

Minor Happenings: McBride Catching On In Lake County

Written by {ga=consigliere}
Wednesday, April 11 2007 7:00 PM -

Lastoria is back with another update on the farm system, recapping the news and developments from the week that was in the Indians player development system. In his latest, Tony touches on the early impressive performances by several Tribe pitching prospects, catcher Matt McBride getting off to a hot start, the catching shuffle in Buffalo, a progress report on Cliff Lee, and more. This is the best and most comprehensive Indians minor league report anywhere.



“Minor Happenings” covers the important developments and news in the Indians farm system. Information in this report is collected from the various news outlets that cover each team, some national news, and in some cases from private sources connected to the Indians organization.

TheClevelandFan.com Minor League Player of the Week

Matt McBride (Catcher - Lake County): .600 avg (9 for 15), 2 2Bs, 0 HR, 7 RBIs, and 1.418 OPS



Pitching certainly is ahead of the hitting at this point, as several arms in the Indians system performed well this week. The weather seemed to slow down several hitters in the farm system, as all four of the Indians affiliates were affected by weather and had at least one game postponed this week. That, however, was not the case for McBride.

McBride had no problem getting off to a hot start this week, hitting .600 with a 1.418 OPS and driving in seven runs in just four games. The Indians selected McBride with the last of their four second round picks in the 2006 Draft, and after signing quickly he impressed at Mahoning Valley last year hitting .272 with .757 OPS and had 4 HRs, 31 RBIs and 5 stolen bases in 52 games. McBride provides a rare combination of defense and offense at the catching position, and is an exciting prospect in the Indians system that you are going to hear a lot about going forward.

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Honorable Mentions: Infielder Rodney Choy Foo (Akron), right-handed pitcher Frank Herrmann (Kinston), left-handed pitcher Aaron Laffey (Akron), right-handed pitcher J.D. Martin (Akron) and left-handed pitcher Chuck Lofgren (Akron).

Director's Cuts



Indians Farm Chief Ross Atkins, pictured to the left, had another abbreviated farm report this week. Of course, not much of a surprise since Buffalo and Akron were snowed out and have only played three games, and Kinston and Lake County have played just five games.

Atkins is frustrated with the slow start to the season, as they spent all spring training working on getting players into a routine and rolling toward the start of the season, only to see that momentum come to an abrupt halt in Buffalo and Akron where each affiliate saw their opening series wiped out due to weather. The indoor facilities in Buffalo, Akron and Lake County became paramount in keeping players sharp by using the indoor tunnels that have high-tech batting machines and indoor mounds. Down the road, when these games have to be made up it will be tough on the pitching staff and create a logistics nightmare for the player development system. An even bigger nightmare exists when you consider the fact that the major league team will need to dip into the minor league pool for players to use in doubleheaders.

Atkins also commented on Lake County catching prospect Matt McBride. Coming into spring training, the Indians challenged McBride to see if he could increase his flexibility and comfort level with catching, and to date he has shown that. McBride even went out of his way to go the extra mile to improve physically. The Indians are excited about his potential.

Snow Place Like Home

Not only was Indians opening day weekend wiped out by the lake effect snow in Cleveland, but Buffalo and Akron were also affected



by the snow and extremely cold weather. Buffalo and Akron were set to kickoff the season last Thursday at home, but Mother Nature did not cooperate. Buffalo's three game set with Richmond was wiped out, as was Akron's three game set with Binghampton. While most of the rest of minor league baseball opened on Thursday, Buffalo and Akron's season did not get

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started until Monday when they finally played their first games.

The delay to Buffalo's season was the longest delay of opening day in franchise history. Back in 2003, Buffalo was able to play opening day in temperatures in the high 20s, but called off the next six games. Thursday and Friday's postponed games between Buffalo and Richmond are expected to be made up when the Bisons travel to Richmond, Virginia to play the Braves June 9-12. No word on when the postponed Saturday game will be made up, but it could also be made up in Richmond on June 9-12.



Also, still no official word on when the games between Akron and Binghampton will be made up, but they likely will be made up in Binghampton since they are not scheduled to come back to Akron. Interestingly, Akron is scheduled to play Binghampton three more times with all three series in Binghampton on May 7-9, June 26-30, and August 31- September 3. It is likely that one of each of the three lost games in Akron will be made up as a doubleheader in each series; however, since Binghampton somehow got three series in their home park and only one was scheduled in Akron, how about shifting one of the remaining three to Akron?

