

Moving toward the Majors

2013 No. 1 overall pick Mark Appel is making his latest stop in the Quad Cities

Fitting into a new place is far from a new challenge for Mark Appel.

The 22-year-old pitcher has gone from California to Texas to Florida to New York to Iowa since he was the No. 1 overall pick by the Houston Astros in the 2013 Major League Baseball First-Year Player Draft on June 6.

But it was 10 years ago that Mark had his first major move, as the Appel family went from Houston – where Mark was born and had first begun playing baseball – to San Ramon, Calif.

In the same summer that Appel helped his 12-year-old little league team advance to the Texas state championship game, he learned he was moving to California, right before he began middle school.

“I kind of felt like the kid from ‘The Sandlot’ – always moving to a new place and not having any friends,” Appel joked.

While Appel admits to being shy and following his older brother, John, most of his first year in high school, he quickly made friends through playing baseball and basketball.

The Appel family found a church and met friends they still have presently, and Mark looks back with gratitude for all his parents did to support his brother and him.

“It wasn’t necessarily the easiest way to grow up, but I feel so blessed,” Appel said. “My parents made tons of sacrifices for me and my brother.”

When it came to sports, Patrick and Sondra Appel encouraged and supported their sons, making opportunities available but allowing them to have fun.

“They never pressured us into anything,” Mark said. “It really made us play our sports for the love of the game.”

With his special ability and passion, Mark’s opportunities in baseball opened. After graduating from high school in 2009, he was a 15th-round draft pick by the Detroit Tigers, but he chose the opportunity to both pursue a degree and develop as a baseball player at Stanford University.

Following his junior season in 2012, Appel was drafted No. 8 overall by the Pittsburgh Pirates, but he elected to return to Stanford for his senior year. From the top of many draft rankings, Appel was selected No. 1 overall by the Astros this year.

It completed a dream scenario that unfolded months earlier, when his parents returned from a year and a half in China to the Houston area, where Mark had first learned to play baseball in the local little leagues, where the common dream was to play in the big leagues.

“We always pretended to be old Astros players,” Appel said of his youth baseball days. “The dream, being in Houston, was to be the next great Astro.”

Now that dream is as close as ever for Appel and his teammates with the Class-A Quad Cities River Bandits in the Midwest League.

While most of the River Bandits have been with the team, or at least the Astros organization, since Opening Day, Appel has again had more geographical displacement.

Days after he graduated from Stanford, Appel signed in Houston June 19, before heading to the Astros spring training complex in Kissimmee, Fla. He went to the short-season Class-A Tri-City ValleyCats in Troy, N.Y., for two starts before joining the River Bandits July 10.

“It’s pretty cool to be a member of the Astros organization, to be here and be surrounded by a bunch of talent and guys that are motivated and determined,” Appel said.

Appel’s journey in the minor leagues is just beginning, but the goal is a move back to Houston – and that path comes through the Quad Cities.