Written by {ga=consigliere} Monday, August 13 2007 7:00 PM -

The Gulf Coast League (GCL) is minor league baseball in it's rawest form. The GCL Indians roster is littered with draft picks out of high school from the two most recent drafts, as well as several young Latin American players experiencing professional baseball stateside for the first time. Tony ventured down to Winter Haven, Florida back in late-July for his fourth stop on his minor league road trip to checkout the rookie-level GCL Indians, talk to a few players, and most importantly get a sense of what goes on down there and in extended spring training. What an interesting experience it was.



This is the fourth in a series of six articles where by the end of August I will have visited all six of the Indians minor league affiliates in seven weeks. I'll recap each stop in Winter Haven, Mahoning Valley, Lake County, Kinston, Akron and Buffalo with a short writeup consisting mostly of video and pictures, and also write several separate articles on players I talk to during my visit.

Welcome to the Gulf Coast League (GCL), where the Cleveland Indians lowest level affiliate the rookie-level GCL Indians reside. It is professional baseball in its rawest form, with a roster littered with draft picks out of high school from the two most recent drafts, as well as several young Latin American players experiencing professional baseball stateside for the first time.

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Whether you go to Buffalo to watch the Indians Triple-A affiliate in action, or you go to Mahoning Valley to catch the Indians short-season Single-A affiliate in action, you always catch the game in a stadium with fans in attendance. That's not the case for the GCL Indians. When the games are being played, you would think you were watching a high school baseball scrimmage.

They play on the Indians Triple-A practice field located adjacent to the minor league clubhouse at the Indians spring training complex at Chain of Lakes Park in Winter Haven, Florida.

If you take a look around, there is definitely a feeling of isolation. There is no one working in the administration buildings. No front office.

No open concession stands.

No restrooms.

No press box.

No fans.

The only applause you hear when the home team makes a nice play, makes a good pitch, or gets a hit comes from the coaches and players in the dugout.

Just to give you an idea of how different it is at this level, the "front office" is the trainer Teddy Blackwell. That's it. There just is not anything there, except a handful of coaches and roughly 50 players who make up the GCL team and others from various parts of the organization on rehab assignments, and the trainer. That is your GCL Indians organization.

The ticket office where patrons would normally buy tickets during spring training is all closed up, and in fact the entire facility is in a state of hibernation until next spring training. All except the minor league clubhouse and the practice fields.

Here are a few pictures of the field, dugout and practice field:



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The setup of the Winter Haven facility where it basically is only fully operational for two months out of the year is a big reason the Indians are moving their spring training operations to Goodyear, Arizona at the start of the 2009 season. At Goodyear, the Indians will have a brand-new state of the art training complex that should be fully (or at least nearly) operational year round. It will become a true sister

operation to the team headquarters in Cleveland located at Jacobs Field.

The GCL team is just a temporary home for the Indians rookie-level prospects. The GCL team was started up last year, and ended up replacing Burlington by year's end as the Indians affiliate where most of their recent high school draft picks and Latin American players get their first taste of professional baseball.

The GCL team is temporary because when spring training operations move to Goodyear, Arizona in 2009, the GCL team will be scrapped and the Indians will have a rookie-level team in the Arizona League in 2009.

The environment is one that a lot of these players get used to, as many have been in Winter Haven since spring training opened in February. After the big league club and full-season minor league clubs break camp at the end of March, the players left behind in extended spring training are those rehabbing injuries and others who will play on one of the Indians short-season league teams in the GCL or at Mahoning Valley.

Short-season leagues do not startup until mid-June, so for two and a half months from April to mid-June, the players left behind play in inter-squad scrimmages and get lots of practice work in on the diamond, and some in the classroom.

Also, sometimes pitchers are sent to extended spring training to work on new things with their

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game, whether it be developing another pitch, working on their fastball command, or a new delivery. During my stop in Winter Haven, right-handed reliever Cody Bunkelman had just been sent to extended spring to work on a new arm slot. Bunkelman is hanging on by a thread in the organization, but because he throws a mid-90s fastball they do not want to give up on him yet.

So, to my surprise, when I was there I caught Bunkelman's first workout learning how to drop down and throw sidearm. Here are two videos of him in action:

Video 1: <u>Bunkelman bullpen session</u> Video 2: Bunkelman bullpen session (homeplate view)

Also, here are some pictures of him throwing during his bullpen session:





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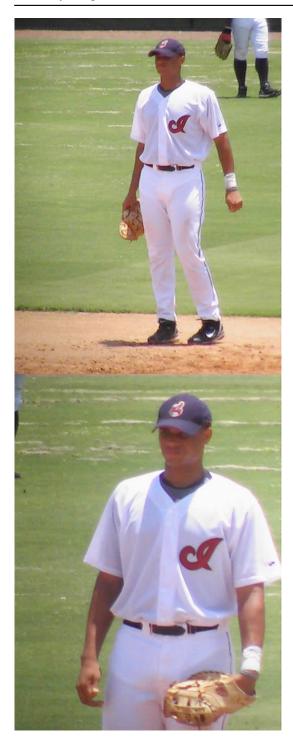




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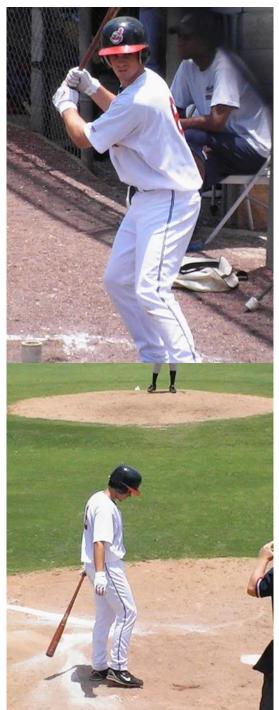


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