

# SUPER 17 GRAD PHILLIPS NAMED NOLAN RYAN PITCHER OF THE YEAR



By Bob Behre

Former Super 17 player Tyler Phillips went 8-0 with a 1.42 ERA in his final 10 starts of the season in the Texas Rangers minor league system last summer. That remarkably run of domination would propel Phillips to an honor presented to the top pitcher among all Rangers' minor league affiliates.

Phillips was named the Nolan Ryan Pitcher of the Year after completing a 12-5 season with a 2.64 ERA in 23 games with the Rangers' Class-A Hickory and Advanced-A Down East affiliates. His 12 wins topped the organization and his 133 innings-pitched was second among the Rangers' minor league pitchers.

"The difference this year compared to previous years was a change in my mentality on the mound," Phillips told Criswell's Clubhouse Chatter blog. "I utilized everything I had learned from my peak performance classes, pitching classes and past failures and those things translated to a new confidence that I didn't have in the past.

"This new confidence also made it easier to create a routine that I felt comfortable with to ensure my success."

Through his third full season of minor league ball, Phillips truly began to turn heads inside and outside the Rangers organization. Phillips, 18-0 in his high school career at Bishop Eustace in Pennsauken, N.J., is now ranked No. 15 among the Rangers major league prospects, up from No. 23 early in the summer. He is called by prospect evaluators, "One of the more projectable starting pitching prospects in the Rangers' system."

Phillips, a 6-5, 235-pound righthander, has elevated his game with a low-to-mid-90s fastball, a changeup that scouts say "flashes plus surprisingly often" and a curveball the same scouts believe has the potential to develop into the "plus range." His fastball has touched 95 and has heavy sink. He made the South Atlantic League All-Star team this summer before his elevation to the Advanced-A Carolina League.

Phillips admits to having to make some adjustments at the professional level as a fresh-out-of-high school pitcher who was just 18 years old when he arrived in Arizona for his first professional season.

"I never really experience failure at Bishop Eustace," he said. "I had to learn how to deal with failure and use it to my advantage. Also, there were so many more things to learn about reading hitters and pitch sequences that aren't a necessity in high school baseball."

MLB Pipeline estimates Phillips, who received a \$160,000 bonus when the Rangers drafted him in the 15th round in 2015, to arrive to the big leagues by 2021. Phillips was called up from the Low-A Hickory Crawdads to Advanced-A Down East in time to pitch one game before the end of the 2018 season.

He surrendered one run on two hits over five innings, struck out three and walked two in his Advanced-A debut. Phillips had been the Crawdads most reliable pitcher last summer, posting an 11-5 record with a 2.67 ERA while striking out 124 and walking 14 in 128 innings. He also boasted a paltry 1.02 WHIP.

That ever-improving changeup seemed to round out Phillips' arsenal nicely.

"The changeup is a feel pitch," he told Crawdads Beat. "I guess it was two years ago I started working on it, because it was always too hard. I got it, then I started to lose it a little bit. Then I got it back last year when I went to extended (spring training). I just practiced it because that's the last pitch a hitter is going to learn to hit. It looks just like a fastball if you throw it right. I practiced it every single day."

Phillips has taken nicely to a patient approach that includes hard work on his mechanics, arsenal and his body. While he's listed as 6-5, 200 in his minor league bio, Phillips weighed 235 pounds heading into the offseason and continues to pack on muscle.

"I'm only 20 years old," Phillips told the Crawdads Beat blog during the summer. (He turned 21 in October). "I'm hoping I move up every year from here on out. That's my goal. If anything happens before that, great, but I don't need to rush myself."

Phillips has been a strike-throwing machine throughout his minor league career, evidenced by his 127 strikeouts and just 16 walks in 133 innings in 2018. He's been improving, too, in the critical area of "missing bats." His efficiency really showed when he struck out 62 and walked just eight batters during the 57 innings that made up his 8-0 finish to the 2018 season.

His changeup remains his out pitch while he continues to make strides in an effort to improve his curveball.

## CHERNOW LOOKS TO BUILD OFF SUCCESSFUL FRESHMAN CAMPAIGN AT COLUMBIA

By Bob Behre

Baseball practice is underway at Columbia University and former Diamond Jack and Super 17 player Jack Chernow couldn't be happier.

