Rox keep eye on Rodgers, Nikorak in camp
Prospects learning process in instructional league in Arizona

By Jim Callis / MLB.com | September 28th, 2015

Statistics from pro debuts carry little meaning. Just ask newly minted Hall of Famer Randy Johnson (5.93 ERA with more walks than strikeouts) or Derek Jeter (.626 OPS with 21 errors in 57 games) or Chipper Jones (.592 OPS with 18 miscues in 44 contests), for example.

So don't read too much into the performances of the Rockies' two first-round picks in the 2015 Draft. Shortstop Brendan Rodgers, signed for $5.5 million as the No. 3 overall choice, hit a more-than-respectable .273/.340/.420 as one of the youngest regulars in the Rookie-level Pioneer League but missed 32 games with a variety of nagging injuries. Right-hander Mike Nikorak, the recipient of a $2.3 million bonus as the No. 27 selection, recorded an 11.72 ERA with 32 walks in 17 2/3 innings in the same circuit.

The team isn't concerned about any of those numbers, said Rockies senior director of player development Zach Wilson. The Rockies aren't trying to incorporate any major changes with Rodgers or Nikorak during their instructional league camp, which opened in Scottsdale, Ariz., on Wednesday and will last for three weeks.

"The stats don't matter at that level," Wilson said. "What matters is the process and how they go about the process. Early on, that's all we're trying to do with the young kids, help them to become more comfortable and learn how to prepare. Naturally, the players think about results, but results are the last thing on our mind."

Some clubs considered Rodgers, the Rockies' No. 1 prospect rated by MLB.com, the best pure talent in the 2015 Draft. He has the bat speed, strength and approach to hit for power and average, he runs well enough to steal a few
bases and he may be able to stick at shortstop. If not, his offensive game and his strong arm will profile just fine at third base.

Because his season at Lake Mary (Fla.) ended nearly two months before the Draft, Rodgers had a longer layoff than most high schoolers. Colorado believes that’s the main reason he struggled to stay healthy in his first taste of pro ball, as he had hamstring tightness and wore down quickly.

"We’re mostly focusing on his body and conditioning, and what he needs to do to prepare for a 140-game season," Wilson said. "He's been fully active in our camp, taking groundballs at shortstop. We're really focusing on making sure his body is ready to compete."

As for Nikorak, the Rockies aren't trying to change anything at this point. While he has a higher ceiling than any prep pitcher in the 2015 Draft, he also battled inconsistency at East Stroudsburg (Pa.) High. He'll repeat his delivery and deliver mid-90s fastballs and plus curveballs when he's at his best, but his stuff and command dips when he can't keep his mechanics in sync.

"Quite frankly, this season is going to be the best thing that ever happened to Mike Nikorak," Wilson said. "He's got the mentality to learn from this and make adjustments. We're not going to do anything with his mechanics."

**Tulowitzki deal yields promising arms**

Besides Rodgers, the highest-profile prospect in Colorado's instructional program is right-hander Jeff Hoffman. A candidate to go No. 1 overall in the 2014 draft before he had Tommy John surgery, he went ninth overall to the Blue Jays, signed for $3,080,800 and came to the Rockies this July in the Troy Tulowitzki trade.

Hoffman reached Double-A 14 months after having his elbow reconstructed and pitched well there after the deal, posting a 3.22 ERA with a 29/10 K/BB ratio in 36 1/3 innings. His mid-90s fastball and tough curveball have returned, and the Rockies just want to give him a few more innings and make some slight alterations to his delivery this fall.

"We're just clearing a few simple things up, getting him in line a little bit more so he can finish his stuff a little bit more," Wilson said. "His changeup is solid average but can be better if he extends through it and gets to his glove side more. It's just small things like that. He has a chance to be very special."
All three right-handers acquired in the Tulowitzki trade will report to Scottsdale. Jesus Tinoco, who showed improved command after the deal and has a sinker that can creep into the mid-90s, is already on hand. Hard-throwing Miguel Castro, who was promoted to Colorado when rosters expanded in September, will arrive after the big league season ends in a week.

