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FRANK JOLLEY

Sports Editor

Blake to play for UCF

LEESBURG -- John Michael Blake wants every step of his baseball career to serve a purpose.

The Lake-Sumter Community College right-hander established himself as a closer during his first season with the Lakers and furthered his reputation with a dominant summer in Leesburg Lightning's bullpen.

After posting a 3-3 record with five saves for the Lakers, Blake worked with former major league Cy Young Award winner Frank Viola with the Lightning, Leesburg's Florida Collegiate Summer League franchise. Blake responded to Viola's tutelage by posting a 1-0 record with six saves and a sparkling 0.90 earned run average.

Blake's standout effort attracted the attention of four-year college coaches, including University of Central Florida coach Terry Rooney.

Rooney, who accepted the UCF job in June after spending two seasons at LSU, maintained his interest in Blake, who spent the summer and fall working on developing a new pitch, and the LSCC sophomore responded this week by signing a national letter of intent with UCF for his junior and senior years.

"UCF is the best fit for me," Blake said. "When I visited the school in October, I had a chance to talk with Coach Rooney and I really like what he had to say. He's been a pitching coach and he has a lot of experience with a nationally recognized program. He is really excited about taking the UCF program to the next level and I wanted to be a part of that.

"Coach Rooney was the deciding factor for me."

Blake said he has been working on developing a change-up to compliment his fastball and slider. Blake said Rooney has indicated that he wants to use him as a starter when he arrives at UCF.

Even though his fastball has been clocked as fast as 94 mph, having a third pitch could help Blake go deeper into games without elevating his pitch count, LSCC coach Rich Billings said.

"John Michael needs a pitch that he can go to get a ground ball in a double-play situation," Billings said. "He doesn't need to strike out every hitter he faces. If he can get a batter to hit a ground ball on one pitch instead of throwing at three pitches to get a strike out, that reduces his pitch count and allows him to get into the seventh inning and reduce the wear and tear on his bullpen.

"He's been working hard on his change up and I'm really excited about his future. He has the potential to go a long way."

Blake has already attracted the attention of major league scouts, based on his freshman season at LSCC. He was a 32nd round pick by San Francisco Giants in Major League Baseball's June draft.

He didn't sign with the Giants, choosing instead to play for the Lightning and work with Viola, who won the 1987 World Series Most Valuable Player Award with the Minnesota Twins. The signing deadline past in August, meaning Blake is eligible to be drafted again in June by any major-league team.

Blake said Viola helped him with the mental aspect of pitching. He said Viola taught him to be aggressive in the strike zone, because it is easier to pitch inside when hitters are using wooden bats instead of metal bats.

Many pitchers grow up pitching strictly to hitters using metal bats, which tend to make them more hesitant to pitch on the inner half of the strike zone because the sweet spot on a metal bat is much larger than it is on a wooden bat.

"It was a great experience working with Frank and I don't see how it could do anything but help my career," Blake said. "As a former pitcher, he was able to talk about the things that really affect a pitcher's mind-set. I think a lot of the things I learned from him will help me in college and professionally, if I reach that level."

Billings believes playing at UCF should be a positive step for Blake. He said Rooney is a positive-minded coach and a motivator. Rooney's goal, Billings said, is to elevate UCF program to level that would allow them to compete with the state's "Big Three" -- the University of Florida, Florida State and Miami.

"John Michael has the potential to be as good as he wants to be," Billings said. "Playing at UCF should help him get closer to realizing his potential. He'll be playing for an excellent coach and be part of a growing program.

"It's a good move for him and I'm really excited for him."