

ROUND ROCK EXPRESS

Hirsh growing into larger role

Major-league dream appears to be within reach for lanky Round Rock pitcher

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Jason Hirsh took the mound Sunday as the starter for the United States in the futures game, the pinnacle of minor-league baseball.

Joined by another 49 of the game's top prospects, the Round Rock Express right-hander gave up a hit and struck out one in his scoreless inning at PNC Park in Pittsburgh, where the major-league all-stars took the field on Tuesday.



Rodolfo Gonzalez
AMERICAN-STATESMAN

[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

'If he keeps pitching the way he has, I don't know how much longer I will have him,' Express manager Jackie Moore said of Jason Hirsh.



Michelle Cantu
FOR AMERICAN-STATESMAN

[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

At 6 feet, 8 inches, pitcher Jason Hirsh is the tallest player in Express history. And he is a commanding presence on the mound, boasting a 10-2 record and an ERA of 2.28, fourth best in the Pacific Coast League.

With his impressive list of pitching credentials growing to match his lanky 6-foot-8-inch frame, Hirsh could soon be a major-leaguer himself.

This season, his first at the Triple-A level, the 24-year-old is tied for the Pacific Coast League lead with 10 wins — against only two losses — and he has the fourth-lowest earned-run average in the PCL — 2.28.

With his six scoreless innings last week in a 4-0 victory over Albuquerque, Hirsh pushed his total of consecutive innings without allowing an earned run to 33.

"I think he is really close to helping us in the big leagues," said Ricky Bennett, the Astros' assistant general manager and director of player development.

That's to be expected, since Baseball America magazine ranked Hirsh as the Astros' top minor-league prospect entering the season. Now in his third full season in the minors, Hirsh was taken by Houston with the 59th pick overall in the 2003 major-league draft.

In 2005, he was named the Texas League pitcher of the year with the Double-A Corpus Christi Hooks after going 13-8 with a 2.87 ERA and striking out 165 in 172 1/3 innings.

That success led to big expectations upon his arrival in Round Rock, where he started slowly.

"I felt like I had to live up to something, but now I am over the hype and know that I need to go out and do my job, regardless if I am a top prospect or not," he said. "Obviously, with the top-prospect label, there is a finer microscope placed on everything you do."

Hirsh said he pressed in his first month with the Express, and "my stats show it. I was trying to be too good, too early."

After picking up his first win for Round Rock on April 11, Hirsh recorded two losses and two no-decisions before he garnered his second win on May 8.

"Since then, I have settled in and have become more comfortable with what I am doing out there," he said.

Express manager Jackie Moore said of Hirsh, "We have had a lot of good pitching come through, and he has been as consistent as the best of them. If he keeps pitching the way he has, I don't know how much longer I will have him."

But as Hirsh's career path draws nearer to Houston, his younger brother Matt has fallen onto one he would rather not travel.

Matt, a 21-year-old right-hander, was released by the Astros' organization on Memorial Day, sent packing after an extended spring training. He called Jason at 6:30 a.m. to break the news.

"I was just in a total state of shock," said Matt, who was 1-2 with a 5.61 ERA for the rookie-league Greenville Astros last year. "I did not expect that to happen. I knew they were going to make a few releases to a few guys, but you never think it is going to be you."

Jason quickly turned his thoughts from sleeping to nurturing.

"I told him you did nothing wrong, keep working hard and go out there and prove to them that they made a mistake," he said.

Later that day, with a little extra weight on his shoulders, Hirsh gave up four runs in six innings of Round Rock's 13-12 loss at Albuquerque.

A little more than a month since the shock of Matt's release, the two brothers remain confident they will fulfill a childhood dream of each pitching in the major leagues.

The 6-5 Matt, a self-proclaimed finesse pitcher who was a 30th-round draft pick of the Astros, is playing for the Tinseltown Terror, a nationally ranked semi-professional club headquartered in Hollywood, Calif.

When he is not pitching for the Terror, which plays Fridays through Sundays across the country, Matt is likely managing the brothers' Web site, hirshbrothers.com, which

received more than 13,000 hits in June and documents their pitching performances and other news concerning them.

"Things right now are going pretty well," Matt said. "I thought I would sign with someone else once I was released, but that hasn't happened yet. I have been waiting every day for a phone call."

Jason said he's always been adamant that Matt was the better pitcher. "I am confident that he will pick up with somebody," he said.

At 8 a.m. on the morning his brother took the mound for the futures game, Matt rolled out of bed at the Omni Hotel in Pittsburgh and headed for a workout session, striving to stay in shape for that day when a major-league team opts to take a chance on him.

Later that evening, Matt sat in the stands at PNC Park to watch his brother pitch for the first time as a professional.

It was the taller of the two that held the attention of the baseball world for a moment.