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Redbird Buzz Episode 5: Ryan Cermak and Steve Holm

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Redbird Buzz

Episode 5: Ryan Cermak and Steve Holm

July 2022

John Twork 00:09

Welcome to Redbird Buzz. I'm John Twork from University Marketing and Communications. Today we're talking baseball with one of the best to ever suit up for the Illinois State University baseball team, third year sophomore Ryan Cermak, a recreation management major from Riverside, Illinois. We're also joined by Redbird baseball head coach Steve Holm who just wrapped up his fourth season in Normal. Originally a shortstop and pitcher, Cermak transitioned to the outfield early during the 2021 season, and since then he solidified himself as one of the nation's premier hitters and defenders. Just recently, Cermak became the first Redbird in program history to be named a Gold Glove winner by ABCA/Rawlings. He was also named the Missouri Valley Conference Defensive Player of the Year and was a First Team All-MVC Selection for the second straight season. He finished with a team high 340 batting average with 43 RBIs, 45 runs scored and 19 home runs, becoming the first Redbird since 1999 to hit at least 15 in a single season, and tied for the second highest mark for a single season in school history. Cermak was also an MVC Scholar-Athlete First Team Selection. Now Cermak is preparing for the Major League Baseball draft which takes place July 17 through the 19th and scouts project Cermak as a potential top five round pick, according to the Baseball Prospect Journal.

John Twork 01:41

It's my pleasure to welcome Gold Glover Ryan Cermak to Redbird Buzz along with Illinois State head baseball coach Steve Holm. What's the word, Redbird? Ryan, your post-season awards have continued piling up. What does all this recognition mean to you as you wrap up your college career ahead of the draft?

Ryan Cermak 01:58

It means a lot. A lot of my family has always had my back and always had faith in me and also alongside me, Steve Holm, and he's always had my back. And that just means a lot, that I can really show out.

John Twork 02:11

Let's go back to the very beginning. At what age did you start playing baseball for the first time and when did you realize that was going to be the sport for you?

Ryan Cermak 02:18

It probably started out when my first word was "ball." It was definitely that. I remember my mom would videotape everything as a kid and it would just be baseball, baseball, baseball. So I was probably three years old when I picked up a bat.

John Twork 02:35

Your dad also played college baseball?

Ryan Cermak 02:37

Yeah, he played junior college at Triton in Chicago.

John Twork 02:42

And your mom is an Illinois State alum and she was involved in athletics too, right?

Ryan Cermak 02:45

Yeah, both of them are Illinois State alums. And my mom, she worked in a health department so we've been around the athletic family.

John Twork 02:56

Always moving, probably.

Ryan Cermak 02:57

Always moving.

John Twork 02:59

You're from Riverside, Illinois and northwest suburban Chicago and I understand that, you know, you didn't have a ton of Division One offers out of Riverside, Brookfield High School, but what made you decide to come to Illinois State?

Ryan Cermak 03:11

I, I loved the coach. I really, I really love the coach. I love the facilities here and I love the weight room. I love the weight room. So everything was perfect for it.

John Twork 03:24

And Coach Holm, Ryan was among some of your first recruits. Can you talk about what was appealing as you were going through that process about Ryan, coming out of high school?

Steve Holm 03:36

Well, you know, he was committed here before we got the job and then when they made a move on the previous coach, Ryan, he committed, which is very, very common for that situation to occur. And so, you know, at that point we were trying to put back together the class and, you know, we went out and looked at some of the players, some of them we tried to get back, some of them we didn't. And with Ryan, I vividly remember we were playing - or, he was playing over in Indianapolis and he was playing shortstop and, you know, we needed a shortstop, but every time we went to see him we were like, I don't know if he's a shortstop, but you always came away that he made every play and you just, you walked away going, I cannot say that he's not going to play shortstop, even though the body was, you know, he looked like he was going to fill out. And honestly it reminded me a little bit of myself because I played shortstop all the way through college and I was too big for the position. I ended up playing

catcher in pro ball but ultimately I could pull the baseball, which he could really do, even to a fault early on and he pulled it too far foul, but and then he had the arm strength because he also closed out the game that I saw him play shortstop. That game, I think, he came in and pitched the last two innings, but and that's exactly what I was doing at high school and it just, I was like, we have a similar frame, the arm strength was the same, the bat speed was the same, and everyone kept saying that I couldn't play shortstop and I ultimately did and I did not have to move to outfield like Ryan. But ultimately, you know, it was just one of those things. He was always in the right place at the right time as a baseball player and you know, you just, you bet on a good player when you see him and obviously he came in and, you know, the [run tool?] really progressed for him in a fantastic way, he continue to get faster and faster and faster, which is what allowed the move to center field to be so beneficial for him.

