

Written by {ga=consigliere}
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We've got a really special feature for our readers this week. Our Indians minor league guru Tony Lastoria, he of Minor Happenings, has put together a detailed list of the Indians top 35 prospects - with writeups on each player. Today, we unveil #26-35, and will run the rest of the list incrementally over the next three days. You will find no more thorough assessment of the Tribe minor league system and it's prospects anywhere in existence.



This is my first foray in the land of top prospect lists, and I must admit it is a lot harder to come up with these rankings than I thought it would be.

It wasn't for a lack of content, as a full year of covering the Indians minor league system with my "Minor Happenings" piece provided more than enough material for just about every player considered for this list. The hard part was whittling down a list of 50-60 players down to a Top 35 because the Indians system is so deep with talent. I can't count how many times I revised this list, moving guys up and down several times before settling on a final version.

Originally, this was supposed to be just a "Top 10 Prospects" list that was to provide a short paragraph blurb on each player, but as I contemplated who should make that Top 10 list I found myself leaving off some very good players, so the list grew to 20, 30 and then to 35. And, those short paragraph blurbs evolved into page long reports for each player in the Top 10.

Some players missed the list for various reasons, while others that made the list may be a surprise to some. With the exodus of so much talent from the farm system last year because

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the Indians were able to provide a lot of prospects significant playing time, the list was really wide open for newcomers. My general rule of thumb when compiling this list was that players with a good minor league track record usually got the benefit of the doubt over younger prospects or recent draft picks. Most of the recent draft picks or younger players which made this list had to have some very good projectable talent.

Anyway, out of the 35 prospects that made this list, 6 were recent draft picks from the 2006 Amateur Draft. Also, the positional breakdown was 11 right-handed pitchers, 8 outfielders, 6 left-handed pitchers, 4 catchers, 3 first-basemen, 1 second-baseman, 1 short-stop, and 1 third-basemen. Clearly, the Indians have a ton of depth in their farm system with pitching and outfielders. Also, with some good draft picks and key trades, the Indians now have a stable full of very good catching prospects they did not have at this time last year.

Due to the length of this piece, it has been broken up into four parts, which will be posted on this site each day the rest of this week. Prospects 11-25 will post tomorrow (11/29), prospects 6-10 will post Thursday 11/30, and prospects 1-5 will post Friday 12/01.

Feel free to e-mail me at tlastoria@swerbsblurbs.com with any questions and/or comments. Without further ado, here is the list:

35. Tom Mastny: Right-handed Pitcher

Age: 25 **Height: 6'6"** **Weight: 220** **Bats: Right** **Throws: Right**

Mastny has done nothing but win and put up consistent numbers at every stop on the minor league ladder over the course of his career. In his 4-year minor league career Mastny has been impressive, going 28-9 with a 2.20 ERA in 111 career games. But, 2006 was his first season as a full-time reliever and he blossomed in the role going a combined 2-2 with a 2.01 ERA in 36 games at Akron and Buffalo, and later was called up to Cleveland and pitched impressively.

While he lacks an over-powering fastball, Mastny generates a lot of swing and misses with his fastball because of the good deception he creates with his delivery and arm action. He has somewhat of an unorthodox delivery, but is a strike thrower and is very mature on the mound. His length (6'6") allows him to get good leverage on hitters, and his pitch selection is very good. Mastny will get a long look at one of the bullpen spots in Cleveland this spring.

34. Ryan Mulhern: First-Baseman

Age: 26 **Height: 6'2"** **Weight: 205** **Bats: Right** **Throws: Right**

After a sensational 2005 campaign where he won the Lou Boudreau Award as the organization's top hitter, Mulhern took a step back in 2006. And the Indians were very open in stating that Mulhern's 2006 season was not very successful. While he was productive, it pales in comparison to the numbers he put up in 2005. After he hit .315/.390/.640 with 32 HRs and 94 RBIs in 112 combined games at Kinston and Akron in 2005, Mulhern struggled at Akron in 2006 hitting .268/.335/.438 with 15 HRs and 69 RBIs in 121 games. Mulhern has very good power, but lacks good plate discipline. Much of his problem in 2006 was a lack of aggressiveness early in the count in not attacking fastballs, and then late in the count being over-aggressive when the pitchers were throwing more breaking balls. He tended to over-think his at bats and just did not have a good plan of attack when he stepped into the batters box. Mulhern can play first-base or the outfield, so it remains to be seen where Mulhern may play in 2007. Most likely, he will open at Buffalo and play first-base.

