

## Laffey Brimming With Talent And Confidence

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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You can't stop Tony Latoria. You can only hope to contain him. Our consigliere was at it again this week, tracking down Aaron Laffey ... who recently made two starts for the Indians. While Adam Miller got all the pub leading into the season, Laffey has been the story of the year for the Indians farm system, rapidly ascending the ranks, and becoming a big time candidate for starts down the stretch, as well as potentially a 2008 rotation spot. A great piece.



Going into this season, all the talk in the minors and in spring training centered around top pitching prospect Adam Miller. The talk was well deserved, as Miller is one of the top right-handed pitching prospects in all of baseball and he was mowing down batters in the Grapefruit League in the spring.

But, after a promising start to his 2007 campaign, Miller has been sidelined by various injuries for most of the season. With Miller going down, it opened the door for another Tribe pitching prospect to step up and establish himself, to answer the call when opportunity came knocking.

The guy who answered the call is Aaron Laffey.

The story of the year at the minor league level on the pitching front may be the emergence of left-hander Aaron Laffey as a legit starting pitching option for the Indians now and in the future. With a several vacancies created at the Triple-A Buffalo level with Fausto Carmona seizing his own opportunity in Cleveland, Miller shelved, and other pitchers nicked up with injuries, Laffey was moved up from Akron on May 17

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and what transpired in the next 45 or so days changed his standing in the organization to where he is now viewed as a legitimate starting pitching option now and in the future.

Laffey started this season off with a bang at Akron, going 4-1 with a 2.31 ERA in his first six starts before that callup to Buffalo in mid-May. Laffey struggled initially in Buffalo, as in his first three starts he was 0-3 with an 8.64 ERA and early on it looked like the 22-year old was not ready to handle Triple-A.

But, suddenly things all came together. Laffey went on to go 6-0 with a 0.87 ERA in his next six starts - all in June - and now has won eight consecutive games and is 8-3 with a 3.19 ERA in 15 starts at Buffalo.

Whether it was just an adjustment he

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had to make going from Double-A to Triple-A, him regaining the innate confidence the organization and scouts rave about, or the development of his sinker and changeup, Laffey transformed into a new pitcher and minor league sensation over night.

Laffey is a pitcher who oozes confidence on the mound, which might be his biggest asset as a pitcher. He doesn't have overpowering stuff, so he has to trust his ability to work hitters to his strengths and pound the ball into the ground. He is aggressive on the mound, and goes right after hitters and attacks them.

Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins commented that Laffey's confidence on the mound is "ridiculous"; and Buffalo manager Torey Lovullo certainly agrees.

"He pounds the zone with a ton of confidence, changes speeds and has quality secondary stuff," said Lovullo. "On top of that, he wants to go out there and really take it to the opposition and attack hitters."

Laffey's toughness is recognized beyond the organization as well. Chris Kline is a national writer for Baseball America, and is very familiar with the players in the Indians system having done the scouting reports on the Indians Top 30 Prospects the past three years in the [Baseball America Prospect Handbook](#).

"A lot of people, including us at Baseball America, projected him as a reliever because of how often he rolls up ground balls," said Kline. "But Laff has really taken it on his shoulders to prove everybody wrong. Asi de from the stuff--and being a kind of undersized guy--Laffey has big stones.

He doesn't back down from anyone.

He might eventually be better suited for the pen, but he's really proved himself as a starter this season . . . durable and consistent."

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 the changeup in the past, but has made strides with it this season. He credits the development of his slider as an out pitch as a big reason for his success this season.

"Definitely my slider has been key, along with the development of my sinker in being able to throw a lot more strikes in the zone with it," said Laffey. "My strikeouts per nine innings totals have gone up a lot since last year, and I think just being able to use my slider as a put away pitch has definitely been one of those big key roles for me."

"I had it a little bit last year, but I have definitely been able to use it more consistently this year. It is more of a backdoor slurve/slider, I mean everybody calls it something different. I just call it a breaking ball.

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Just being able to throw the breaking ball backdoor for a strike and throw it first pitch for a strike that way it gets the hitter off balance seeing something start out in the left-handed batter's box and sweeping in on the plate.

It makes it hard for them to make an adjustment to figure out where the outside corner really is.

And it really helps my sinker play in because then I can start my sinker middle of the plate and let it tail to the outer half and kind of get the hitter's timing off and reaching for balls and start pounding it into the ground.&quot;

Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins agrees the &quot;slurve&quot; has been huge for Laffey, and even takes it a step further saying that if he is on and comes backdoor with it, it is un-hittable.

&quot;His backdoor breaking ball is about as good as they get, and he didn't have that a year ago,&quot; said Atkins. &quot;That is something that has gotten him over the hump and into Triple-A and performing at that level. It is really an un-hittable pitch. It is a matter of whether he is going to get the call with it, and if so there is nothing you are going to do with it.&quot;

The Indians drafted Laffey in the 16<sup>th</sup> round of the 2003 Draft out of high school (Cumberland, MD), and he had committed to playing college baseball with Virginia Tech before signing with the Indians on July 1, 2003. Laffey made his professional debut in Burlington that year, and in nine games he went 3-1 with a 2.91 ERA and limited batters to a .183 batting average against (BAA) while striking out 46 batters in 34 innings pitched.

Laffey suffered through a sophomore slump in 2004, as he went 3-7 with a 6.53 ERA in 19 games (15 starts) for Lake



County, and had trouble consistently finding the zone as he walked 44 batters in 73 innings pitched. He did rebound and pitch well when he was reassigned to Mahoning Valley later that year, as he went 3-1 with a 1.24 ERA in eight starts for the Scrappers.