Chernow, a sophomore at the Ivy League school, is coming off a freshman campaign that should provide he and his coaches plenty of optimism heading into the 2019 season. Jack batted .259 while starting 32 of the 40 games he played for the Lions.

Chernow came to Columbia in September of 2017 embracing the challenge of playing Division 1 baseball while carrying a difficult academic load at a prestigious university.

"College life with baseball took some adjusting and getting used to," admitted Chernow.

"I struggled in our fall season, but continued to improve and get better. I ended up starting our first game of the spring against UNLV and got a hit in my first at bat.

"Academically, the classes are definitely challenging but manageable. We have a lot of core requirements that mainly fill your freshman schedule. Being in New York City has been great for learning outside of the classroom, like going to the MET for art history class and going to multiple concerts for salsa and reggae classes."

Columbia finished 20-30 in 2018 thanks to a rugged out-of-conference schedule but managed to succeed at a high enough level in the Ivy League, reaching a conference final against Yale that provided plenty of drama. "We typically schedule challenging pre-conference games which is great experience against tougher



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**CHERNOW** (continued from front page)

competition and it prepares us for Ivy League play," said Chernow.

Columbia defeated Yale, 4-0, in the best-of-three opener before the two teams engaged in a memorable 15-inning marathon in game 2. Joe Engel stepped to the plate for Columbia with one out and the bases loaded in the bottom of the 15th and promptly lofted a fly ball to center fielder that scored Ben Porter from third with the winning run in a thrilling 2-1 victory.

"We had great leadership all year long," said Chernow, who played second base and batted ninth in the game, going 1-for-6. "Winning that clinching 15-inning game at Yale was one of the best feelings."

The Ivy League title qualified Columbia for the NCAA Tournament and a trip to the Gainesville (Fla.) Regional. But the Lions drew No. 1 Florida in its opener, falling 13-5, before Florida Atlantic bounced them from the tournament in the second game, 11-2.

"The regional was a great experience," said Chernow, who split his time in the field last year between second base and center field. Chernow's statistical line in 2018 included 30 hits, three doubles, a home run, 15 runs scored and a 5-for-5 stolen base efficiency. He posted a .315 on-base percentage.

Chernow has been working mostly at second base in the early going.

Chernow ran into a pair of fellow Diamond Jacks -- Jack Mahala and Nico Motessi -- during the course of Columbia's 2018 Ivy League schedule. Mahala pitches for Harvard and Motessi was an outfielder for Cornell. Both are Seton Hall Prep grads.

"Being able to play my old Diamond Jack teammates made the series against Harvard and Cornell extra fun," said Chernow.

Chernow went 3-for-11 and scored twice as Columbia defeated Harvard in two of the three games played on March 31 and April 1. The righty Mahala pitched a third of an inning of scoreless relief during Columbia's 7-1 victory in the second game of the series but did not face Chernow. Columbia also defeated Cornell in two of the three games in the series on May 12-13. Chernow went 3-for-10 with an RBI and a run-scored in that series. Motessi did not play.

Chernow's signature game in 2018 came against Texas-San Antonio on March 10 when he went 3-for-5, hit his first college home run and drove home two runs. He certainly shows signs of delivering more big games like that in 2019.

"We are returning most of our team this season," Chernow said. "And will get back an ace in Josh Simpson from Tommy John surgery. Our pre-conference games this year include a weekend at Oklahoma University, a weekend at Cal Poly and spring break against North Florida and Miami."

**Did you know?:** Jack was named to the 2017 Star-Ledger All-Group 3 Third Team. He also played soccer for two seasons at Mendham and his 2015 team won the NJSIAA Group 3 championship.

## DIAMOND JACKS HURLER GAVIN STELLPFLUG COMMITS TO MARYLAND

By Bob Behre

Gavin Stellpflug was not a frontline starter as a sophomore last spring for NJSIAA Group 3 champion Somerville, but the 6-5, 210-pound righthander assumes that responsibility with fellow righthander Bobby Wortman in 2019.

Stellpflug pitched fewer than 20 innings for the Pioneers in 2018 but his stock among college scouts, already strong, skyrocketed in June after his performance at Diamond Nation's Garden State Underclass Games. An offer from Army in hand, Stellpflug suddenly drew the attention of such schools as Boston College, Xavier, Old Dominion, Seton Hall and Maryland.

