

BIRD-MAN

The Southern Illinois Miners have had many great players pass through Rent One Park in their storied history. Last season, former slugger and Frontier League MVP Joey Metropoulos became the first of these greats to have his number retired, the highest honor a team can bestow upon a single player.

This season, on June 27th, Southern Illinois will once again honor one of their best players, as they retire #13 for the greatest pitcher in team history – Ryan Bird.

A right-hander from a small town in Eastern Illinois, Bird pitched for Saint Louis University as a collegian. Despite a solid career for the Billikens with a 3.48 ERA and 16 wins over four seasons as a starter, Bird went undrafted in 2007. He was not overlooked, however, by a couple Frontier League teams.

“After the draft, I said ‘Oh no- what do I do,’” Bird said. “I tried out for Gateway and didn’t get a call, but then Mike (Pinto) gave me a call and asked me to come to a tryout. So I did a full-day tryout with the Miners, and two days later, Mike called me and said ‘we’d like for you to join our team.’”

That phone call was not, however, the start of Bird’s time as a Miner.

“We liked him immediately,” Pinto said. “We offered him a contract. He told me that he was going to a Blue Jays workout a few days later and asked if he could let me know after that.”

Lo and behold, Toronto liked Bird as well, and signed him after that workout. But the fledgling Miners organization made a great impression on the young pitcher.

“I told Mike the Blue Jays wanted to pick me up,” Bird said. “And Mike was like ‘that’s so great.’ He gave me advice on going to an organization, which he didn’t have to do. The tryout was very professional as well.”

Bird went on to have a great season as a reliever in the Blue Jays’ organization. Between his time for their rookie affiliate in the Gulf Coast League as well as their short-season single-A team in the New York-Penn League, he pitched 35 innings over 22 appearances with a stellar 1.80 ERA, 43 strikeouts and 11 walks. He was released in spring training the following season despite the success, though, and that’s when things broke right for Southern Illinois.

“After I was released, the first person I called other than my parents was Mike,” Bird said. “He said ‘we’ll sign you,’ and we talked for a couple hours. I was really excited to come play for him.”

That ended up being the start of a phenomenal career over three seasons in Southern Illinois for Bird. In his first season, 2008, Bird was dominant in putting up the best statistical season for any Miners pitcher ever. Named the Frontier League’s Pitcher of the Year, Bird led the league in wins and strikeouts (setting single-season Miners records in both categories that still stand today), going 13-3 with a 2.48 ERA over 123 1/3 innings, and fanning 152 batters.

“That was one of the best years of my adult life,” Bird fondly recalled. “The team was phenomenal. After having success but getting released by the Blue Jays I was kind of shell-shocked. So when I went into spring training with the Miners, I was all business- I wanted to show everything I had.”

“I started off the year a little up and down,” the right-hander added. “Then Brendan Akashian came- he was my catcher- and we clicked immediately. He knew what I liked to throw right away and after one game he said ‘oh, we’re going to have some fun.’”

Bird went on to pitch two more seasons for the Miners in 2009 and 2010, amassing 28 wins and a 2.96 career ERA in Southern Illinois, fanning 308 batters in 289 innings. He is still the Miners’ all-time leader in wins and strikeouts, while ranking second in innings pitched. Between 2008 and 2009, Bird also won a remarkable 17 consecutive decisions for the Miners, a streak that remains a Frontier League record.

Miners manager Mike Pinto remembers Bird for his dominance on the mound, but also for his completely different demeanor off the field.

“Ryan is one of the toughest competitors to ever put on a Miners uniform,” Pinto said. “All great pitchers have a different gear, and Ryan was one of those. Off the mound, on non-game days, he was one of the nicest guys we’ve ever had. On game day, there were no conversations, no banter. He pitched with a vengeance, a competitive fire- almost a mean streak. Yet the moment he was out of the game, he went back to being the Ryan we knew on every other day. He was truly one of a kind.”

When Bird thinks back on his time with the Miners, one thing stands out above everything else, including the success on the mound.

“When you’re in the moment, you kind of take it for granted a little bit,” Bird said. “There are so many great things, especially with Southern Illinois- the people, the fans, the players- but I’d have to say the thing I take away the most are the relationships in our clubhouse. There are guys I’m always going to have that camaraderie with- even years later, if I see them on the street, it would be like we didn’t skip a beat. It was a blast.”

This season, Ryan Bird’s #13 will be retired, to never be worn again in Southern Illinois. And when fans look at the left field fence, it will be a reminder that when naming the best Miners’ hurlers, as the Trash Men once penned in their catchy 1963 hit song, the Bird is indeed The Word.