



A primary goal for each member of the Northwest Arkansas Naturals is one that is universal across minor league baseball – to realize their potential and reach the major leagues. But one member of the Naturals’ starting rotation has a different perspective than any of his teammates.

Zach Miner has already been there.

Drafted by the Atlanta Braves in 2000, Miner began his first journey up the ladder of professional baseball the following summer. He reached Triple-A in 2005 before a mid-season trade to the Detroit Tigers. The next year, he made his major league debut against the Boston Red Sox on June 4, 2006.

Over the next four years, Miner spent the majority of his time in the American League, serving as a versatile member of the Tigers’ pitching staff. He made 35 starts for Detroit and came out of the bullpen 122 times, posting a 25-20 record and a 4.24 ERA. He even pitched in a World Series game with Detroit in 2006. By all accounts, Miner was well on his way to a long major league career, earning a significant raise in 2009, his first year of eligibility for salary arbitration.

Like many pitchers, Miner had battled through injuries. He spent a few weeks on the disabled list in 2007 with what was believed to be a flexor tendon strain in his pitching elbow. Though he recovered and avoided the disabled list for the next two years, the injury turned out to be a sign of things to come.

“I think at the end of the ’09 season [the elbow] was bothering me a good deal,” Miner said. “But I just thought rest in the offseason would strengthen it up again.”

It didn’t. Unable to pitch during



Zach Miner made his big-league debut with the Tigers in 2006.

the start of 2010, Miner attempted to rehabilitate his elbow. After an MRI showed no significant damage, he continued the rehab process. When the injury worsened, he had another MRI, which revealed a torn ligament in his elbow that necessitated reconstructive surgery. Despite the outcome, Miner believes that attempting rehab to that extent was the right choice.

“You never want to have surgery, so usually you try and exhaust all rehab options before you have it. But it got to the point where we weren’t able to manage it anymore and I had it fixed.”

On May 28, 2010, Miner underwent Tommy John surgery, a procedure in which the torn elbow ligament is replaced by a tendon from elsewhere in the body. Named for the pitcher who underwent the first instance of the surgery in 1974, the operation is common among baseball players and now has a higher success rate

than ever before.

But the road back from elbow reconstruction, one that last year’s Washington Nationals phenom Stephen Strasburg is currently on and one that Naturals’ left-hander John Lamb will have to navigate, can be a long one. Pitchers typically need 12-18 months to return to the mound in a game situation. Knowing what was ahead, Miner dedicated himself to his rehab from day one.

“I pretty much made it my main focus, I gave up a lot of things that I enjoy doing that I thought could aggravate it,” he said. “I haven’t played golf since I had surgery, I didn’t fish really at all since I didn’t want

to put any extra stress on it.”

Though his rehab was going according to plan,

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Effective Dates: 9/22/11 - 5/31/12
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Miner was still nowhere near returning to the mound as the 2010 offseason approached. Facing another round of salary arbitration for a player who may not even be able to play in the upcoming season, the Tigers declined to tender Miner a contract. He became a free agent, one who was unable to show teams what he could do.

Though his rehab progressed as well as could be expected, it was still a grind in the Florida sun. Day after day, Miner played catch with his physical therapist Dave Bailey, as well as with his father and his friends. As the months went by, Miner was still far away from throwing in anything resembling a game situation.

“It was definitely a stressful time not being able to [pitch]. There were some other teams that called and wanted to see me throw, and I was only playing catch at 75 feet.”

The one team that trusted Miner’s rehab process was the Kansas City Royals. Despite knowing that Miner might not be

able to pitch until late in the 2011 season, the Royals offered the right-hander a minor league contract this past December. On Dec. 31, 2010, Miner signed the contract and officially became a member of the Kansas City organization.

Miner credits his past relationships with some of the key officials in the Royals’ baseball operations department. In particular, General Manager Dayton Moore was a member of Atlanta’s front office while Miner worked his way



Miner earned his first win of the season on May 27, one day shy of the anniversary of his Tommy John surgery.



In 157 major-league games, Miner has posted a 25-20 record with a 4.24 ERA.

through the Braves’ system.

“[I knew] Dayton, along with [Assistant G.M.] J.J. [Picollo] and a lot of other people in the organization,” Miner said. “I think that they trusted what me and my agent were telling them. They never flew down to take a look at me, they pretty much just trusted that I was where I said I was.”