33. Aaron Laffey: Left-handed Pitcher

Age: 21 **Height: 6'0"** **Weight: 170** **Bats: Left** **Throws: Left**

Since his dominant debut at Burlington in 2003 where he went 3-1 with a 2.91 ERA, Laffey has been sort of a disappointment. He went through a tough season in 2004 at Lake County, and put up a solid year in 2005 splitting time in Lake County and Kinston. Laffey jumped back onto

the prospect scene last year after he combined to go 12-4 with a 3.16 ERA in 29 appearances (23 starts) at Kinston and Akron in 2006. Laffey's fastball tops out at 87-88 MPH, and he also throws an above average slider and a changeup. Laffey has had problems improving his mechanics and developing a changeup, which have held him back and may make him a lefty specialist down the road. He should start the 2007 season in Akron.

32. Sean Smith: Right-handed Pitcher

Age: 23 **Height: 6'4"** **Weight: 195** **Bats: Right** **Throws: Right**

Smith is a highly touted draft-and-follow player who emerged last year. Smith has always had the talent, but a bunch of minor injuries the last few years held him back. Finally healthy, in 2006 Smith put up arguably his most impressive season in the minors going 11-7 with a 3.83 ERA in 29 combined starts at Kinston and Akron. Smith showed he was on the rise with an outstanding performance in the Carolina League Finals series in 2005. Smith has had command problems in the past, but his emergence last year was tied to more efficient use of his pitches, increased velocity in his fastball, and not shying away from contact. Plus, he pitched with a lot of confidence last year. His fastball consistently checks in at 88-91 MPH, and he also throws a 12-6 curveball, slider and changeup. Smith could end up along the same lines of Brian Slocum based on pure stuff, and might be a middle reliever or a swing guy as he moves along in the Indians farm system. Smith should be in Buffalo in 2007, but may start the season at Akron.

31. Michael Aubrey: First-Baseman

Age: 24 **Height: 6'0"** **Weight: 195** **Bats: Left** **Throws: Left**

When Aubrey plays, he performs. In 238 career minor league games, he has hit .318/.403/.520 with 37 HRs and 193 RBIs. But, staying on the field to put up those numbers has been his problem, as he has endured many long spells on the disabled list and those 238

games played have come over 3 ½ seasons (roughly 460 possible games). In 2006, for the second straight year, he was lost early in the season when he injured himself sliding into 2B and suffered a surface fracture on his right knee joint. With his latest injury, his days as an impact prospect are all but over, which is unfortunate. When healthy, Aubrey is a superior defender and good hitter with gap power. But, the injury bug seems to have stalled his career. The man has been a china doll since being drafted by the Indians in the 1st round of the 2003 draft, and 2007 might be Aubrey's last chance in the organization. If healthy, he probably will open the season in Akron.

30. Joe Ness: Right-handed Pitcher

Age: 23 **Height: 6'5"** **Weight: 230** **Bats: Right** **Throws: Right**

The Indians took Ness in the 6th Round of the 2005 Draft out of Ball State University. In Ness's first full season with the Indians last year, Ness went 9-6 with a 3.62 ERA in 26 starts at Kinston. At 6'5" and 230 lbs, Ness is a big, physical pitcher with a strong arm that gets his fastball in the low to mid 90s. Ness also throws a slider and changeup. While Ness is a strike-thrower, his pitches tend to lack variation in speed because his changeup is still a work in progress. If Ness is unable to change speeds, it could spell trouble down the road against more advanced hitters. The Indians feel Ness has the potential to be an innings eater because of his durability and strong mechanics, and he should start the 2007 campaign in Akron.

29. Josh Rodriguez: Second-Baseman

Age: 21 **Height: 6'0"** **Weight: 175** **Bats: Right** **Throws: Right**

The Indians took Rodriguez with their second of four picks in the second round of the 2006 Draft. In pre-season college draft prospect rankings, Rodriguez was considered the top shortstop available. Like Wes Hodges (more on him later), however, Rodriguez's draft stock plummeted somewhat when an elbow injury limited him to DH duty at Rice University early in

2006 and he was eventually moved to third-base. Once signed, the Indians assigned him to Mahoning Valley where he hit .268/.337/.465 with 4 HRs and 24 RBIs in 45 games. Rodriguez is a patient hitter with gap power. While Rodriguez lacks speed he does have an excellent throwing arm, and is versatile enough to play third-base, shortstop or second-base. With the need in the lower minors for second-basemen, Rodriguez most likely could end up at that position full-time. He should start the 2007 season at Lake County.

