

# Back from the ‘nightmare’

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By Niles Kruger

Jackson Lamb never will forget the date.

And it’s not just because it was Friday the 13th — although in retrospect the superstitious date of bad luck seemed to fit.

On March 13, 2015, Lamb’s baseball career took an unexpected turn.

The Bedford graduate was pitching for the University of Michigan against Kansas that day when he suffered the first significant injury of his career.

“I felt fine,” he said. “I came on in relief and got out of a jam. I went out for the next inning and on the second hitter, I got him down 1-2 and threw a splitter that the guy hit for a home run.

“I felt something pop in my elbow. On the next batter I threw three straight in the dirt and my coach came running out. He knew something was wrong.”

When the injury was evaluated by doctors, Lamb heard the words that every pitcher dreads: Tommy John surgery. “It’s kind of a pitcher’s worst nightmare,” Lamb said. “You don’t need much to throw a baseball, but one thing you need is your elbow.”

For nearly a year, Lamb didn’t have his right elbow. “Usually it’s a whole year before you can throw,” he said. “I got back in about 11 months. The hardest part is getting the range of motion back. After surgery, you are in a cast for eight days. On that day they want you to try to start moving it again. It’s not a fun process. Getting that range of motion back is painful.”

The mental part of the process was difficult as well.

Lamb was still a member of Michigan’s baseball team, but he felt estranged from his teammates. He was not out on the field with them and was not allowed to go on road trips with the team.

“That year we won the Big 10 Tournament, but I didn’t get to experience it,” he said. “I was home. I didn’t get to travel with the team.”

He also had to clear the mental hurdle of throwing a baseball without thinking about getting hurt again.

“When you finally pick up a ball again and start throwing, it’s definitely in the back of your mind,” he said. “You just have to trust that the rehab process worked. You have to trust the process and do everything right.”

Lamb started his collegiate career as an outfielder.

He batted .250 in 108 at-bats as a freshman in 2014 with 8 doubles, 1 triple, 2 home runs and 12 RBI. He also made some highlight-reel defensive plays in the outfield.

But with a fastball that could reach the mid-to-high 90s, his coaches convinced Lamb that his future was on the mound.

After pitching just 6 1/3 innings as a freshman, he became a full-time pitcher in 2015. He was off to a great start with a 0.96 earned-run average in 9 1/3 innings that season before he suffered the injury.

He was able to return to the mound on March 26 of 2016.

The Michigan coaches were very careful with him that season. Lamb appeared in 10 games, working just 8 1/3 innings. He gave up 7 hits, walked 5, struck out 13 and compiled a 1.08 ERA. He recorded 2 saves.

This year the coaching staff has removed the reins from Lamb and he has thrived as the closer for the Wolverines.

He is 2-0 with a team-high 9 saves and has yet to yield an earned run with 21 strikeouts, 14 hits and just 6 walks in 22 innings.

“Last year I got a little taste of it,” Lamb said of closing. “It’s something I enjoy, but you have to get used to it. The first couple of times you go out there in that role, you are a little nervous.

“I like the closing role a lot. We have a real good feeling in our bullpen.”

The entire Michigan team has a good feeling. The Wolverines are 35-11 overall, 11-7 in the Big Ten and ranked No. 17 in the country.

“Last year we got off to a good start and then we kind of took everything for granted,” Our main focus this year is to finish strong.”

The Wolverines took two of three games over the weekend from Ohio State. The rest of their schedule is heavy on games against teams from Michigan.

They will play a home-and-home series with Central Michigan Tuesday and Wednesday, then play three games at Purdue over the weekend before finishing up the regular season against Eastern Michigan and Michigan State.

The Big Ten Tournament will be played May 24-28 at Indiana.

Lamb says he feels 100-percent recovered from the injury, but isn’t sure how fast he is throwing.

The Michigan coaching staff is not enamored with radar guns.

“They don’t give us the numbers,” Lamb said. “Our coaching staff tries to minimize that. The ball feels good coming out of my hand. I am throwing hard enough to get people out. That’s all that really matters.”

The horde of professional scouts who attend every Michigan game to watch Lamb and his teammates certainly know his velocity.

In June, the Bedford product will almost certainly be drafted by a Major League baseball team for the third time in his career.

Lamb, who was the Gatorade Michigan High School Player of the Year as a senior at Bedford, was chosen in the 20th round by the Texas Rangers in 2013. One team was ready to select him in the third round, but could not convince Lamb to give up his Michigan scholarship.

He was eligible for the draft again last year and was picked in the 35th round by the St. Louis Cardinals.

“That would definitely be something cool,” Lamb said of the prospect of being selected for a third time.

But those thought will wait until he finishes his season with the Wolverines.

“My emphasis is on staying strong and finishing strong,” said the son of Steve and Shawna Lamb of Temperance. “That’s my main emphasis. The most important day is today.”