Choo Remains Upbeat

When the Indians sent down outfielder Shin-Soo Choo to Buffalo, surprisingly Choo remained positive. For any player who had significant game experience at the major league level the previous year, they would understandably be disappointed not making the major league team the following year. But not Choo, as he looks at being sent to Buffalo an opportunity to play everyday rather than being a bench player in Cleveland so he can work on hitting left-handed pitching.

Choo is definitely one of the better players in the International League, and he carries himself well and has a great gameplan at the plate. The season is only three games old in Buffalo, but Choo has started well reaching base in 8 out of 13



plate appearances (4 hits and 4 walks). But, it is clear Choo needs work on hitting left-handed pitching. Even after an all-star season in the Pacific Coast League when he hit .323 with Seattle's Triple-A affiliate Tacoma, Choo's issues hitting lefties showed itself. At Tacoma, Choo hit .361 against right-handers and only .185 against left-handers, and while he hit .278 against lefties in Cleveland he was only afforded 18 at bats against them. Choo spent a lot of time in spring training with Tribe hitting coach Derek Shelton working on identifying arm slots by pitchers to improve on picking up incoming pitches.

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But, all that said, Choo left some in the organization unimpressed with some of his work ethic, route running in the outfield and clueless base-running. The Indians have discussed Choo in trade talks with other teams, as some in the organization feel his instincts are lacking and that he has gotten lazy.

The base-running issue has in fact already shown itself this season, as in yesterday's game he made yet another mistake on the bases. With Ben Francisco on second base and Luis Rivas on first base, Choo pulled an RBI double to the right-center field gap but rounded second with his head down and made a feet-first slide into third totally unaware Luis Rivas was standing on third already. Choo was easily tagged out.

Picking Up Where He Left Off



Akron left-hander Chuck Lofgren is looking to build off of his very successful 2006 campaign at advanced Single-A Kinston. At Kinston last year, Lofgren set all kind of records in going 17-5 with a 2.32 ERA and holding opposing hitters to a .217 batting average against. Lofgren showed Akron fans what all the hype was about in his first start on Monday, as he went five innings giving up only one run on four hits while walking only one and striking out six in the Aeros opener on Monday. One of Lofgren's biggest fans is good friend and roommate Scott Lewis, who is another one of the Indians top left-handed pitching prospects. Lofgren and Lewis lean on each other a lot for advice, and talk about their starts after games on how well they did and what they could do better in certain situations.

Dead Man Walking?

For someone who went into spring training as the favorite to win the utility infield gig, Hector Luna's stock has fallen rapidly, and so



much so that he could be released at some point when/if the need for a 40-man roster spot is needed. Luna had eight errors in 17 spring training games, and the error-fest has continued at Buffalo as he has three errors in the Bisons first three games. So, in 20 combined games in spring training and Buffalo, Luna has 11 errors. Sure, Luna has hit well with Buffalo the first three games, hitting .364 (4 for 11) with one home run and four RBIs, but if the guy cannot field the ball as a utility player, he has little use for the Indians this year and beyond.

It should be noted, Luna's defensive issues seem to be carrying over to the rest of the Bisons

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roster, as they have ten errors in the first three games.

Catching Shuffle

Bisons catcher Mike Rose was in a holding pattern in Cleveland this past weekend. After Indians catcher Victor Martinez went down



with a left quadriceps injury in the Friday Home Opener against Seattle which was eventually snowed out, the Indians summoned Rose from Buffalo and had him on hand in Cleveland if the Indians felt the need to put Martinez on the disabled list. The snowy weather actually ended up sparing the Indians the need to put Martinez on the disabled list, as the rest of the Seattle series was snowed out and Martinez has responded well to treatment. Rose officially rejoined Buffalo today and made his first start of the season.