**Rockies on the rise**

Some lesser-known prospects who had strong 2015 seasons are getting a chance to build on their progress in instructional league.

First basemen Collin Ferguson and Brian Mundell, both products of the 2015 Draft, show the ability to manipulate the barrel and hit for power. Ferguson, a 17th-rounder from St. Mary's, batted .346/.463/.605 at Rookie-level Grand Junction. Mundell, a seventh-round from Cal Poly, hit .275/.355/.410 at short-season Boise.

Right-hander Carlos Polanco got knocked around to the tune of a 5.64 ERA in his U.S. debut last year but was much better after making the jump to full-season ball in 2015. He had a 3.90 ERA with a 115/36 K/BB ratio in 140 2/3 innings at low Class A Asheville. If he can improve his command like he did his stuff and control this season, he could be a mid-rotation starter in the big leagues.

"He has started to climb the prospect ladder," Wilson said. "He can throw his fastball 95-97 mph down in the zone, he has a good curveball and slider, and he's developing a changeup. He has a very deceptive delivery. He's going to start opening some eyes."
Colorado Rockies face gauntlet of questions heading into final road trip
So what's on the line as the Rockies finish their season with three games at Arizona and three at San Francisco?

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Last November, just a month into his job as the Rockies' new general manager, Jeff Bridich said: "Our general goal is just to get us back to playing meaningful games in September. I think it's both an aggressive and realistic goal for us."

The Rockies never came close to reaching that goal.

They begin their final road trip of the season Tuesday night at Arizona with a 66-90 record. It's the third time in four years Colorado will lose at least 90 games. That means Bridich faces a gauntlet of questions during the offseason.

So what's on the line as the Rockies finish their season with three games at Arizona and three at San Francisco?

Weiss watch

Manager Walt Weiss has one year remaining on his three-year, $2 million contract. He has made it clear he wants to return, but Bridich has been noncommittal and owner Dick Monfort has declined to talk to the media.

Not helping Weiss is his 206-274 record.

Helping Weiss is the Rockies' steady play of late. They are 10-10 over their last 20 games, thanks to a rare sweep of the Los Angeles Dodgers last weekend.

One thing is clear: The players are not pointing the finger at Weiss.

"We haven't been very good," star third baseman Nolan Arenado said. "The blame doesn't go to him. He puts the best guys out there, and we need to go perform. We weren't able to do that this year. Hopefully, we'll have some guys next year ready to play and give him a better chance to win."

Arenda alert

The two-time Gold Glover, at age 24, has blossomed into an elite player. He has blasted 41 home runs and leads the majors with 126 RBIs. The club records for home runs (49 by Larry Walker in 1997 and Todd Helton in 2001) and RBIs (150 by Andres Galarraga in 1996) are beyond his reach. Yet Arenado has already hit the most home runs since the Rockies installed the humidor at Coors Field in 2002.
Weiss is touting Arenado for National League MVP, but the award appears to be locked up by Washington’s Bryce Harper and his 41 homers, 1.125 OPS and astounding 10.2 WAR (wins above replacement).

CarGo's future

Early in the season, Gonzalez was mired in a deep slump. Then he got his legs under him and went out and hit 26 homers after the all-star break. CarGo, with 39 homers, trails Arenado by two in their friendly battle for the team title. It will make the final six games fun to watch.

Bridich is not actively trying to trade Gonzalez, but he will listen to offers during the offseason, and CarGo's trade value has never been higher than it is right now. You can bet that a lot of scouts' eyes will be trained on CarGo as the season winds down.

Mound auditions

Colorado's pitching is, again, terrible. The rotation's 5.31 ERA ranks last in the National League and the bullpen's 4.74 ERA ranks 14th.

With veteran Jorge De La Rosa and rookie Jon Gray shut down for the season, the last six games give fill-in starters Chris Rusin and David Hale one last chance to each to prove himself.

Weiss has been using all sorts of combinations out of the bullpen, but it's clear that he wants to see how hard-throwing right-handers Jairo Diaz, Justin Miller and Scott Oberg perform with the game in the balance, as well as left-hander Rex Brothers.

