

Seattle's Newest Southpaw

Kalispell's Joe Pistoese is ready to make the jump from college to the professional ranks after being drafted by the Seattle Mariners

BY [DILLON TABISH](#) // JUN 16, 2015 // [SPORTS](#)



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GREG LINDSTROM | FLATHEAD BEACON

In the late afternoon on June 10, as Major League Baseball teams decided the fate of anxious young men around the country and a group of teenagers warmed up at the field in Kalispell, life seemed to round the bases for Joe Pistoese.

Back home, the 22-year-old lefty tossed the ball around with a friend and former teammate.



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STANDINGS



Softball

05/21

NORTHWESTERN AOVR CNF

Frenchtown	21-2	6-2
Polson	18-7	5-3
Libby	17-6	5-3
Columbia Falls	16-6	4-4
Whitefish	1-19	0-8

WESTERN AA OVR CNF

Glacier	19-3	10-2
Missoula Big Sky	20-4	9-3
Helena Capital	13-8	9-3
Helena	13-9	8-4

“This is where it all started,” Pistorese said at Griffin Field, the home of the Kalispell Lakers legion baseball program.



The scene was reminiscent of four years earlier, when “The Pistol” was graduating from Flathead High School as the most dominating pitcher in Montana and garnering attention from professional franchises and top universities. That year the

Chicago White Sox [drafted Pistorese in the 44th round](#) of the amateur draft, but the adolescent ace honored his commitment to play at Washington State University, following his father’s advice.

Four years and 369 innings later, one of the best pitchers in the Pac-12 Conference arrived back home stronger, more mature and well prepared for the future.

But last week the future was surrounded with uncertainty.

Pistorese spent two days sitting in stressful isolation at his parent’s home as the MLB draft commenced with rapid, ruthless inertia. Then, just before noon, his mother, Linda, startled him with screaming excitement. And then the Seattle Mariners called.

In the 17th round of the draft, Pistorese’s name [was announced with the 515th pick](#), higher than any other player ever from the Flathead Valley.

“I just kept on looking at my list of eight million players. I said, ‘You know what? I’d be a fool not to take this guy,’” Tom McNamara, director of scouting for the Seattle Mariners, [told the Seattle Times about Pistorese](#).

“I don’t think I was necessarily nervous. It was anxiousness,” Pistorese said afterward. “Obviously it’s a big moment in my life, but I was confident that I would get a shot to play at the next level. I was just hoping it would be sooner than later.”

Missoula Sentinel	5-17	4-8
Missoula Hellgate	3-17	1-11

A real estate advertisement for RE/MAX. The background is a scenic mountain landscape with a lake in the foreground. The RE/MAX logo is at the top in red and blue, with the tagline 'HOME AGAIN REAL' below it. In the middle, the word 'Residential' is written in red. To the right, there is a small inset image of a house. Below that, the word 'Land' is partially visible in red. At the bottom, a blue banner contains the text 'FIND YOUR HOME' in white.

After being drafted and swarmed with congratulatory calls from family and friends, Pistorese fled to his favorite safe haven for a workout.

When he arrived at Griffin Field that afternoon, he received a fitting gift from his friend — an unblemished Mariners cap. His former coach embraced him with a hug — “We’re all proud of you” — as young players looked on.

“When we first had him in legion baseball, we knew he was talented and that he was going to be special. And he is,” said Ryan Malmin, head coach of the Lakers. “It’s been a great thing to see how successful he’s been. The kid deserves it.”



Joe Pistorese helps out at practice for the Kalispell Lakers on June 10, 2015. Greg Lindstrom | Flathead Beacon

Now begins a rare new journey.

Two days after being drafted, Pistorese flew to Arizona to sign a minor-league contract with the Mariners.

Seattle has minor league affiliates in Tacoma, Washington (AAA), Jackson, Tennessee (AA), Bakersfield, California (Advanced A), Clinton, Iowa (A) and Everett, Washington (Short-Season A).

Pistorese will begin this summer with the Everett AquaSox, a popular small-town club north of Seattle. He was [added to the roster](#) and the season begins this week.

