

Minor Happenings: De La Cruz Breaks Through

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Wednesday, April 09 2008 7:00 PM -

Tony's "Minor Happenings" column has been a weekly staple on Thursdays during Indians season for us for a couple years now, and T is back at it again in '08, coming out of the gates with an excellent piece. Tony talks about his first of several road trips he'll make this season to go see the Indians minor league affiliate in action. He announces his first Minor League Player of the Week. Gives us his Directors Cuts quotes from Ross Atkins. And talks about a couple of the guys who may be the Aaron Laffey's and Jensen Lewis's of 2008 for the Indians. Enjoy!



"Minor Happenings" covers the important developments and news in the Indians farm system. While most of the information in this report is from my own research and through interviews I have conducted with organizational personnel, some information in this report is collected and summarized from the various news outlets that cover each team.

Welcome back folks to another year of Happenings down on the Indians farm. This is the only place you need to be for your minor league fix, as you'll get no better coverage elsewhere.

I'll be making my first minor league pit-stop of the season when I travel to Woodbridge, VA tomorrow (Friday) to take in the Kinston/Potomac game at Pfitzner Stadium. I'm going to try and nail down as many guys as I can for interviews since Kinston will be the team I see the least this year, so check back over the weekend and throughout next week for some interviews I did with the players.

I'll be hitting up all the affiliates at least three times this year, so there will be many player articles coming down the pipeline throughout the season.

Also, I plan to do a couple "Where Are They Now" features on some long lost prospects.

Also, I started up a blog this past October, [The Cleveland Indians Minor League Insider](#). Thos

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e who want up to date news and information should go there as I will be updating my blog almost daily with any news and developments as I get them.

This information will still be included in

Minor Happenings

, but since it only posts weekly this is an option to get the news much more quickly.

It's good to be back....

Indians Minor League Player Of The Week

(for games from April 3 through April 9)

Kelvin De La Cruz - Left-handed pitcher (Lake County)

Lake County left-handed ace Kelvin De La Cruz is certainly going out of his way early in the season to [make me look good](#) . Many publications did not give De La Cruz much fanfare this offseason in their rankings of the Indians prospects, but from the people I

talked to last year there was a lot of excitement for this 20-year old not only in the Indians organization, but from people outside the organization as well. So far, in two starts at Lake County, De La Cruz has been dominant.

Working on an 85-pitch count that limits him to five to six innings a start, in two starts he is 1-0 with a 0.90 ERA and in 10 innings has allowed eight hits and three walks while striking out 14.

De La Cruz was signed as a non-drafted free agent out of the Dominican Republic in December of 2004. Last year, De La Cruz showed much improved arm strength as his fastball velocity jumped up to 88-92 MPH and topped out at 93 MPH, where the previous year it was only 84-86 MPH. His fastball velocity could still increase because he is still young and getting bigger and stronger, and he compliments it with a plus changeup and average curveball.

He has the size, the pitches, and the intelligence to grow a lot in the coming years, and projects as a starter in the big leagues.

In a lot of ways, his build and pitching style is reminiscent of Fausto Carmona when he was with Lake County in 2003.

Honorable Mention: Josh Judy (RHP - Lake County), Armando Camacaro (C - Akron), Ryan

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Edell (LHP - Akron), Andy Gonzalez (IF - Buffalo)

Director's Cuts

Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins has been in Single-A Lake County this week taking in the action and watching his young players, and provided some insight into the Lake County team as well as all sorts of other things:



On the Lake County starting rotation: "Kelvin De La Cruz has really looked good and thrown the ball well. A 19-year old 6'5" left-handed pitcher who throws 93 MPH is really fun to watch.

Chris Archer, Ryan Morris, Ryan Miller, and Santo Frias have all been encouraging, and coming out of spring training it is the first time some of them have pitched in cold weather and they have handled it well."

On the "prospect" label: "I'd say [Lake County] is one of the first thresholds where you really start to put the true prospect label on them.

Those bottom feeders like myself in the minor leagues can put prospect labels on guys that are 16-17 years old, but once you get to the GM level to earn that prospect status you have to have at least participated in a full season.

This is definitely one of the first thresholds.

You have to use every piece of information that you have.

It is all about projection and all about what the guy's ceiling ultimately is.

Age and action of pitches both play a role.

A guy like a Kelvin De La Cruz who is 6'5", 19 years old, arm strength, durability, and a competitor, there is not much not to like."

Early first impressions of the position payers: "A couple guys, like Karexon Sanchez,

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have looked good.
hot, as well as Lucas Montero.

He has started the season off

Mark Thompson is an exceptional defender in the middle of the field, and he reminds us a lot of John McDonald.

He could be of that type of mold like a John McDonald or Marco Scutaro.

Adam White is another player who is an eighty runner, which is the best on the scouting scale.

He flies."

On guys being sent down to Triple-A and responding well: "They have and that is always good to see. None of them are happy about it, and that is just how we want it.

We don't want anyone to be happy about playing in Triple-A.

We want every single one of them to want to be in the major leagues.

There are guys in the game that can pout and sulk and be negative energy in a clubhouse, but ultimately if the guy is a true pro he recognizes where the money is made and he needs to get out of there.

Guys as young as them typically don't pout too long because they realize 'wow, if I am not performing then I am not going to get back to where I want to be'.

But they have handled it professionally, and I think you can see in their performances that they have not pouted about it.

It is never news they want to hear or that we want to deliver for that matter, but it is just the nature of having some depth."

On Scott Elarton's veteran presence: "He not only has the information for people to tap into, but has the confidence to deliver it when need be and let people know 'hey, this isn't the appropriate behavior' or 'that is not the right way to handle this' or just put someone in line so to speak. That is invaluable, as it is one thing to come from a staff member, but to come from a peer it is much more powerful.

