

## Mark Appel of Stanford could be MLB's top pick

Tom FitzGerald

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Far from Stanford's Sunken Diamond, Mark Appel has a huge support group in Houston and a small but vocal contingent - two fans - in Beijing.

The Houston group is composed of relatives and friends who would love for the Astros to pick him with the top selection in June's baseball draft. Appel grew up in Houston before his family moved to San Ramon when he was 12. His attorney father had gotten a job with Chevron.

Now Patrick and Sondra Appel regularly take 14-hour flights from Beijing, their new home thanks to Chevron, to watch their son pitch. His dad has made six such trips.

Presumably they'll be the jet-lagged couple when their son starts at 6 p.m. Friday for the No. 17 Cardinal (29-14, 11-10 Pac-12) against Washington State (24-20, 9-11).

As far as college pitchers go, Appel is the total package. He's also smart, engaging, handsome, humble and religious, and he's a couple of months away from being filthy rich. The 6-foot-5 right-hander is 7-1, with a 2.72 ERA, and he leads the Pac-12 in strikeouts with 85.

On the same campus where Andrew Luck became the top pick in the NFL draft and Nneka Ogwumike was the first choice in the WNBA draft, Appel may very well be the top pick in the Major League Baseball draft.

That all three had Houston roots "is incredible to think about," Appel said.

Although many Colts fans were united in a "suck for Luck" hope that their team would tank its final games, it's doubtful that many Astros fans gave out any "smell for Appel" encouragement for Houston to finish last season with the worst record in baseball.

But they know full well what Appel offers, which his catcher, Eric Smith, describes as "a fastball in the upper 90s, a nasty slider, a nasty changeup."

From trying to hit him in practice, Smith said, "Sometimes you have to be guessing on him, and if you guess wrong, you're going to look bad."

A reporter pointed out that Appel was hit pretty hard by Fresno State, giving up eight hits and seven runs (with 11 strikeouts) in his only loss. Smith said, "Sandy Koufax got hit hard too, probably, in a couple of

games. Especially with aluminum bats, games like that can happen."

At Monte Vista High in Danville, Appel was - get this - the No. 3 starter. The team had left-hander Christian Jones, now sitting out the season at Oregon because of an injury, and Steven Swift, who's pitching for Washington. Appel had no problem with being third banana; he wasn't really Mark Appel yet.

That came a couple of years later. He spent the summer after his freshman year in the New England Collegiate Baseball League working hard on his changeup.

"He came back and was throwing the breaking ball to right and left hitters," Stanford pitching coach Rusty Filter said. "He was way ahead of the curve that people expected of him. That summer was big for his confidence."

As a sophomore, Appel was 6-7 with a 3.02 ERA, becoming the Friday starter after Brett Mooneyham injured a finger in preseason.

Last summer, Appel spent four weeks with Team USA, which played a five-game series against Japan, and also played in the Cape Cod League. Now he is deemed one of a handful of choices for the top pick in the draft.

"There's no pattern with Mark now," Filter said. "It's no 'well, we hope the changeup is there. If not, we'll use the slider.' He's brought all three pitches each game. He's able to use those pitches in any count."

At San Diego State, Filter coached Nationals fireballer Stephen Strasburg, the top pick in the 2009 draft. The two are a lot alike, he said. "Stephen's velocity increased each year at college," Filter said. "That's what we've seen with Mark. He's showing the signs of what he can become."

Appel has hit 99 mph on the gun in a game this year. "Usually in the first inning he's above 95, then settles in at 92," Filter said. "Toward the end of an outing, he picks it back up and you'll see the 96-97 again later in the game."

A strong fan of the Astros, Appel remembers the pain of seeing the Cardinals' Albert Pujols clobber a three-run homer off Brad Lidge in the 2005 NLCS. Houston made it to the World Series, only to be swept by the White Sox.

"The Astros still haven't won a World Series," Appel said, "but I was thinking, 'Man, this could be the year.' At least we got there."

If his former hometown team picks him, it "would be like a cherry on top. I'd get to go home and see my family and friends." If not, he said, "Just having the opportunity to play baseball is a blessing in itself. I don't know how I could be disappointed, no matter where I end up."

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