John Twork 05:25

Ryan, you were a freshman during the COVID-shortened 2020 season. You started 13 of the team's total 16 games, all 13 of the games that you played in were off to a pretty good start. And then how challenging was that to have your first season just abruptly cut short? And also, did you take away anything from that experience?

Ryan Cermak 05:43

Yeah, well, it was tough, you know. I was a freshman and I, I was sort of getting used to college pitching and it taught me a little bit, and I was struggling a lot and then I started getting used to it. And Florida State, I felt pretty good, I hit a nice double off of bounds. Like okay, I'm starting to get the hang of it a little bit. And then I'm pretty sure it was either that night or the day after everything got banked. And what I learned from that is just don't take anything for granted, because you never know when something will end, if it's COVID or if it's an injury, anything along those lines.

John Twork 06:24

And then I would imagine you had to take some personal initiative as a freshman to stay in shape and to keep locked in. I mean, it was unknown at that point when the next season would even be, you know, and so, you know, how did you get through that physically and mentally, that big break in the action?

Ryan Cermak 06:42

Yeah. Lucky for me, a good friend of my mom and dad had a squat rack and a bunch of weights that he gave to me. And so I'd be in my basement, I'd be, you know, utilizing the squat rack pretty much every day and then I eventually, once when summertime came around, there was only about two leagues open and I ended up playing in an Indianapolis league and that helped me keep in shape.

John Twork 07:14

Sure. And then Steve, you alluded to the move to center field for Ryan after starting as a third baseman as a freshman. Can you talk about the thought process behind that move? It worked out pretty well for him.

Steve Holm 07:26

We actually threw him out in center field at the end of the fall for like two days and, and I told him at the time, I said, hey, this is just so we can get somebody else. I'll look at third base, don't worry, you're not

going to move to the outfield. But maybe behind the scenes I was thinking that might occur eventually for him. But, you know, we started out, I think we were at Oklahoma State and he had a rough weekend. They were definitely, you know, he was in his own head as a hitter and it was kind of taken out to the defensive side. And we went to - I think the next weekend was Southeast Missouri State and then he, that weekend, I think the first game wasn't very good. So he sat, you know, and I told him, I said, hey, you're gonna sit next to me during the game. And he just sat there and, you know, I told him, like, he's putting so much pressure on himself and the game's not as hard as you're making it be right now. But at the end of the game, you know, I said, are you ready to play tomorrow? And he said, yeah, and I said, well, you're gonna play the outfield, and I'm gonna put you out in right field. I said, just go for it. So he went out there and there was a ball that, like a sinking liner, and he dove and he might have missed it by 15 feet, 20 feet, and then went past him to the wall, and then you see his numbers, he's just chasing after this ball and he comes back in, he's kind of looking at me, like, yeah, man, I really screwed that up. And I said, hey, just keep going for it. I said, you know, we moved him to the center the next day, I said, you're gonna play center field, you're gonna fit out there really well, but don't ever not do what you just did. Just put your nose down and go for it, you know, pedal to the metal and that's essentially what he did and, you know, it started showing up about two weeks in, you started seeing him make some plays that you're like, holy smokes, like he, you just knew he felt comfortable. And when he felt comfortable on the defensive side, I think that's when you saw the offense really take the turn, you know, on the skyward north part where he started. He wasn't putting as much pressure on himself as a player anymore and he was just able to play defensively which allowed the offense to flourish.

John Twork 07:26

What do you attribute to such a - he's like flipping a switch almost, going from shortstop to center field. And you said within two weeks he looked comfortable out there, is that just his flexibility as a player, baseball IQ, all of the above?