In addition to Rose, the injury to Martinez caused a chain reaction of other moves at catcher in the farm system. Catcher Armando Camacaro was activated from the disabled list and transferred to Triple-A Buffalo. Also, the Indians signed catcher Yamid Haad to a minor-league contract Monday and initially assigned him to Buffalo, but when Rose was activated today they assigned Haad to short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley. Haad owns a career minor league batting average of .250 with 69 HRs and 322 RBIs in 821 career minor league games, and only has 29 career major league at bats.

Leading Man



Although only three games have been played, outfielder Ben Francisco has carried over his good play from spring training to Buffalo. Francisco is hitting leadoff for the Bisons, and in three games it hitting .300/.500/.400 with five runs scored, no home runs, one RBI and two stolen bases. The most impressive stat early on is the four walks for Francisco in the first three games which have helped setup many Bisons rallies. Francisco is a versatile player with good speed, defense and offensive abilities, and developing more plate discipline and just getting an opportunity in Cleveland is all Francisco needs at this point.

Lee Progress Report

Indians left-hander Cliff Lee is currently on a minor league rehab assignment, and was scheduled to make his first start for Double-A Akron this past Monday. Those plans were nixed

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because of the extremely cold weather, and the Indians instead opted to have Lee rehab his strained abdominal muscle by making a start in much better temperatures for advanced Single-A Kinston in North Carolina. In Lee's first start on Tuesday for the K-Tribe he threw 29 pitches and was sharp in his scheduled two innings of work. He did not allow a run on one hit and did not walk anyone and struckout four batters. Lee is scheduled to make his next rehab start on April 15th for Single-A Lake County.

His Words, Not Mine



One of the cool things I recently stumbled on is a blog by Lake County Captains right-handed pitcher Mike Eisenberg. Eisenberg shares some great insights into the daily routine and life as a minor league pitcher. I have shared a few e-mails with him, and will be doing a feature article on him sometime soon, but in the meantime he gave me permission to use his blog entries.

After his first start Tuesday night, which to put it nicely did not go the way he would have liked, he commented about it in [his blog](#) saying:

2 IP, 5 hits, 6 runs, 3 BB, 1 K, 1 balk, 1 fielding error, and 1 HR. Stat of the night: 1 loss

Tonight was the definition of not having your stuff. The irony, though, (and of course, there has to be irony somewhere) is that warming up, in the bullpen pregame, I was dead on. Hitting spots, making the adjustments, doing the right things to prepare for a game. Tonight, I had a serious case of Inside The Lines syndrome. That means that pregame I do everything right and then once I get out there everything goes wrong.

The first inning wasn't all that bad. I threw too many pitches and fell behind in the count frequently, but I did not allow myself to issue a walk and they beat me by manufacturing a run (thanks to a balk advancing the runner to 2nd base). It just wasn't there in the second inning. Couldn't find the strike zone and more importantly, could not make the adjustments. That's the key to pitching.

Obviously, it's not the start I was hoping for. Hell, I was kind of looking to never have an outing like this. I've got my work cut out for me the rest of the season to put it behind me and start over in 5 games. I've got 5 games to reconfigure myself and make the changes that need to be made. Tomorrow morning it begins with a 10 am lift. Let me tell you, I'm through with that stuff. It's all business now. Hell if that is going to happen again. I may not throw perfect games every time out, but I do expect to be able to give 7 strong innings every time out there. I deserved that

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loss tonight. They may not have deserved a win, as I handed it to them, but they got one. This is part of the job though, you get the wins and you get the losses. And you usually get them because you earned them. Not going to do much sleeping tonight, but instead I will review the night and figure out what I can do to make sure it never happens again.

Akron Outfield Rotation

The Akron outfield will be in constant change, at least to start the season. No, there will not be a lot of turnover early on with players shuttling back and forth between Akron, Kinston and Buffalo, but instead the plan is to rotate Trevor Crowe, Brian Barton, Ryan Goleski and John Van Every at each outfield position and at designated hitter.

Crowe will rotate among the three outfield positions, playing four games a week in right field, two in left field and one in center field. Crowe is the least comfortable in right field, which is why most of his playing time will be at that position. With Crowe getting so much work in right field, Goleski's time at his natural position in right field will be limited, so Goleski will mostly play in left field and also at designated hitter. Barton and Van Every will split time in left field and center field, and also at designated hitter.

