

Danny Denz, a USPBL Unicorn Figuratively and Literally

By Brendan Pagel (June 29th 2024)

Danny Denz's journey to the USPBL wasn't a typical one, however he's thankful for the opportunity and eager to continue working hard.

Danny Denz is currently a pitcher for the Utica Unicorns within the United Shore Professional Baseball League, however his dream is to get another opportunity within a Major League Baseball Organization.

Denz knows all about what being a professional baseball player looks like as he was within the San Diego Padres Organization from 2021-2023.

Unfortunately Denz's time within the Padres organization was cut short after he needed Tommy John Surgery which made him miss the entire 2023 season and then had another setback after the injury which made the Padres opt to cut Denz back in December of 2023.

While that was certainly a tough pill for Denz to swallow he has kept his head high and has been attacking and taking advantage of his new opportunity as a Utica Unicorn.

According to Denz he was brought to the USPBL through a relationship his agent has with Utica Unicorn's manager Jim Essian.

He followed that up saying that being in this league gave him an opportunity to play again, while also helping him continue to develop so he can be the best pitcher that he can.

When Denz was asked what his favorite part of the USPBL was he first talked about how great the atmosphere was, but he also mentioned how close knit the league was.

"It is also really cool because this league is really close knit and it allows me to pick hitters' brains and help me develop as a pitcher. For me I like to ask questions to see what hitters see at the plate and that helps me because I am a big pitching nerd and I like to go off of what they see and vice versa if they have questions. It is really helpful because it helps us grow as players."

While Denz is certainly enjoying his time in the USPBL, he is also finding a lot of success on the mound.

One of the things I do here at the USPBL is run a pitch ranking that accounts for batting average against, line drive rate against, chase rate, whiff rate, strike percentage, and strikeout percentage. After running those statistics I found that Denz's sweeper was statistically the best pitch in the league for the first month of the season.

Denz's sweeper has been very successful this season as nobody has been able to record a hit off it, and the chase and whiff rate on the pitch are both extremely high at .382 and .467 respectively.

On average Denz's sweeper has a 15.1 inch horizontal run, and an average spin rate of 2827.1. Both of which are quite good at this level.

While statistically Denz's sweeper is the best pitch in the league, Denz believes that his best pitch is his cutter.

Denz's cutter is also an extremely effective pitch as opposing hitters are hitting only .182 against the pitch while also whiffing against the pitch at a .417 clip. However the numbers aren't the reason Denz believes the cutter is his best pitch.

Denz believes his cutter is his best pitch because of how it compliments his fastball and sweeper.

"I really like the pitch because it really helps separate my fastball and my sweeper and bridges the gap to get hitters off my fastball but also makes my sweeper even better having the cutter in my arsenal."

When Denz throws his sweeper he makes it an emphasis to establish the pitch in the strike zone.

"The result I am trying to get is to establish it over the plate just like any other breaking ball. Pretty much if any hitter sees it isn't the zone then it makes it easier for them to spit on it."

While many pitchers rely on breaking balls for constant swing and miss, Denz believes that his sweeper doesn't have to always have swing and miss for the pitch to be successful.

"So I am trying to establish it in the zone but also that creates room for me to generate swing and miss and weak contact. Swing and miss is great but if I can get weak contact that is all I really can ask for in getting outs."

For pitchers, hearing that you need Tommy John Surgery is usually one of the worst things you will ever have to hear.

For Denz the situation was similar, however while there were many struggles there were also a lot of learning experiences that he gained from this recovery too.

The most difficult part of the recovery period for Denz was the fact that he had to be away from the field.

For many athletes that kind of recovery can be very lonesome since most of the time has to be spent away from teammates and coaches and ultimately that can wear on individuals.

This is where Denz turned to his faith and family to help.

When talking to Denz he made it a point to talk about how his faith and love for Jesus Christ helped guide him through this very difficult time.

“Back when I was with the Padres I was in a difficult place mentally. I didn’t have a really good year in 2022 and got hurt at the end of the year and my faith put that all into perspective. Just knowing that I had my faith and that I had a really good support system in my rehab group for Tommy John helped me compliment my faith and no matter what Jesus is always there for you and always has your back so if you give everything to Him He will help you.”

He would continue talking about his faith saying “My faith has really grown over the last couple of years and it has brought me great joy and true happiness since Jesus is our lord and savior and that is something that I have grown on.”

Denz also mentioned that he learned during this recovery period that baseball doesn’t define him as a person even though he loves the game.

“Something that I learned was that baseball doesn’t define me as a person. I can say that I love this game with all of my heart but at the end of the day it doesn’t define me. That gave me a lot of clarity going through my Tommy John recovery and going into this season since baseball is just a game and it is supposed to be fun.”

He would continue saying “We can often times oppress ourselves because we obviously want to succeed and put up good numbers, but at the end of the day I know that I have my faith to back me up, and I have my wife and family that are always great for me so that makes the bad days not so bad, and the good days great, which is something that I really cherish.”

Now that Denz is back from the recovery stage, he is continuing to work hard at the USPBL as he awaits his next opportunity.

When he was asked about why another MLB organization should give him another opportunity he replied saying “I think they should give me another opportunity because I wasn’t able to show everything that I have got coming back from Tommy John Surgery.”

He continued saying “I am grateful for that because it brought me here, but at the end of the day I know I have more to offer. I am very dedicated to this game and have had aspirations of being a major leaguer as a kid and I want to continue to chase those dreams until I can’t anymore. I have a work ethic that is second to none and I just want to show what I can do.”

While Denz’s story is different and he enjoys his time at the USPBL, he knows he still has more left in the tank.

He continues to work hard and hopefully that effort continues to show at the USPBL, as well as in another MLB organization in the future.