As fate would have it, the AquaSox play just north of Bellevue, where Pistorese was born. When he was a young boy, Pistorese and his family frequented the Kingdome and Safeco Field in Seattle to watch the M's play. That's when he developed a passion for baseball.

"I can name every player from the '99 Mariners," he said.

The Pistorese family moved to Kalispell when Joe was 6, and from there the left-handed pitcher grew into a hard-throwing ace for the Lakers who once struck out 21 batters in a game at the state tournament and [also notched a perfect game](#).

His minor-league journey will also begin in the same state as his college ball.

Pistorese, a 2011 Flathead High School graduate, was a four-year starter at Washington State University and finished his senior season with an 8-5 record and 2.41 ERA while starting all 15 games he pitched. The 6-foot-2 pitcher had 67 strikeouts in 104 innings and four complete games this spring. He was named first-team All-Pac 12 after the season and [twice was named Pac-12 Pitcher of the Week](#). He ended his career at WSU as the all-time leader in innings pitched (369) and tied for most career starts (55).

"Throughout his career, he's been a great game-time competitor," Gregg Swenson, the pitching coach at WSU, said. "As he grew in the program and grew up physically and mentally, all the preparation in between games got better and better. Last year he took it to another level."

Swenson is confident that Pistorese will hold his own in the minor leagues and hopefully rise through the ranks. The Kalispell pitcher can hit 92 mph on the radar gun and has a sharp curveball that fooled some of the best batters in the Pac 12 over the last four years.

“He could be a starter in the big leagues. As long as he can just continue to maintain the workmanlike effort and just really compete at the high level that he can, I see no worries of him moving up the ladder in the minors,” Swenson said.

Of course, making it in the minors is a challenging task. Every year there are roughly 4,500 players in the minor leagues. There are only 750 roster positions in the major leagues among the 30 franchises. An estimated 10 percent of minor league players make an appearance in the majors.

Josh Fields, a former standout pitcher from Columbia Falls, played eight seasons at all levels in the minors, a remarkably long career compared to the average three- to five-year span. After graduating from Mesa Community College in Arizona, Fields was drafted by the Chicago White Sox in the 23rd round of the 2001 MLB draft.

“It’s a pretty cutthroat business. You either perform or you don’t. And there’s always someone next in line trying to take your job,” Fields said.

Fields started out at the Rookie A level similar to Pistoese, and the Columbia Falls product made it all the way to the AAA ranks and even received an invite to spring training.

“It’s performance based. In Joe’s situation, he’ll have to take the ball every opportunity and try to make the most of it,” said Fields, who was hobbled by two shoulder surgeries and played his last season in 2008. “It takes some luck and a lot of hard work. The hard work now just begins for Joe.”

Montana has seen over 60 players move on to the minors. Along with Pistoese and Fields, the Flathead has seen a good crop of players make the jump. The New York Mets selected Kalispell’s Richard Eckleberry in the 23rd round of the 1978 draft.

Columbia Falls’ Chuck Higson was taken by the New York Mets in the 28th round of the 1982 draft. Kalispell’s Dan Sibling was taken by the Philadelphia Phillies in the 31st round of the 1983 draft. Also, Libby’s Mitch Fahland went in the 23rd round of the 1970 draft. He was selected by the Chicago Cubs.

“It’s the toughest job I’ve ever had and the toughest job I will ever have. It’s a grind,” Fields said.

But, he added, “I wouldn’t trade it for the world. And it’s a good opportunity for Joe. Hopefully he gets put in some good situations and has some success.”

Playing catch at Griffin Field last week, wearing his Mariners cap, Pistorese had the same calm demeanor that he always had in the past. But there was no mistaking a new intensity, an intensity that could best be described by the loud pop of his pitches hitting the leather mitt with each throw.

“I’m excited to see what comes around the corner,” he said.

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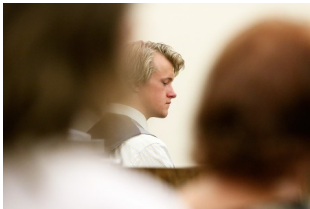
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