New contract in hand, Miner continued his rehab and joined the Royals at the team’s facility in Surprise, Ariz. After beginning the regular season in Extended Spring Training, Miner made his return to the rubber for the Naturals on May 16 against the Tulsa Drillers at ONEOK Field. In that game, he allowed two runs in four innings, throwing 60 pitches in his first professional outing in a year and a half.

Two starts later, Miner fired five innings of one-run ball against the Frisco RoughRiders, earning his first win since 2009 just one day shy of the one-year anniversary of his surgery.

Since then, the results have been mixed. Through the end of the first half of the season, Miner was 1-2 with a 6.20 ERA and collected

15 strikeouts in 24 2/3 innings with the Naturals. The Royals approached his comeback cautiously, limiting him to less than 70 pitches in his first six outings. Though not every day has been easy, Miner said that he has not had to overhaul his mechanics since the surgery.

“There were days early on where in between innings I’d get stiffer than I used to, and so maybe my pitch selection was different,” he said. “I’d go out and throw more breaking balls early in the inning ‘til my arm got loose. But I feel like I’m relatively the same pitcher that I was before.”

According to Miner, one of the biggest differences between the major leagues and Double-A is the pressure to win. Now that he is back in the minors, where the focus is on development in addition to the standings, Miner has the opportunity to experiment with his arsenal.

“In Detroit, we had to win. It was all about winning every day, and if you didn’t pitch well your job could be on the line,” he said. “You were up there for survival and it was sometimes hard to work

on things. There are a couple of things I've kind of wanted to try and work on that I've never really done in the last five years, so I'm doing those things now."

Miner's last full season in the minor leagues was 2005. At that time, he was a 23-year-old working toward his first taste of the big leagues, the same age as Natural pitchers Chris Dwyer and Buddy Baumann. Six years later, Miner is the old man of the locker room.

Though 32-year-old reliever Willy Lebron is three years Miner's senior, Miner is the only Natural with any big-league experience. Miner has a corner locker with a little extra personal space, and though he tries not to dominate the clubhouse, his teammates do look to him for perspective.

"I don't try to tell them, 'hey, you guys need to do this to get to the big leagues,' because they all have the talent. But these guys do ask me a lot of questions; they want to know things about the big leagues. I just try to get across that at Double-A, it's not that big of a difference. Mentally it's different, but everyone here's got talent."

Miner isn't the first major-league veteran working back from reconstructive surgery to impart his perspective on the Naturals. Two years ago, former big league catcher and Springdale resident Vance Wilson spent time with the Naturals while attempting to come back from his second Tommy John operation. Wilson was a leader in the Naturals' clubhouse that season, a trait that extends back to when he and Miner were teammates in Detroit during the 2006 season that ended with the Tigers in the World Series.

"We really looked up to Vance a lot," Miner said. "He wasn't afraid to tell us what was on his mind, good or bad. I remember he aired me out a couple of times during games when he wasn't even catching me. He was a leader for us, being a catcher and a veteran guy."

Wilson and Miner are again part of the same major league organization, as Wilson is in his first year managing the Kane

County Cougars, the Royals' new Class-A Midwest League affiliate. Wilson has said that he didn't seriously consider coaching until that stint with the Naturals, when he was able to take a mental step back, see how the organization operated and imagine himself continuing a baseball career in that type of position.

Wilson was 36 years old when he suited up for the Naturals. At 29, Miner is still in his physical prime and does not spend as much time reflecting on what his post-playing career could hold. But Miner

admits that there are times when he thinks about what might come next if he doesn't make it back.

"I think it's definitely human nature. The days I feel good, and my velocity's back, you don't really think about all that stuff. But there are certain days where it's a struggle and you get frustrated like anything else.

"There's a lot of rust that needs to be knocked off and those thoughts can definitely creep into your mind. I've definitely thought about coaching. I love baseball, I love being with the guys and

talking with them, trying to help them and listening to what they have to say."

More than anything else, Miner is committed to writing a second chapter in his major league career. One that he hopes has no end in sight.

"Very few guys make so much money that they can just go fishing and play golf every day [after they retire]. Obviously I still hope that happens, but you never know."



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