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Rodriguez knocking on door of big-league dream

Former Pheasants catcher in camp with San Diego Padres

SIoux FALLS – This month, former Sioux Falls Pheasants catcher Eddy Rodriguez is rubbing shoulders with the likes of veteran major-leaguer players Orlando Hudson, Carlos Quentin and Huston Street. Rodriguez is in spring training with the San Diego Padres as a non-roster invitee to their major-league camp.

Just two years ago, Rodriguez was a vital piece of the Pheasants' dominant 2010 season that culminated in a trip to the American Association championship series.

“An invitation to big-league camp is not something that is given out lightly, so we're very excited about him having the opportunity,” Pheasants manager Steve Shirley said. “We are very proud as an organization to be a part of his progress. It's our goal to create opportunities for players to continue a path to the major leagues.”

With the Pheasants' division-clinching squad in 2010, Rodriguez batted .259 with 13 home runs and 55 RBI in 80 games. Behind the plate, he threw out 24 attempted base stealers and received for a pitching staff with the second-best ERA in the league.

“I remember the connection we had that made us such a force. We had a great group of guys,” Rodriguez recalled about the team that won a franchise-record 63 games. “It was one of the best teams I've ever been a part of.”

Rodriguez was selected by the Cincinnati Reds in the 20th round of the 2006 draft after a standout career at the University of Miami. He climbed the Reds' ranks to Double-A Chattanooga before his release in 2008. So he turned to independent baseball. Rodriguez joined the Pheasants in 2010 after proving himself as a premiere catcher in the American Association with the El Paso Diablos in 2009.

The Padres purchased Rodriguez' contract soon after the 2010 season finished. He spent all of 2011 in their minor-league system, playing at every level. He helped win championships for both the high Class A Lake Elsinore Storm and Class AA San Antonio Missions.

“I made sure I made a good impression,” Rodriguez said of his 2011 season. “A lot of times they know a name, but they don’t know the person.

It paid off with an invitation to the big-league camp as one of just seven catchers vying for a spot with the parent club.

Rodriguez feels his goal of playing in the major leagues is more realistic than ever. A revamped approach at the plate now compliments stellar defensive skills and ability to call a game.

“I’m a lot smarter and more mature,” Rodriguez said about his offensive mindset. “I’m a lot more confident after a couple of mechanical changes, and I have a better mental plan at the plate.”

The plans and whims of player management are a mystery, though. “I’m pretty confident in what I bring to the table, but you never know,” Rodriguez said. “All you can do is show up and work hard.”

Rodriguez credits his year in Sioux Falls as vital to his development. “Playing for Steve Shirley was one of the best things for my career,” he said. “He gave me an opportunity to be in the lineup every day.”

Former Sioux Falls Canaries reliever George Sherrill (2001) joins Rodriguez as the only two alumni in major-league camps this spring. Sherrill has returned to the Seattle Mariners as part of their 40-man big-league roster. He made his major-league debut with them in 2004.

If Rodriguez debuts with the Padres this year, he will be just the seventh player in team history to make a big league squad after playing in Sioux Falls, and he would be the first position player to do so.

For now Rodriguez says, “I’m just so happy to have a jersey with my name on it.”

The Sioux Falls Pheasants begin their 20th season at 7:05 p.m. on Thursday, May 17 when they host the Sioux City Explorers. Information about season tickets and group outings is available by calling (605) 336-6060 or visiting www.sfpheasants.com.