Steve Holm 09:39

I think it's the athleticism, you know, like - and I used a similar move, but for myself, they always thought like I was a good player, but ultimately the athleticism fit behind the plate. His athleticism - because he was playing third base he can really run at this point, and at third base you're like, the range is showing up as a step and a dive, like you're not even able to see how fast he is. And once we put them out in the outfield, there was players on our own team going, gosh, I didn't know Cermak was that fast. And it was because we were limiting him at third base to his athleticism. And then once you put him out there it just flourished, you know, and that's where he fits. Like, ultimately, the game of baseball is somewhat of a combine. And, you know, if you ran him through a combine you would look at him and go, okay, he should play center field. And that's ultimately where he ended up.

John Twork 10:26

Let's hear your side of the story, you know, getting moved to the center field. And so you go from, you know, just starting, coming up 15 feet short of that line drive to winning a Gold Glove this past season. You know, what's been the process over these past two years to becoming an elite center fielder? I imagine there's, you know, mental toughness, physical toughness, all that. How have you achieved that?

Ryan Cermak 10:53

No, moving to the outfield was definitely a blessing in disguise. Just, I think it was just taking the reps and batting practice and then, like he said, a few games in the fall, just getting live reads off the bat. And, you know, I had to realize, like, I didn't have the fastest corner outfielders my sophomore year and so I had to realize I really had to cover all the grounds. And I guess that's sort of just knowing your teammates, because this past year I had a little bit faster corner outfielders. And it sort of just knowing your surroundings, knowing where the wall is and knowing how vocal your other corner outfielders are. I think it's just a learning process. And I'm still learning, you know, but I truly think it was my athleticism that took over.

John Twork 11:46

You've made a lot of highlight reel catches, and - is it fun? I mean, have you realized like, hey, this is a ton of fun being out here in the outfield?

Ryan Cermak 11:56

Yeah. I - homeruns is a lot of fun but you don't get the opportunity to get a diving ball every game, you don't have the opportunity to climb a wall every game and rob a home run. So sometimes I think robbing a home run is better than hitting a home run.

John Twork 12:19

Let's talk about hitting home runs while you're talking about that. You know, we've talked a lot about your defense, but you're also an elite hitter. What's your approach at the plate and has that changed at all your last three years at ISU?

Ryan Cermak 12:31

Yeah, it's definitely changed throughout the year. My first year, I don't even think I had an approach -

Steve Holm 12:38

It was swing and swing hard.

Ryan Cermak 12:41

Yeah, if the ball was 48 feet in front of the plate, I'd be swinging at it. And I think that came with time and practice and reps, realizing that that the game's not that fast as you want it to be. And so I started have a yes, yes, yes approach, meaning the pitch is in the right spot, yes, yes, yes, and if it's the ball, yes, yes, no. And that's sort of me. And I also have, in the back of my head, I don't care what the pitcher is throwing me, I'm gonna hit the heck out of it. And from there, I think that really helped me.

John Twork 13:17

Has the game slowed down for you?

Ryan Cermak 13:19

Oh yeah, it's slowed down. If you look at videos of freshman year, you can see I was swinging out of my feet, and now even this year, a few times, I was swinging out of my feet and sometimes you got to take a step back and, and calm down and just be you.

John Twork 13:34

How do you figure all that out? Is that coaching, staff, teammates, yourself?

Ryan Cermak 13:40

Steve knows when I'm a little antsy at the play and he'll talk to me and he'll work with me and he's really helped me with that.

John Twork 13:50

You want to add on to that, Steve, about any advice that you've given Ryan that seems to have stuck?