Impressive Starts

It is early, but the highly touted starting pitching prospects in the Indians top three minor league affiliates in Buffalo, Akron and Kinston has been mostly outstanding. Here is how they faired in their first starts of the season this past week:

Adam Miller (Buffalo)- 6 IP, 3 ER, 10 hits, 2 BBs, 2Ks
Rafael Perez (Buffalo)- 5.2 IP, 0 ER, 3 hits, 3 walks, 4 Ks
Chuck Lofgren (Akron): 5 IP, 1 ER, 4 hits, 1 BB, 6 Ks
J.D. Martin (Akron): 5 IP, 0 ER, 2 hits, 3 BBs, 2 Ks
Aaron Laffey (Akron): 6 IP, 1 ER, 2 hits, 1 BB, 2 Ks
David Huff (Kinston): 4 IP, 1 ER, 1 hit, 3 BBs, 3 Ks
Ryan Edell (Kinston): 5 IP, 1 ER, 3 hits, 0 BBs, 5 Ks
Frank Herrmann (Kinston): 6 IP, 0 ER, 4 hits, 1 BB, 2 Ks
Sung-Wei Tseng (Kinston): 5 IP, 2 ER, 4 hits, 1 BB, 3 Ks

That is nine pretty good starts out of the eleven combined games the teams have played. Only Brian Slocum's disastrous start yesterday at Buffalo where he went 4 innings and gave up five earned runs on five hits and five walks, and Kevin Dixon's start the other night in Kinston where he was knocked around for six earned runs on eight hits in 4.1 innings, are the only blemishes to date for the three starting staffs.

Early Bullpen Returns

With most starting pitchers only going five to six innings in their starts early on, we will get a

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good look at a lot of the relievers in the Indians farm system. To date, there have been some impressive early performances:

Brian Sikorski (Buffalo): 2 games, 2 IP, 0 ER, 1 hit, 1 BB, 2 Ks
Mike Koplove (Buffalo): 2 games, 1.1 IP, 0 ER, 0 hits, 0 BBs, 0 Ks
Juan Lara (Buffalo): 1 game, 1 IP, 0 ER, 0 hits, 0 BBs, 1 K
Eddie Mujica (Buffalo): 1 game, 1 IP, 0 ER, 0 hits, 0 BBs, 0 Ks, 1 save
Reid Santos (Akron): 1 game, 2 IP, 0 ER, 1 hit, 0 BBs, 2 Ks
Jake Dittler (Akron): 1 game, 2 IP, 0 ER, 1 hit, 1 BB, 1 K
Joe Ness (Akron): 1 game, 1 IP, 0 ER, 0 hits, 0 BBs, 3 Ks
Jeff Stevens (Kinston): 2 games, 5 IP, 0 ER, 0 hits, 0 BBs, 7 Ks
Scott Roehl (Kinston): 2 games, 3 IP, 0 ER, 0 hits, 2 BBs, 4 Ks, 1 save
Luis Valdez (Lake County): 2 games, 4.1 IP, 0 ER, 2 hits, 4 BBs, 8 Ks
Neil Wagner (Lake County): 2 games, 2 IP, 0 ER, 2 hits, 1 BB, 2 Ks, 1 save

Of note, Stevens is the pitcher the Indians got in the Brandon Phillips trade, and he has been a starter for most of his career.

Parting Shots

After not allowing a run in five innings in his season debut, Akron starting pitcher J.D. Martin extended his scoreless-innings streak to 28.1 innings. The scoreless innings streak goes back to his final seven appearances last year where he did not yield a run in his last 23.1 innings. ... Outfielder Franklin Gutierrez (hamstring) was activated from the disabled list today and assigned to Triple-A Buffalo. ... In three games, Buffalo is seven for seven in stolen base attempts. Ben Francisco leads the team with two stolen bases. ... Buffalo reliever Jason Beverlin picked up the win the other night in relief, which was his first win at Buffalo since July 21, 2002 when he won ten games for Buffalo that year. Beverlin is back in the states after spending the past four seasons in Japan. ... Switch-hitting Akron infielder Rodney Choy Foo, who was born and raised in Hawaii, started the season off with as bang in Akron's season opener on Monday, going 4-4 at the plate with a two-run home run. ... Kinston is off to a 3-2 start, but have only scored 14 runs in five games.