He then followed that up by going 7-7 with a 3.22 ERA in 25 games (23 starts) for Lake County in 2005, and then broke back into the prospect scene in 2006 when he went 12-4 with a 3.16 ERA in 29 combined games (23 starts) in Kinston and Akron.

When you look at Laffey's minor league resume, he has been consistent every year putting up an ERA somewhere between the mid-twos and mid-threes at every stop and every year except for that one stop in half a season at Lake County in 2004. Laffey still remembers that season vividly, and considers it a learning experience for him.

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"Right from the start of the year I was pretty inconsistent," recalled Laffey. "Throughout the year I think I did try to strikeout guys.

I don't remember what it was, but I had like a six and a half ERA.

I was just really inconsistent where I would have one really good start where I'd throw six shutout [innings] and strikeout eight or nine people.

And then for two or three outings in a row I would give up four or five runs.

I just was not in the strike zone a whole lot, and I did not have control of my sinker in the zone."

Besides the development of his slurve, Laffey credits the development of his sinker and being able to throw to opposite arm side as two of the biggest reasons he has developed into one of the Indians best pitching prospects.

"A big thing for me is that I have been able to throw strikes with my sinker because a lot of times I used to leave it out of the zone off the plate and I could not throw it off to opposite arm side," noted Laffey. "Which is another reason that if I tried to go in on a guy in 2004 it was pretty much going to tail back over the middle of the plate and get hammered.

Opposite arm side and developing the changeup has probably been the biggest career difference for me."

Kline really likes Laffey's sinker and the command he has with his pitches.

"He's got big heavy sink to his fastball--it's just a very heavy ball," said Kline. "It's not the velocity that grabs you when you think about him, but it's his ability to command the sinker and his secondary pitches."

Laffey combines his aggressiveness on the mound with the command and effectiveness of his pitches to go right after hitters and pitch to contact. He knows he does not have overpowering stuff where he is going to consistently strike hitters out, but with the command of his pitches he can pitch to contact and get opposing hitters to consistently roll over on balls and pound them into the ground.

"I think it is just a strength for me, because if I try to strikeout guys obviously your pitch count is going to go up," said Laffey. "I just kind of take my strikeouts within the game. My goal is obviously to get strike one and strike two and be ahead of the hitter, but even at 0-2 sometimes I don't necessarily try to put a guy away. If I am going to throw a fastball at 0-2 I am going to throw it to a spot where he will either 1.) take it, 2.) put it in play or 3.) swing and miss. I am not going to get a whole lot of swing and misses with my fastball, so 0-2 I am still looking to put the ball in play, but if I have first and third and one out, or something like that, then I am looking for the

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punch-out. I don't really look to strikeout a lot of guys, but with the development of my slider the strikeout totals have gone up.&quot;

With Laffey's outstanding run of starts in Buffalo, and the parent club having issues in their starting rotation with left-handers Jeremy Sowers and Cliff Lee under-performing, it was not long before Cleveland came calling and Laffey's dream of playing in the big leagues finally was realized. Laffey was called up to Cleveland on August 4<sup>th</sup> and made his major league debut that day in Minnesota, losing to the Twins 5-4 in a game he pitched much better than the line score indicates (5.1 IP, 6 H, 3 ER, 1 BB, 1 K).

&quot;It was great just getting up there [to Cleveland],&quot; recalled Laffey. &quot;I already knew all the guys from spring training being out there in big league camp.

I was a lot more comfortable already knowing all those guys and being able to pitch in the big leagues.

It has always been my dream to do that, and I finally accomplished that.&quot;



Laffey ended up only making two starts before being optioned back to Buffalo. In his two starts he showed the promise that has the Indians so excited about him, although he did not showcase his true talents as the command of his slider was lacking.

Still, he handled himself well pitching on the road in both starts, especially making his major league debut in a tough environment like the Metrodome.

Laffey won his second start against the Chicago White Sox when he squared off against lefty Mark Buehrle.

&quot;It was pretty awesome pitching against Buehrle as our games are very similar,&quot; said Laffey. &quot;He is a guy who has won a World Series ring and threw a no-hitter earlier this year. It was great to pitch against a guy of that caliber, and to beat him is even better.&quot;

The win was bittersweet, as after the game he was told he was going back to Buffalo because the Indians wanted him to pitch regularly as they had several off days coming up and did not need a fifth starter for two weeks.

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"They told me it was not because of performance, and that it was strictly because they do not need a starter until the 25th of this month," said Laffey. "I was told to just go back down and keep pitching as well as I have been and keep fighting for a spot to get back up there."

Right now, it looks like Cliff Lee is all but certain to be the one recalled to make that August 25<sup>th</sup> start.

But, even if Laffey is not called up to make that start, he will definitely be up when rosters expand on September 1

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Even if there is no room in the starting rotation, Laffey could be effective coming out of the bullpen, which is a role Laffey is very familiar with.

"Actually, every year before this year I pitched out of the bullpen," noted Laffey. "Starting from the time I signed in Burlington, I had a couple starts and relief appearances as well.

Ever since then I have started the year in the bullpen and eventually earned my way into a starting spot.

This year I started as one of the five starters in Akron and from there I have stayed a starter."

The Indians have a hectic September ahead of them as they battle to get into the postseason, and they will have very few off days that final month of the season. Laffey could be used out of the bullpen, but also be a valuable spot starter down the stretch.

"I have also thought about that, that maybe if they need a long guy or something like that, or a guy they need in September to give their starters a break and get them rested for the playoffs if it comes to that where they have enough distance between them and Detroit to be able to rest their starters," said Laffey. "I would love to get back up there, and I don't care if I start or if I relieve as it doesn't make a difference to me."

Starter or reliever, Laffey should be a part of the Indians plans now and well into the future.