Steve Holm 13:56

I think it's just the maturation of a player. Obviously, your freshman year, everyone has been a freshman at times and he certainly had freshman moments. But even during that freshman season, I remember there was a line drive up the middle against Arkansas. And we'd beat Arkansas that day and they were, you know, obviously a Top 25 team. And you knew that when you put him on stage in a place like that, that he still stood out. And so at that point you knew he was going to be fine, but it was just, you know, sometimes northern hitters, they haven't played as much outside baseball's as some - like, I came from California, and some of those kids have been playing 11 months out of the year. So there's some pitch recognition and some decision-making skills that are not as honed in for a northern player, you know, early on in their career and, and I think that's why you see the trajectory, you know, to where if you look at the freshman year to the sophomore, to junior year and you're like, wow, it's really, really on an upward trajectory. And part of that is just the fact that, you know, he didn't get to play as much outside baseball at some of these other guys. But ultimately, you know, the athleticism was always there to make those adjustments. He just needed the repetitions to allow it to come out.

John Twork 15:02

Steve, you've coached some great players throughout your coaching career, played with some great players. With all that perspective in mind, what's so special about Ryan Cermak?

Steve Holm 15:11

I did an interview earlier in the year and they asked me, like, what I look for when I recruit. And it's - I said, I like to go see a kid who smiles when he plays. And if you watch those highlights, or you watch, you know, Ryan play, you see him smile. And it's kind of a [inaudible] thing where, when guys are smiling, it means the game's not that difficult for him, but it also means they enjoy the game. And, you know, people talked about Ryan's work ethic, and, oh, he goes out and hits at night or whatever. And I don't see that as, like, that's not a work ethic, he just likes to do it. And if you like to do it, it's not really work at that point. So I don't think that he goes to the cage at night and he's like, man, I really need to work and hit, I think he goes to the cage at night because he enjoys what he's doing. And that's not the case for every guy on your team. We got, you know, 35 players and they don't all love the game, you know, at a certain level. And I think he just loves playing baseball and that's why you see him smiling. And you see him smiling because, you know, he's having fun and the game is not overwhelming to him. Sometimes, you know, if you look at the end of my career, there wasn't a whole lot of smiles, you know, the game started getting overwhelming when he's above 30 years old. But ultimately, you know, the

really good players tend to have a smile on their face, because the game is not super hard but also they're enjoying what they do.

John Twork 15:17

Is that true? Is it fun?

Ryan Cermak 15:51

No, yeah, I'm a kid on a playground out there, on the monkey bars. It's, it's truly that.

John Twork 16:37

And Coach alluded to the extra work that you put in as well. And I read somewhere that you and a teammate, you know, after a long day, including lifting and practice and classes, go back at night to get some extra hits. And what brings you to the batting cage late at night?

Ryan Cermak 16:56

It sort of relaxes me, and it sort of puts me in the right mindset for the next day. It makes me feel like I earned the next day. And, you know, like, I like earning my days, if that makes sense. I think it's just that.

John Twork 17:11

Yeah. And speaking of everything that a student-athlete has to do, you know, I mentioned that you were a Missouri Valley Conference Scholar-Athlete First Team Selection, a 3.77 GPA in recreation management. Congratulations on that and how do you manage to balance it all?

Ryan Cermak 17:30

I don't think it's as hard as people think, like you see some people with lower GPAs, some people with higher. The people with higher, like, they might not be as smart as people with lower, it's just like, you just got to do the work and some people just don't want to do the work. And I think I just did the work and it ended up being pretty good for me.

John Twork 17:50

The recreation management, can you talk a little bit about why you chose that major? It seems like that's something like kind of what your mom does, right?

Ryan Cermak 17:58

Yeah. At the end of the day, hopefully 15 years from now, I want to open up my own gym and train young athletes. And I think I'd have a really fun time with that.

John Twork 18:09

Fantastic. Well, that experience at ISU will come in handy for sure. Right as the college baseball season's wrapped up, and now you're reflecting on your time as a Redbird ahead of the draft, can you talk about what you've gained from your experiences with your teammates and also playing for Coach Holm?

Ryan Cermak 18:27

Yeah. I think it's just enjoy your time. Take it day by day. You know, I'm not going to see a lot of the guys I played with for a long time. Maybe we'll have a reunion 20 years from now and we'll all see each other, but you just got to cherish the moments you have in the time being and you can't look at the future, like, too much. You have to but not too much.

John Twork 18:54

Yeah, absolutely. The draft is quickly approaching and as I mentioned earlier, scouts are projecting you as a potential top five round pick. First of all, has it always been your dream to play Major League Baseball?

