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Wisler making the adjustments to continue success in MLB

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Tampa Bay Rays relief pitcher Matt Wisler works against the Boston Red Sox during the seventh inning of Thursday's baseball game in St. Petersburg, Florida.

AP Photo/Chris O'Meara

Editor's note: This story has been updated to include Matt Wisler's relief appearance late Friday night vs. the Los Angeles Angels.

Matt Wisler has had to make quite a few adjustments throughout his MLB career.

But a couple of the Bryan native's most recent ones have led to a big start with his latest team.

A rectangular advertisement for Defiance College. The top section has a purple background with white text that reads: "You don't have to go far from home to 'Defi the ordinary' college experience." Below this is a white section containing the Defiance College logo, which is a diamond shape with a circular pattern inside, followed by the text "DEFIANCE COLLEGE" in purple. The bottom section has a yellow background with purple text that reads: "98% Career Placement Rate" and "Click Here to Apply NOW!".

You don't have to go far from home to "Defi the ordinary" college experience.

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After a hectic three-day stretch in mid-June in which the right-handed relief pitcher was designated for assignment by the San Francisco Giants and traded to the Tampa Bay Rays, Wisler has been nearly perfect since joining the defending American League champions.

"Obviously, (it's) unfortunate what happened with the Giants. I was hoping for better results over there, but the results just never really came," Wisler said in a phone interview with *The Bryan Times* on Tuesday. "I kind of shot myself in the foot my first two weeks of the season there.

"I thought I made some good adjustments and I was getting back on the right track, just not as consistent as I'd like to be over there, so I understood the move, getting released by them. But then getting picked up by the Rays is pretty exciting.

"Obviously, especially knowing what they've done over the last couple of years or so, and the guys and the arms in their system, guys who get traded and what they turn them into. I felt like I'm probably getting back in the rhythm where I was right before getting designated.

"... I've just been feeling a lot better with mechanical changes that I was trying to work on coming over from the Giants, and just hopefully put them into place right now."

Wisler, a 2011 Bryan High School graduate, has strung together plenty of stellar pitching performances in his seven years in the majors.

The last two weeks have been no exception.

In seven appearances with the Rays, Wisler has allowed just one hit in 7 1/3 scoreless innings. He has nine strikeouts and one walk.

In his latest appearance Friday night, Wisler pitched one scoreless inning and had one strikeout in the Rays' 4-3 victory over the Los Angeles Angels. He earned his sixth hold of the season after helping Tampa Bay maintain its one-run lead in the eighth inning.

On Thursday, Wisler tossed 1 1/3 innings and had one strikeout and one walk in the Rays' 1-0 victory over the Boston Red Sox.

His ERA has dropped to a season-low 4.39.

"Just continuing the adjustments mechanically that I was making with my back leg and stuff, staying in my back leg a little bit better," Wisler said. "They just preach throwing a lot of strikes here.

"I've felt like I've done a pretty good job of it this year, but I think the quality of my slider has just been getting better as the season progresses. I'm at a point now where I feel really good with my slider, more consistent movement like I had last year, and that's starting to come out a little bit more and just attacking the zone as much as I can."

Wisler, who signed a one-year deal with San Francisco on Dec. 8, was traded from the Giants along with cash considerations to the Rays for minor-league left-handed pitcher Michael Plassmeyer on June 11. The move came two days after the designation.

"Obviously, it's never ideal to get released from a team, so that's always not fun," Wisler said. "... I was a little bit nervous at that time. I didn't know if I would get picked up.

"Obviously, my ERA wasn't where I wanted it to be, but I felt like I had pitched a lot better than that ERA had shown. Luckily, a team took me, especially being the Rays is definitely exciting. Getting a chance to go down there, go to another first-place team, a team that's trying to win a World Series this year is pretty cool."

During the shortened 2020 season, Tampa Bay rolled to the AL East title after going 40-20 in the regular season. The Rays beat the Houston Astros 4-3 in the best-of-seven series for the AL pennant before falling to the Los Angeles Dodgers in the World Series.

