll take a redshirt year. "I'll still talk to the coaches and see what they have to say about it. I think that's what will happen, but I guess I'm not 100 percent sure."

Christensen had a tender arm at times last season at Kennedy, but said he wants to continue as a pitcher and position player at Nebraska.

"I still want to pitch," he said. "I love pitching, just as much as playing first base or the outfield. If I can, I'd like to do both as long as I can. I know there will be a time I'll have to give one up."

Christensen does not need surgery and is expected to make a full recovery, but the injury has lingered for several months.

"It's definitely a lot better," he said Sunday. "I have a few days where I get a little sore, but

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that's part of the throwing program. I've been throwing quite a bit the last couple of weeks. It's just normal pain and I think I'll work through it and get stronger."

Christensen practices with the Cornhuskers and dresses for home games, but does not make road trips.

Nebraska's team doctor has told him to expect some soreness as he continues to rehab his left elbow. "It's a pretty tough program to get through, and that's what they want," he said.

FREESE ENROLLED at LSU Eunice last summer after he couldn't agree to terms with the Chicago White Sox. He was excited about playing at Eunice this season, but got derailed in the fall semester.

"I didn't do really well my first semester," he said Sunday. "I just needed one more class to be able to play."

Freese is not listed on the LSU Eunice roster on the school's website and is not practicing with the team. He said he has been working out on his own, trying to prepare for the 2012 major league draft in June while he waits to see what happens next.

He said he hates not playing. "It's very, very disappointing," he said. "It's killing me, basically."

The White Sox lost the rights to Freese once the signing period ended last August, so he's fair game for anyone who might want to select him this year or sign him as a free agent.

"The Cubs are talking to me a little bit. The Reds called me in the fall," he said. "The Diamondbacks are talking to me a little bit. There's not too many people down here talking to me because I'm not really playing."

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Freese said he'll listen to pro offers, if any, before deciding what to do next. He anticipates being eligible at LSU Eunice next season. "After this semester all I'll need is one more class during the summer and I'll be able to play in the fall," he said.

Freese, a 6-foot-4 righthander, split his 2011 campaign between the Washington Warriors and a travel team in Chicago. He compiled a 2-2 record with a 3.50 ERA for the Warriors as a senior after going 6-3 with a 2.69 ERA as a junior in 2010 and making all-state as a utility player.

Freese said he plans to return to Cedar Rapids this summer, play for Norway in the Iowa Valley League and take an online class to become academically eligible at LSU Eunice. "I'll take a short class and make it easy on me and play ball," he said.

He said he was clocked at 91 and 92 mph during a recent bullpen session and hopes to reach 92 to 94 mph on a regular basis by the time pre-draft workouts begin this spring. He said he doesn't like sitting around and waiting, but that's all he can do right now.

"It sucks, but sometimes it's worth it, getting bigger and stronger," he said.

Freese said he enjoys living in Louisiana. "I love the weather here, I love the people. It's really great here," he said. "The town is boring, but you find things to do, so it's all right."