Looking ahead

Rockies’ Christian Bergman (3-1, 4.62 ERA) at Diamondbacks’ Robbie Ray (5-12, 3.53), 7:40 p.m. Tuesday, ROOT; 850 AM

Bergman is a longshot to make the starting rotation in 2016, but he's proving valuable as a long reliever. He has been especially effective on the road, posting a 1.78 ERA in 10 games (one start). He has not fared well against Arizona, with a 6.30 ERA in five relief appearances. The left-handed Ray is coming off a strong outing against the Los Angeles Dodgers, allowing three hits in six shutout innings at Chavez Ravine.
Wednesday: Rockies' Chad Bettis (8-5, 4.38 ERA) at Diamondbacks' Chase Anderson (6-6, 4.40), 7:40 p.m., ROOT
Thursday: Rockies' David Hale (5-5, 6.01) at Diamondbacks' Patrick Corbin (6-5, 3.28), 7:40 p.m., ROOT
Friday: Rockies' Kyle Kendrick (6-13, 6.54) at Giants' Chris Heston (12-10, 3.62), 8:15 p.m., ROOT
The Colorado Rockies have scored the most runs in the NL, have the league's second-best batting average and need Carlos Gonzalez to hit one more homer to make him and Nolan Arenado the first teammates with 40 apiece in nine years.

None of that has prevented Colorado from sitting at the bottom of the NL West finishing out a third 90-loss season in four years.

The Rockies look to win a fourth straight game for the first time in 2 1/2 months when they begin a three-game series at the Arizona Diamondbacks on Tuesday night.

It's no secret that Colorado (66-90) has one of the most potent offenses in baseball, led by Arenado's 41 homers and NL-high 126 RBIs. Those numbers likely would give him more votes for NL MVP if the Rockies hadn't struggled most of the season.

Arenado homered and had four RBIs in Saturday's 8-6 win over the Los Angeles Dodgers, and he drove in a career-high five while hitting a three-run shot as Colorado completed a three-game sweep of the West leaders with a 12-5 victory Sunday.

It's on the verge of its first four-game winning streak since July 9-12.

"We get frustrated when you look back at it," Arenado said. "Better you lose track of it and try to push forward and look to the future.

"I know there are ups and downs in the season. But this year, we had a little bit more downs than up."

Gonzalez went 7 for 13 in the series and homered in the first two games. His next long ball would make him and Arenado the majors' first teammates with at least 40 homers since Jermaine Dye and Jim Thome of the 2006 Chicago White Sox.

Arenado has gone deep six times this season against Arizona (75-81) and Gonzalez homered twice with a career-high seven RBIs as the Rockies won the last meeting 9-4 on Sept. 2.

The Diamondbacks have won five of the seven matchups in Arizona, and they're returning home after a 6-4 road trip. Ender Inciarte homered twice and went 4 for 5 in Sunday's 4-2 victory over San Diego.
“This is the best game I’ve played in the big leagues,” Inciarte said. “It’s fun to win games, and when you can help in this way, you remember them for a long time.”

Arizona would have to win out to finish exactly .500 for the third time in four seasons. It sends Robbie Ray (5-12, 3.53 ERA) to the mound in this contest as he looks to continue his solid run.

Ray has gone 2-2 with a 2.39 ERA in five starts since Aug. 31, when he gave up one run and struck out eight in 5 2-3 innings against the Rockies. He pitched his second scoreless outing in that stretch last Tuesday, striking out seven in six innings of an 8-0 win over the Dodgers.

"Everything was working," Ray said. "I was down in the zone and just pounding strikes."

The left-hander beat the Rockies 5-1 on May 6 with six solid innings in his only other career start against them. He’ll oppose Christian Bergman (3-1, 4.62), who made his first start in more than five months Wednesday and gave up seven runs and 10 hits in 3 2-3 innings of a 13-7 loss to Pittsburgh.

The right-hander has given up seven runs and 14 hits in 10 innings over five games out of the bullpen against the Diamondbacks this season. He went 1-0 with a 2.45 ERA in two starts against Arizona in 2014.