Tampa Bay (46-31) has kept its solid play going this season. The Rays won two of three games from the Red Sox (45-31) this week to take a 1/2-game lead in the division. Both teams won Friday night.

"They've been great. Good clubhouse, and the coaching staff's really relaxed, really low-key," Wisler said of Tampa Bay. "But they're really smart.

"Anything that they see they're going to come to me with and so far, they've just been trying to get to know me, know what I do, see what I do over the course of the rest of the year. I'm sure they'll come to me if they see anything that they want to change."

Wisler has been strong for the past two months. In May, he allowed two earned runs on five hits in 8 2/3 innings (2.08 ERA). He racked up 12 strikeouts with just one walk.

So far in June, he has a 1.00 ERA after allowing just one earned run on five hits in nine innings, with 11 strikeouts and two walks.

A rough two weeks to start his tenure with the Giants, though, was hard for Wisler to overcome.

In his season opener on April 1 against the Seattle Mariners, Wisler allowed three earned runs on two hits with one walk. He did not record an out in the Giants' 8-7 loss in 10 innings.

In his first six appearances, he had an 0-2 record and a blown save with a 17.18 ERA. Wisler improved significantly in late April and lowered his ERA to 9.00 on April 22 before a couple tough outings to cap off the month pushed it to 10.00.

"I think a lot of it, the pitching coach out there found a slight thing in my mechanics where I was just kind of getting it into my toe and it was hard for me to get consistent break on my slider," Wisler said. "Once he kind of diagnosed that, it took a while for me to get there consistently where I need to be and get that feel back that I had last year that made me really consistent with my slider.

"Once I got that consistent break back to my slider, everything's kind of clicked into place. Obviously, my slider's my big pitch so not having that at the beginning of the season was kind of a struggle ... Since then, kind of settled down, got my stuff more or less where it needs to be and now I can go out there and pitch the way I know I can."

For the season, Wisler has a 1-2 record. He has allowed 13 runs (all earned) on 20 hits in 26 2/3 innings pitched, with 35 strikeouts and seven walks.

With the 2021 season returning to a full 162-game schedule, staying healthy will be key for players, especially pitchers. Wisler has already thrown more than he did last season in a strong year with the Minnesota Twins when he posted career bests in ERA (1.07) and opposing batting average (.165) in 25 1/3 innings.

"For me, it's just everyday maintenance stuff. I do a pretty good job taking care of my body with workouts in the offseason, workouts in season, so for me, it's just kind of the routine-base stuff that I do to take care of my body," he said.

Wisler's MLB journey has included seven teams. The former two-time all-Ohioan for the Golden Bears and 2011 seventh-round draft pick by San Diego has played for the Atlanta Braves (2015-17, 2018), Cincinnati Reds (2018), Padres (2019) and Mariners (2019), as well as the Twins, Giants and Rays.

He has made 175 appearances and has a 20-30 record with a 4.91 ERA and 374 strikeouts in 441 1/3 innings.

Wisler, who still keeps in touch with friends, family, past coaches and teachers in Bryan and northwest Ohio, said he has been thankful for what he's done so far on baseball's biggest stage.

"It's been quite the journey so far. Obviously, not as consistent as I'd like to be in one place, but it's been a good journey," Wisler said. "The biggest blessing is that I've stayed up in the big leagues throughout the last couple years, especially.

"With getting released and stuff ... somebody else has kept calling and kept me in the big leagues. So I think that's been the biggest blessing is I've been able to just kind of focus on that, the good side of it that the fact that I'm still getting chances and getting opportunities.

"Over the last couple years, too, I've really kind of just gotten to know what it takes for me to be successful and just continue to work on that process. Obviously, if I can get my slider where it needs to be and my fastball location and stuff, I know I'm going to be successful so that's my biggest process and whatever team I'm with, that's what I'm going to work on the most."

