

Prospects That Can Help In 2007

Written by {ga=consigliere}
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If you're new to our website, you're in for a treat this season when it comes to our Indians coverage as 4-5 of our most talented writers on staff will be covering the team regularly. Steve Buffum's "B-List" quickly became a reader favorite last year, and Tony Lastoria's minor league coverage and Tribe op-ed pieces are really, really good. In Tony's latest, he takes a look at the 11 Indians prospects most likely to impact the big league club this season. Will super prospect Adam Miller (pictured) see the show this year? Tony opines ...



By now, fans are well aware that the Indians will continue to steadily use their farm system as a pipeline for young talent to help the big league club. As current players on the Indians roster near free agency, the Indians will need alternatives other than free agency and trades to turn to.

Because of this, over the course of the 2007 season Indians fans will likely be exposed to several young Indians prospects. Some will be familiar as they may have played at some time in 2006 with the Indians, and some will be seen for the first time. The hope is that with the Indians expecting to contend, the Indians will not need to turn to their farm system for help, but injuries and performance issues always crop up during a season for just about every team. When these issues surface, the Indians will turn to a healthy stable of prospects that they have stashed away in Buffalo.

Back in late-November, [TheClevelandFan.com's inaugural Top 35 Prospect list](#) was unveiled. But, a lot of these prospects will not even sniff the majors this year. Instead, the prospect listing below is not necessarily the Top 11 in the Indians system as far as talent goes, but are the Top 11 prospects who are major league ready (or close to it) with the highest likelihood of being called up, ranked from #1 (most likely) to #11 (least likely):

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(Note: Fausto Carmona RHP, Shin-Soo Choo OF, Joe Inglett IF, and Franklin Gutierrez OF were not considered for this article. While they will be in Buffalo and most likely be the first players the Indians call-up when a need arises, these players are no longer considered prospects because they have lost their rookie status.)

1. Rafael Perez LHP

Perez is one of the Indians top left-handed pitchers in the system. Last year, Perez went a combined 4-8 with a 2.76 ERA and held opposing batters to a .213 BAA in 25 appearances (12 starts) at Akron and Buffalo. In brief action with Cleveland, Perez was 0-0 with a 4.38 ERA in the 12.1 innings he pitched, and he held batters to a .204 BAA. Perez throws a powerful 92-94 MPH live fastball with great action, and his slider is rated as the best in the entire system, which many scouts feel will be a devastating pitch in a major league bullpen. Reportedly, he will begin the season in the Buffalo starting rotation, but the Indians have a great need for young left-handed relief pitching this year and beyond. With how dominant he has been against lefties the past few seasons, and the Indians need for a second lefty in the bullpen, Perez will get several opportunities with the Indians in such a role throughout 2007.

2. Tom Mastny RHP

Mastny is yet another relief option the Indians will have stashed away at Buffalo this year. Last year 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 after being called up to Cleveland pitched impressively. What Mastny lacks in stuff he makes up for with good arm action and deception in his delivery. He throws strikes and handles himself well on the mound, which are probably two of the biggest keys to success as a bullpen pitcher. Mastny will likely get the call sometime this season as the need for bullpen help arises because of injury or the Indians need a fresh arm in the bullpen for a few days.

3. Juan Lara LHP

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Lara is another left-hand relief option the Indians may turn to quickly this season. Last year, Lara went 5-3 with 8 saves and a 2.77 ERA in 53 combined relief appearances at Akron and Buffalo. Lara was also impressive in his short stint in Cleveland, going 0-0 with a 1.80 ERA in 9 appearances. Lara's durability makes him very attractive, especially as a lefty specialist. He throws a 92-94 MPH fastball, and compliments it with a nice low to mid 80s slider. While he is still developing his changeup, it proved to be an effective pitch for him last season. Like Perez, Lara undoubtedly will get a few looks as a lefty in the pen with the Indians this season. If the Indians are steadfast on keeping Perez in the Buffalo rotation, Lara may be the first lefty reliever they turn to.

4. Eddie Mujica RHP

In two years, Mujica has gone from a struggling starting pitcher to a flourishing reliever and one of the Indians top bullpen prospects. Last year, Mujica went 4-1 with 13 saves and a 1.57 ERA in 34 combined appearances at Akron and Buffalo. Mujica features a mid 90s fastball which he locates very well, a good mid-to-high 80s slider, and a nasty split-finger fastball he developed last year. He is fearless on the mound with excellent physical and mental makeup, and also has outstanding durability to handle multiple appearances. His confidence and short-memory, to go along with his fearless mentality and pitching abilities, make him a natural fit for a backend bullpen role. While he likely will not make the team outright, he and Mastny will be the first right-handed relievers the Indians call on when a need arises for a fresh arm or to fill in for an injured pitcher.