"I got a lot more calls after the Underclass Games," said Stellpflug. "I started talking to Maryland in July. They told me they had a spot for one more pitcher and it was between three guys. I just let it play out and hoped for the best."

Stellpflug and his parents visited Maryland on Sept. 1 and Old Dominion on Sept. 2 as the Diamond Jacks Super 16 player whittled down his choices. "We had talked on the phone, but when we met the coaches in person we got to know them and their goals for the program. It was so much more impressive talking to them in person. My parents were blown away by the authenticity of the Maryland coaches. It made my decision much easier."

Gavin made the decision on Sept. 3 that Maryland was where he wanted to store his baseball spikes for his four years of college.

Stellpflug throws a two-seam and four-seam fastball, a slider and is developing a changeup to his arsenal. "I started to figure out the changeup in late July and August and threw it pretty well at times," he said. "It's a work in progress." His two-seamer has a little more depth and sink and "I miss more barrels with it." His fastball has been clocked in the mid-80s.

"Gavin has a tremendous will to learn, grow and work," says Steve DiTrolio, Diamond Nation's Director of Recruiting. "His focus to his craft is undeniable and will certainly pay off this spring."

Stellpflug admits that his focus on the mound became a bit more keen after the Underclass Games as he became aware of the amount of eyes following his moves on the field.

"The Underclass Games really kicked (the recruitment) off for me," said Stellpflug. "I was seeing more and more coaches coming to my games by our first tournament after the Underclass Games. At first (the attention) was weird, but I found I liked it. It upped the ante. I discovered I was a lot more focused and knew what my plan was out there."

Somerville will have a difficult act to follow this spring after the 2018 squad captured the Somerset County school's first-ever group championship in baseball. Stellpflug watched as his buddy Wortman wriggled out of a bases-loaded, one-out jam in the top of the seventh inning to secure a 3-2 victory over Allentown in the Group 3 championship game.

"Bobby has huge guts," said Stellpflug. "I'm excited for the two of us to get after it."

Stellpflug pitched just 19.1 innings as a sophomore last spring and Wortman pitched 22.1 innings as a junior. "Going in I'm thinking I'm going to be the ace, but it's between me and Wortman, we're the top two guys," said Stellpflug. "Whoever's the ace gets the most innings. That's the next step I'd like to take. March is the month when everyone figures out their role."

Stellpflug and Wortman give Somerville a strong 1-2 punch on the mound and the team remains very solid



right up the middle with another Diamond Jack, Seton Hall University commit Devin Hack, patrolling center field and leading off. Returning behind the plate is senior Vince Mele as is sophomore second baseman Matt Miceli, a dynamic No. 2 hitter as a freshman in 2018 and another Diamond Jack.

"I think we're really confident as a group having played together last year," said Stellpflug. "I think people feel because we lost (All-Stater) Tom Babalis that we won't be good, but we are a contender."

Stellpflug's confidence entering this spring can be linked directly to his summer experience with the Diamond Jacks Super 16 squad. "Coach (Steve) DiTrolio split our innings in games, three and three or three, three and one. It gave us a chance to make more appearances and to be seen by more schools," said Stellpflug. "I was definitely happy with my performance. I threw well, flashed some things and that gave us a chance to talk with schools more frequently. I went out each game with a goal and a plan to succeed."

The experience of being seen by multiple college scouts in the Underclass Games and throughout the summer seems to have quickly matured Stellpflug, who certainly comes off as an astute student of the game of baseball and a player who is attuned to where he stands at this point.

"This time last year I really wasn't aware of where I projected," said Stellpflug. "Army wanted me to be their big righthander. Hearing things like that forces you to grow. It's hard to manage that mentally."

Stellpflug was still learning whether or not he belonged and looking around at all the top talent at the Underclass Games can be humbling. "Going out on the mound at the Underclass Games I was able to put everything aside. The most nerve wracking part is before the game when you notice who is watching, schools you never thought you'd be in the presence of. It can change your summer and your life."

It certainly can. In fact, at the end of it all, Stellpflug can finally say, "I feel like I belong. I like the expectations to do well. I like the pressure that comes with competing for something big."

DiTrolio certainly feels Stellpflug belongs.

"I would not be surprised if he positions himself as one of the top pitchers in the state by his senior year, and a potential draft guy," said DiTrolio. "The University of Maryland got a grinder, that's for sure."