

Changed up: Hostetler embraces jump from infield to catcher



Bennett Hostetler was drafted as a shortstop. Beloit fans may remember him as a third baseman from his 10 game stint in High-A in 2021.

This season, though, the 24-year old has taken up the most physically demanding position on the field: catcher.

To Hostetler, the reasoning behind the switch is simple.

"Just organizationally, and kind of across the league, there's a lack of catching," Hostetler said. "Specifically, a lack of catching that can consistently hit the baseball."

After the 6-foot, 195 pounder was selected by the Marlins out of North Dakota in the 18th round of last season's first year player draft, he did just that – hit.

Carrying over from an impressive fifth year season in which he batted a whopping .394 with 10 home runs for the Bison in 2021, Hostetler slashed .319/.397/.486 in 37 games between Low-A Jupiter and High-A Beloit.

Rather than the solid numbers at the plate, the Montana native's defensive makeup is what jumped out to Chris Briones – a former professional catcher for nine seasons and the Sky Carp's second year defensive coach.

"I watched his actions at third base and I watched his arm strength," Briones said. "I watched his footwork and I said to [Marlins field coordinator] Patrick Osborne 'you see how he moves,' I said 'That would be a guy that I would love to move behind the plate.'"

Briones believed Hostetler's age may be a hurdle in possibly changing to the position, but apparently, the Marlins saw the same thing as Briones – credentials for Hostetler to play backstop – and approached him following the season.

"[The Marlins] said 'with your body type, your hands, your feet, your ability to hit the baseball, we think it would be a good career move for you to switch to catcher,'" Hostetler recalled. "It would be a good way for you to move up organizationally, just based on how old you are."

By the time of Spring Training, Hostetler was 24 and a half – already old for a new minor leaguer, and even older for a player making a dramatic position switch. As a result, time has proved to be key.

"It's like, 'how fast can you get in condition to play the position,'" Briones said. "[We said] 'Let's find out.'"

Despite the accelerated timeline, Hostetler is happy with his development to this point.

"It's been a long process kinda condensed into six months, but it's going well," Hostetler said. "There's a lot of stuff that goes into it. Pitch calling, receiving, blocking, throwing; everything you'd expect from a catcher and a lot of it was new to me, just having never caught before."

Through mid-May, Hostetler has played 26 games, catching 14 of them. Throughout the season, Hostetler has split duties behind the plate with 22-year old Will Banfield – the 69th overall pick in the 2018 draft, known for his defense.

Despite the two-year age difference, the younger Banfield has proved to be an elder statesman of the position for the older Hostetler to follow.

"Just watching him do drills every day, watching him in game, it helps me a lot," Hostetler said. "That's really the best way that I learn, is through watching other people. So it's really been a big help to have him here with me."

"Bennett's got all the attributes that you would want in a catcher, and when he gets to watch Banfield, I use [him] a lot as an example," Briones said. "Banfield is one of the best defenders behind the plate in our organization. To have that as an example every day for Bennett to watch, it's like 'hey, if you can catch like that kid, then then you're heading in the right direction.'"

Hostetler has battled through his fair share of struggles early in his first year behind the plate, and the grueling nature of the position has taken a toll on his bat. Through action on May 15, Hostetler is batting .189 with an OPS of .613.

According to Briones, that's all part of the process of learning the position.

"I think the hardest part about making this switch is the mindset of getting beat up every single day," Briones said. "The body's going to be exhausted, it's going to feel different from being a shortstop a year ago in college... The mental side is draining the physical side, both sides are draining."

At the end of the day, Hostetler is willing to do what it takes to accomplish his end goal, even if it takes blood, sweat and bruises behind the dish.

"I don't really care," Hostetler said. "My end goal is Miami, so whatever gets me there quicker is going to work for me."