5. Brian Slocum RHP

Slocum bounced around from starter to reliever and back to starter last year. Last year at Buffalo, Slocum went 6-3 with a 3.35 ERA and held opposing hitters to a .227 BAA. Slocum seemed to find himself the second half of last season as his pitching arsenal improved a lot where he now has a good low-to-mid 90s fastball and above average changeup which make him effective. He struggled in his first call to the big leagues, but some of it was due to over-thinking and things speeding up on him. He will be the Indians 7th starter in 2007, and should only see time in Cleveland as a spot starter or if a rash of injuries befalls the Indians

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starting rotation.

6. Wyatt Toregas C

After a disappointing 2005 campaign, Toregas bounced back in 2006 and re-established himself as a good catching prospect. The Indians system is now loaded with very good receivers, but Toregas is the one closest to the big leagues. Last year, Toregas combined to hit .294/.366/.450 at Kinston and Akron. Simply put, Toregas is a very good defensive catcher that can control a running game who also happens to be a good hitter. Since the Indians do not have a third catcher listed on the 40-man roster, in the event Victor Martinez or Kelly Shoppach go down to injury and are put on the disabled list, Toregas would likely have his contract purchased and be called up by the Indians.

7. Ben Francisco OF

Last year at Buffalo, Francisco put up another solid season hitting .278/.345/.454 with 17 HRs, 59 RBIs and 25 stolen bases. 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. Francisco was rewarded with a spot on the Indians 40-man roster this winter in large part due to his versatility and productive bat. Now that he is on the 40-man roster, the option clock is ticking and he is now a call-up away from Cleveland. Francisco is not one of the Indians top prospects, but sometime in 2007 he could help the Indians if the need for a 4th outfielder arises.

8. Tony Sipp LHP

Sipp is a power-armed pitcher who has an impressive three-pitch arsenal that make him

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more than just a matchup lefty, but instead a potential late-inning reliever. He will go to Buffalo this year in a late-inning relief role and be their closer. Last year, Sipp went 4-2 with a 3.13 ERA in 29 appearances (4 starts) with 80 strikeouts in 60.1 IP with Akron. He has big-time stuff, fronted by a 92-94 MPH fastball that grades out as a plus pitch, and a devastating slider that grades out as a plus-plus pitch. And, his changeup has taken big steps to being a very good weapon. Sipp is not on the current 40-man roster and probably won't make his debut until sometime in 2008, but he is being fast-tracked and with the Indians need for left-hand relief pitching Sipp could surprise and be with the Indians by mid-season this year. Getting Sipp some experience in 2007 at the major league level may be a good idea since he is a serious candidate for the Indians closer's job in 2008 and beyond.

9. JD Martin RHP

On a rehab assignment recovering from Tommy John surgery, Martin finished last season 1-2 with a 2.03 ERA in 14 combined appearances (13 starts) at Mahoning Valley, Lake County and Kinston. Martin will start this season in Akron, but his previous experience at the Double-A level could move him up quickly to Buffalo if he stays healthy and performs. After Adam Miller, Martin is probably the most talented right-handed starter in the system yet to appear in Cleveland. Martin throws three different fastballs (a cutter, two-seamer and four-seamer) in the low 90s and has outstanding control of them as well as the changeup and 12-6 curveball he throws. Martin was recently added to the 40-man roster this off-season, so if he remains healthy he potentially will be the Indians #8 starter this season. He'll likely be a September call-up unless a rash of injuries to the starting staff forces him up earlier.

10. Asdrubal Cabrera SS

The Indians depth in the middle infield in their farm system, particularly the upper levels, is pretty thin. This was one of the big reasons the Indians traded Eduardo Perez to Seattle for Cabrera last season. Last year, Cabrera hit a combined .249/.310/.349 with 4 HRs, 36 RBIs and 12 stolen bases in 112 games in the Mariners and Indians system. What Cabrera lacks offensively, Cabrera more than makes up for defensively as he is a gold-glove caliber shortstop who has excellent hands, footwork and very good accuracy. Cabrera was the youngest player in all of Triple-A last year, so when he returns to Buffalo this year the focus will be on developing his bat and approach at the plate. Cabrera most likely will not factor

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into the Indians roster until 2008, but if Peralta continues to struggle or gets hurt, Cabrera may be given a shot this year.

11. Adam Miller RHP

Miller is the crème de la crème as far as prospects go in the Indians system. Last year, Miller was 100% healthy and put up a great season at Akron, going 15-6 with a 2.75 ERA as well as tallying up 161 strikeouts in 158.1 IP. Even though his velocity is down a little, he still consistently cranks his fastball up to 96 MPH late into games. In addition to that, he has developed his secondary pitches and has become more of a pitcher rather than thrower. Miller is the prize of the organization, and Shapiro has a penchant to coddle his prized-prospects. Add to it that Miller is not on the Indians 40-man roster, and it is safe to say that barring a major rash of injuries or poor performance from the Indians starters, Miller won't be in Cleveland until at the earliest as a September call-up. His ETA is most likely April 2008 as the Indians 5th starter.

Honorable mentions: Brad Snyder OF, Trevor Crowe OF, Brian Barton OF, Mike Rouse IF