

Puk's big decision: Gators or pro ball?

Written by Jim Ecker

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A.J. Puk isn't sure if he wants to attend college after he graduates from Cedar Rapids Washington this month or get a job, so in that sense he's like a lot of high school seniors.

In Puk's case, however, he'll have to decide whether he wants to attend the University of Florida on a baseball scholarship or sign a pro baseball contract.

The baseball draft starts June 6.

"We'll see how it turns out. Either way, it's a good opportunity for me," Puk said Monday after playing in the Perfect Game Pre-Draft Showcase before dozens of pro scouts at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

Puk is a 6-foot-7, 220-pound lefthander with a fastball that normally sits in the 90 to 92 mph range when he's feeling good. He can hit 94 on occasion, but sat mostly in the high-80's Monday with a little stiffness in his back.

Puk is also a first baseman with a sweet swing, but he expects to be drafted as a pitcher and not as a position player.

The question is: How high will he go?

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He's seen a few mock drafts that are flattering, but acknowledged they don't mean a thing at this point. "I've seen stuff from late-first round to mid-third round. That's not always true," he said about the speculation.

The consensus, according to scouts, seems to be somewhere within the first five rounds. The signing bonus for a late first-round pick can be \$1 million, but the bonus money for a fifth-round selection would be considerably less.

The Sweeney brothers of Cedar Rapids - Ryan and Kellen - were second-round picks and signed for bonuses that topped \$600,000. Puk talked to the Sweeneys over the winter and their advice was the same: Do what's best for you.

The Florida Gators have one of the top college baseball programs in the country. Puk signed with Florida last November and they view him as a two-way player at this point who can pitch, play first base or serve as a designated hitter.

First things first, however. Puk is practicing with the Cedar Rapids Washington baseball team and plans to play for the Warriors at the beginning of the season and see what happens.

Washington opens the season on Monday, May 20 against Mount Vernon in the opening round of the Bob Vrbicek Metro tournament at Marion High School.

"The next couple of weeks, I'd like to get a couple of outings in at Wash and see how it goes," he said.

Puk decided a week before practice began that he'd play for the Warriors. He had seriously considered skipping his final season entirely, but wanted to spend at least a few weeks with the team this year.

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"It's my senior year. I want to go out and have some fun," he said. "I'll get a month of the season. It will be good to play about a month with them.

"We're young, but I think we'll be all right."

He's scheduled to leave for Florida on June 22 to get ready for summer classes, but that could change if he likes what happens in the draft on June 6.

He said he has an idea of how much money he'd like to get as a bonus, but naturally did not want to say publicly. Money is definitely a big factor, he confirmed.

"It always goes into the process, to see if you want to go or not," he said.

He said he wants to determine "what's right for me and right for my family" when he ultimately makes a decision. "We'll see what happens," he said. "I'm gravitating both ways.

"It's tough," he said. "I can see it both ways."

Puk is a St. Louis Cardinals fan, so in a perfect world he'd be drafted in the first round by his favorite club and turn pro.

He smiled at that scenario.