Ryan Cermak 19:08

Yeah, it has. As a kid I've always wanted to play for as long as I can - I remember talking with my dad when I was a young kid and he said, well, we both said if I'm the 40th rounder, very last pick, like, that'd be a blessing. And now there's only 20 rounds. And even if I was the 20th - 20th round, last pick, like, it'd still be a blast, you know.

John Twork 19:34

Has there been a moment maybe recently in which you realize like, hey, this, this is gonna happen. This might happen.

Ryan Cermak 19:43

Yeah, it was our pro day in the fall. I wasn't expecting, like, too many scouts, maybe like four or five and then I don't know, there's maybe 25 scouts there. And I was like, whoah, I think Steve pulled me aside and he was like, you know all these guys are here for you, right? I was just like, no. But I think it was sort of there where I had to prove something.

John Twork 20:10

Yeah. Steve, one last question for you. You know, clearly MLB scouts, all those scouts who were there and who have seen Ryan throughout the past couple of seasons, have been impressed by, you know, I've read about this well-rounded tool set, you know, he's, he's fast, he's athletic. From your perspective, how will Ryan's skills as a college baseball player translate to the pros? You've played in the big leagues yourself so you have that experience. And then also, is there anything about Ryan that might be beneficial to a big league team that might not show up on a scouting report?

Steve Holm 20:47

Yeah, so, when you jump into the minor leagues, I mean, you're essentially, you're playing with the best player on every team, you know, there's usually one or two guys from each team that's gonna get drafted and, you know, you're basically making an all-star team so the skill set starts to come into play. In college baseball, I think you can get away with having lesser skill set as long as you have tremendous mentality. In pro ball, everyone drafts skill set, and then the mentality, the mentality really is what starts to separate players, because you're all much more even field when it comes to the actual raw skills. So with that, you know, the thing that some of the scouts have continued to look at with Ryan, and they call me and they're like, hey, you know, they're trying to do background info on him. I'm

like, the kid has always performed. So you're looking at a highly skilled athlete who has also performed, because that doesn't always happen, because the performance usually comes with the mindset part. So I think the mindset is going to allow them to get in there. And I mean, you're gonna have some bumps in the road and coming up through the minor leagues, that's just the way it works. But the fact that he loves the game, so the work isn't necessarily extra work, per se, that really is going to help because that separates people. I played with lots of players that are very, very talented, but they didn't like baseball, you know, they would rather be playing football, or they'd be rather, you know, going out at night, or whatever that may be. But the true love of the baseball player, those were the guys that, when push came to shove, they took the next step. And I think with Ryan, I think he really does love playing baseball. He loves to be out there, you know, you see him, like, we're talking about smiling when he's playing. And when you get to the big leagues, I mean, there's 750 humans in the world playing in the big leagues at any point. And that's not through - like, in college, we have like four classes, right? I mean, this is, guys that are 20 all the way up to 40. So you essentially have 20 classes with who knows how many countries, you know, trying to vie for those 750 spots, and half of them are pitchers. So with that, I mean, it becomes a dog-eat-dog world, but the separators become the skill set and then the mentality and I think he does well on both of those.

John Twork 22:59

Ryan, tell us what you're up to now. We're just a few days away from the draft. What are you doing to make final preparations for that and then what are your plans for draft day?

Ryan Cermak 23:10

For the next about two weeks I'm working out, just staying in shape, trying to get stronger, trying to keep weight, not lose too much weight, just get stronger and keep hitting. And what was it?

John Twork 23:28

Your plans for draft day.

Ryan Cermak 23:29

Oh, plans for draft day. I'm gonna have a little party back at my house, probably live stream it somewhere. When my name gets called, just be with my family and friends.

John Twork 23:43

Looking forward to hearing your name called, Ryan. All right, you've done a great job with all the questions so far. You're known for your hitting ability so I have some fastball questions to send your way right now. Favorite class at ISU?

Ryan Cermak 23:59

It's any class with my favorite professor, Jeff Nix. He just made every class fun and I wish I was taking another class next year. That's just all debate stuff and I really love that but -

John Twork 24:12

What department?

Ryan Cermak 24:14
Parks and Rec. Yeah.

