



CHANGES OF FORTUNE

Teammates on all-star teams during their teenage years, Clayton Kershaw and Shawn Tolleson are together again in the Dodger organization.

BY CARY OSBORNE AND J.D. PRUESS



NOALL KNIGHTON



JUAN OCAMPO/JON SOOHOO PHOTOGRAPHY

At the dawn of the 2006 high school baseball season in the Dallas area, Shawn Tolleson was one of the country's hottest draft prospects. He had just completed back-to-back seasons at Allen High with sub-1.00 ERAs. He had also struck out 269 batters in just 172.2 innings in his sophomore and junior years combined.

Clayton Kershaw is thriving in the Dodger rotation and Shawn Tolleson was drafted by the Dodgers in 2010 and had a stellar debut for the Ogden Raptors.



An article in the *Dallas Morning News* centered on whether he would keep his commitment to Baylor University or sign with a Major League organization. *Baseball America* rated him the 18th-best pro prospect in the 2006 high school senior class.

At the same time and across town, another pitcher was going into his senior year as well, but not with the same amount of fanfare. Clayton Kershaw and Tolleson had been friends for several years, and had played on travel teams together, even participating on the USA Junior National team as teenagers.

While Kershaw was building a promising prep career to that point at Highland Park High, he wasn't considered the same caliber pitcher as Tolleson. By year's end, Tolleson's fortunes changed and Kershaw had achieved a meteoric rise up draft boards.

"Shawn was probably the best high school pitcher in Texas, bar none, better than any of us at the beginning of our senior years. He was looked at as probably the best guy in Texas, by far," recalled Kershaw. "It was really sad when he got hurt, his elbow blew out and he had to have Tommy John (surgery). His draft (status), in the process, was done for."

During the first game of his senior season, the highly touted Tolleson suffered a tear in his elbow. College became the option and he took the scholarship offer and went to Baylor.

"It shut down the whole draft thing for me," said Tolleson.

That same year, Kershaw blossomed. He was 13-0 with a 0.77 ERA and 139 strikeouts in 64 innings. The young left-hander was named the Gatorade National Baseball Player of the Year, among other honors, and zoomed toward the top of many teams' lists of prospective draftees.

"His senior year in high school he started throwing really hard and throwing really, really well," said Tolleson of Kershaw. "We had an off-day at my high school and I went to watch him because I was hearing how well he was doing. It was unbelievable. I think he had like 14 or 15 strikeouts."

The Dodgers selected Kershaw, who had committed to Texas A&M, with the seventh overall pick in the 2006 draft. Since then, his ride in professional baseball has been rapid. In 2007, Kershaw's first full minor league season, the left-hander jumped all the way to Double-A at the age of 19. By the following Spring Training he dazzled in big league camp and almost made the Opening Day roster just days after turning 20. When Kershaw debuted in the big leagues on May 25, 2008, he was the youngest player in the Major Leagues that season.

All along his rapid rise to the Major Leagues, Kershaw kept in touch with Tolleson, who redshirted his freshman year at Baylor while rehabilitating. The right-hander regained form in 2008, earning the program's Most Valuable Pitcher Award as a redshirt freshman and by 2010 he was ready to make the jump to professional baseball. He kiddingly called on his old friend for a little help.

COURTESY MARIANNE KERSHAW



In 2004 and 2005, Kershaw and Tolleson were teammates on the USA Junior National and traveling all-star teams.

“I told Clayton, ‘Hey, might as well play for the Dodgers if I’m going to play for anybody,’” said Tolleson. “So I told him to put in a good word for me and I’m sure he did.”

The Dodgers selected Tolleson in the 30th round of the 2010 draft. Kershaw said the credit belongs to Tolleson for putting in the work and persevering.

“Shawn got drafted on his own,” said Kershaw.

Kershaw, who turns 23 on March 19, had the best year of

his Major League career in 2010. The left-hander set career highs in wins (13), strikeouts (212), innings (204.1) and starts (32) last season.

Meanwhile, Tolleson settled into a role he had never been in before — closer. He thrived for the Dodgers’ Rookie League affiliate the Ogden Raptors. The 23-year-old Texan went 1-1 with a 0.63 ERA and 17 saves in 26 games.

“I didn’t have any doubts that he’d do well,” said Kershaw. “Those numbers are video game-like, so it’s awesome.”

At the dawn of the 2011 season, Kershaw and Tolleson are on the upswing in the same organization. They were even groomsmen at each other’s December weddings. Their fortunes may have changed as seniors in high school, but now they can look forward to one day pitching on the same staff, just like on those travel ball teams in their teens, their dreams as big as the Texas sky.

And if they do one day share the same big league clubhouse, Kershaw knows that it will be the culmination of a long road back to the top for Tolleson.

“He’ll say he was happy he went to college,” said Kershaw. “He had a great experience there. I think for him to still be able to get this opportunity is awesome. I’m really pulling for him. I hope it works out.” ■

To see more of Clayton Kershaw’s and Shawn Tolleson’s interviews, and for more Route of Champions features, please visit dodgers.com/routeofchampions.

NOALL KNIGHTON



Kershaw (right) had a stellar 2010 campaign, going 13-10 with a 2.91 ERA and 212 strikeouts in 204.1 innings for the Dodgers. Tolleson, (above) after being drafted in June 2010, shifted to closer for the Ogden Raptors and went 1-1 with a 0.63 ERA and 17 saves in 26 games.

JON SOOHO PHOTOGRAPHY