He has actually embraced [the bullpen role] and it is where he wants to be.

He feels it is where he can have the most success."

On Michael Aubrey: "He has been injury free for awhile now, from Arizona and throughout the majority of spring training and is off to a good start. He is as good as almost anybody we have with making hard contact, and that is the hardest thing to

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do in the game.

So if he stays healthy we could certainly see him contributing to the Cleveland Indians at some point."

On moving Aubrey up: "It all depends on what is happening around him and above him, but not what is happening below him. Also, with him not only sustaining health but sustaining success. T

here are a lot of variables in that, and I think the major league team is the first variable with the second variable being Jordan Brown in Triple-A.

There are some pretty good assets [in Cleveland] when you talk about Ryan Garko, Victor Martinez, and Travis Hafner.

And we even have Alex Gonzalez who can play first base, so there is not a need at this point."

On Alex Gonzalez: "He is a good player. We are certainly glad to have him as a minor league free agent because he is definitely someone who can contribute at the major league level. He is very athletic and plays shortstop.

Most big strong shortstops can do just about anything you ask them to do because they are typically the most athletic guys on the field."

On Carlos Rivero: "He is a lot of fun to watch because of his youth and the athleticism and strength. He has above average ability defensively from a hands and arm standpoint. His range is not above average, but he has been a lot of fun to watch develop over the last couple years and now you can dream a little bit.

You never want to put a ceiling on a guy and say he can't do this, but he is one of those guys you can dream on."

On the comparison of Rivero to Jhonny Peralta: "They are very similar players. At this point in Carlos' career relative to where Jhonny Peralta was four to five years ago they are in very similar places in their career.

They are slightly different in that Rivero may be a little more athletic at this point than Jhonny was, but Jhonny had better hands and they both have similar power.

It just depends on how committed and how focused Rivero is over the next four or five years."

On Rivero staying at shortstop: "He is definitely someone who can play shortstop. His power will dictate whether or not he can also be a third baseman depending on the makeup of your team.

If you had an Omar Vizquel type then you might consider moving someone like Jhonny Peralta

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to third base.

That could be Carlos Rivero.

He is very young, and turns 20 this year at some point this season.

He has a full season under his belt already, two half seasons in the Dominican and one in the Gulf Coast League."

On their Kinston relationship: "It is a great place. We love being there, and it is all baseball. There are no distractions and it has an old time feel to it.

It is much like the movie Bull Durham and is a lot of fun.

It is a great experience for the players and the front office."

Even Stevens

By now, many Indians fans know that Akron right-handed reliever Jeff Stevens is a prospect on the rise in the system, and a pitcher with so much helium he could be in Cleveland sometime later in the year. The excellent command he shows with his fastball that



sits around 93-94 MPH and the good secondary stuff he has to compliment it has many scouts and Indians personnel excited about him.

But, probably the most exciting attribute about Stevens is his exceptional poise and makeup on the mound. For a relief pitcher, particularly one who pitches late in games, this is a must as you have to be unflappable when faced with adversity and high pressure situations. Th is is what separates the great relievers from the good ones, and Stevens has it.

Stevens made his season debut in the season opener last Thursday and was thrown right into the fire as he relieved struggling starter Chuck Lofgren in the 4th inning with the bases loaded and one out. He got the first batter he faced to ground into a double play to end the inning with no further damage, and then proceeded to go three more innings of shutout no-hit ball the rest of the way. In two appearances so far this year, Stevens has inherited five runners and stranded all five, and last year stranded 10 of 17 inherited runners between Kinston and Akron.

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To date, Stevens is 0-0 with a 0.00 ERA and in 4.1 innings has yet to yield a hit or walk while striking out five. It was thought that Stevens would start the year in Triple-A Buffalo, but because of the crowded bullpen situation there he returned to Akron to start the season.

Plus, the Indians want to see him get more work with developing his inconsistent curveball.

However, if Stevens continues his hot start, he could be in Buffalo by late-May.

So Far So Good

Oft-injured first baseman Michael Aubrey and Matt Whitney made it through the first week of the season at Akron healthy. This is



notable because both players prior to last season had trouble staying healthy. Aubrey has battled back and hamstring ailments since 2005, but last year managed to stay relatively healthy and put up 256 at-bats on the year and hit .277 with 12 HR, 45 RBI, and an .813 OPS.

The at bats were the most he had in a season since 2004.

Whitney, meanwhile, suffered complications for years from a gruesome leg injury that he suffered in 2003, but came back last season at full strength to hit .299 with 32 HR, 113 RBI and a .909 OPS between Lake County and Kinston.

In the season opener, Aubrey hit a three-run homer and is hitting .280 with 2 HR, 4 RBI and an .853 OPS through the first six games of the season. Whitney looks to be suffering no ill effects from being returned to the Indians by the Washington Nationals after being taken in the Rule V Draft.

He is quickly showing last season may not have been an aberration or career year as he is off to another good start hitting .320 with 2 HR, 2 RBI, and a .970 OPS in six games.

Some Early Concerns With Lofgren

Akron left-hander Chuck Lofgren had a rough go of it in his first start last Thursday (3.1 IP, 2 ER, 7 H, 5 BB, 1 K). How he gave up

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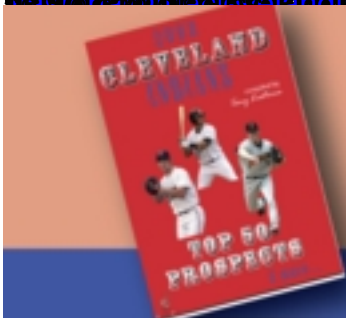
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