28. Ben Francisco: Outfielder

Age: 25 **Height: 6'1"** **Weight: 190** **Bats: Right** **Throws: Right**

Francisco had a very good year at Buffalo last year, hitting .278/.345/.454 with 17 HRs, 59 RBIs and 25 stolen bases. The Indians love his bat, and feel he would be further along if not for several trips to the disabled list over the past few years. Francisco's bat provides very good extra base hit production, and he is a versatile defender who can play all three outfield positions well. His speed is average, but he is an excellent base-runner as his instincts on the base-paths lead to many of his stolen bases. The Indians feel he is capable of a major league opportunity right now, and he may initially break in as a 4th outfielder. With Francisco now on the 40-man roster, he'll join Franklin Gutierrez and Shin-Soo Choo in the battle for the 4th outfielder role with Cleveland in 2007. If he doesn't win the job, he'll return to Buffalo and anchor the lineup.

27. Neil Wagner: Right-handed Pitcher

Age: 22 **Height: 6'0"** **Weight: 195** **Bats: Right** **Throws: Right**

Wagner might be a sleeper, and someone to keep an eye on. Last year at Mahoning Valley, Wagner went 0-0 with 17 saves and posted a 1.39 ERA while holding opposing hitters to a .143 average and struckout 50 hitters in 32 innings. Wagner closed in college, and at this point it appears the Indians intend to develop him as a closer. Outside of Adam Miller, Wagner

arguably has the most explosive fastball in the system that touches 96-98MPH consistently. He controls his fastball well, but the key to him becoming a bonafide relief prospect will be the development of at least one secondary pitches, which he has struggled with. Wagner most likely will start the 2007 season as the closer at Lake County.

26. Jose Constanza: Outfielder

Age: 23 **Height: 5'9"** **Weight: 150** **Bats: Switch** **Throws: Left**

Constanza had a breakout season in 2006, hitting .309/.410/.410 with 2 HRs, 36 RBIs and 39 stolen bases in 120 games combined at Lake County and Kinston. Constanza has outstanding bat control and bat-to-ball ability, and very good baseball instincts. He put himself on the radar screen back in the Dominican Summer League (DSL) in 2004 when he hit .444 and lead the league in just about every offensive category except home runs. The Indians were so impressed with Constanza's showing in the DSL in 2004, that they started him in Lake County in 2005, which is unheard of for players in the Indians academy in the Dominican Republic to start with a full-season squad in their state-side debut. The last player to do so was Jhonny Peralta. Constanza projects as a left fielder because of his speed and defense and limited pop in his bat, and may eventually break in with the Indians as a 4th outfielder down the road. Because of the crowded outfield situation in Akron and Buffalo he will most likely return to Kinston in 2007, but at some point in the season he will be in Akron.

Honorable Mentions:

Ryan Morris (LHP): Only 18 years old, he is a bulldog on the mound and has excellent makeup. His fastball sits in the high 80s, but since he is only 18 he projects well and velocity should increase. Throws a very good slider.

Chris Archer (RHP): A live arm and a confident pitcher. Just turned 18, and someone to

watch develop in 2007.

Nick Pesco (RHP): Injuries have held him back, and he at times struggles with command. Before Huff came on board, he had the best changeup in the system.

Adam Davis (SS): Potential top of the order hitter with plus speed and switch-hits. Needs a lot of work on plate discipline and making consistent contact.

Brian Slocum (RHP): A low-to-mid 90s fastball and above average changeup make him effective. He'll be the 6th or 7th starter for the Indians in 2007.

Graduated:

These players are no longer considered rookies, and thus prospects, because they have compiled 50 or more innings pitched or 130 or more at bats: Fernando Cabrera (RHP), Fausto Carmona (RHP), Shin-Soo Choo (OF), Ryan Garko (1B), Franklin Gutierrez (OF), Joe Inglett (IF), Andy Marte (3B), Kelly Shoppach (C), and Jeremy Sowers (LHP).

Up Next:

Wednesday 11/29: Prospects ranked from 11 to 25

Thursday 11/30: Prospects ranked 6 to 10

TheClevelandFan - Indians Top 35 Prospects: #26-35

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Friday 12/01: Prospects ranked 1 to 5