John Twork 24:14
Okay, fantastic. Peanuts or Cracker Jacks?

Ryan Cermak 24:20
That's a tough one. I love peanuts but I think I'm gonna have to go Cracker Jacks. I like them more, like, I don't know, sweet.

John Twork 24:28
Old school. What would be your MLB walk up song?

Ryan Cermak 24:34
I think I'd have to stick with "Walk Through" by Rich Homie Quan, "feeling like the man when I walk through."

John Twork 24:42
Who?

Ryan Cermak 24:43
Rich, Rich Homie Quan.

Steve Holm 24:47
Is that what you used this year?

Ryan Cermak 24:48
Yeah, that's what I used this year.

Steve Holm 24:50
For a million dollars I never would have been able to say Rich Homie Quan.

John Twork 24:54
I just shook my head like I knew.

Steve Holm 24:55
[Cross talk] that song, yeah, sorry.

John Twork 24:57
Has that been your walk up song your whole college career?

Ryan Cermak 25:00
No, last year I had a Soulja Boy walk up song but this was a new one. I'm debating on switching it up every year but for now it's going to be "Walk Thru."

Steve Holm 25:14

If it works!

Ryan Cermak 25:15

Yeah!

Steve Holm 25:16

Rich Homie Quan.

John Twork 25:22

I'm gonna throw a fastball here, but you can hit any pitch. Pre-game ritual - is there anything interesting or weird that you do?

Ryan Cermak 25:32

I don't think there's anything too weird that I do. I know I always have to eat because I feel -

Ryan Cermak 25:38

No, I feel like my dad, when I was younger, he always said, oh, one more Wheatie this morning and you would have hit that ball out at the [inaudible] and so I sort of think of that.

John Twork 25:39

You got to eat your Wheaties! If you weren't going to the big leagues, or Major League Baseball, what career would you want?

John Twork 25:39

Who doesn't?

Ryan Cermak 26:01

I think I briefly talked about, I want to be a strength coach for younger kids. I think I just want to stay involved in the sports industry and see kids, like, grow as other strength coaches have seen me grow.

John Twork 26:16

And so ultimately you still want to do that after a pro career, sounds like.

Ryan Cermak 26:20

Yeah.

John Twork 26:20

Awesome. Would you rather be at the plate or playing center field?

Ryan Cermak 26:26

That's actually a really tough one... I think I'm gonna have to go to the plate. I think I just love hitting. When I'm up there, I don't think there's a - I don't think there's a better feeling than hitting a home run. I know I talked about it earlier, robbing a home run, hitting a home run. It's tough. It's a coin flip.

John Twork 26:49

Yeah, well, you're great at both so that's good. Your favorite Illinois State jersey/hat combination.

Ryan Cermak 26:55

I'm gonna have to go pin stripes. I love a good pin stripe jersey. I liked the fit of it. And we had the red hat with it. I think it was a solid look overall.

John Twork 27:05

Classic look, goes right with those Cracker Jacks. Lastly, favorite memory from this past Illinois State baseball season.

Ryan Cermak 27:15

This past season I think it was, we were down, we were down two runs. It was Missouri State. I hit a home run in the eighth inning after, god, a three-hour delay. And I hit a home run to tie it up and it was just, it was a bad day, all rain, and we finally got things going again and we were ready to take the field and then Jake McCall behind me, he goes back-to-back. It swung over everything and hits it into the the parking lot and it was just an absolute bomb, he mashed that ball and we ended up winning because of his home run and I think that was a pretty cool moment.

John Twork 28:02

Fantastic. Well, you have a lot of great memories from Illinois State. Maybe the best thing is you've got so many memories to make ahead of you. So thank you so much Ryan Cermak, best of luck in the Major League Baseball draft. And Coach Steve Holmes, thanks for joining us today.

John Twork 28:28

That was Illinois State baseball Gold Glover Ryan Cermak and Redbird baseball head coach Steve Holm. The Major League Baseball draft takes place July 17 through July 19. Check GoRedbirds.com for updates. Thanks for listening to Redbird Buzz and be sure to tune in next time for more stories from beyond the quad.