

Q&A With Baseball America's Chris Kline - Part I

Written by {ga=consigliere}
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Tony Lastoria sat down with Baseball America's Chris Kline to get the inside skinny on some of the Tribe's top prospects. Part II of this phenomenal interview posts Friday.



For those unfamiliar with who Chris Kline is, Chris is a former beat writer for the Cleveland Indians Class A farm team the Kinston Indians, and is now currently working for *Baseball America* in a full-time capacity as a national writer.

Baseball America is often considered THE premier baseball magazine as it covers everything that is baseball from high school to the major leagues and everything else inbetween. The publication was started up over 20 years ago, and over the years has widely become the quintessential guide for the major league draft and information relating to the minor leagues. For the baseball fan that wants to keep track of their favorite team and their farm system to see what the future holds, no other publication comes close to what *Baseball America* offers.

Chris is very familiar with the Indians front office and farm system not just because he used to cover it for the Kinston Free Press, but also because the past two years he has worked diligently on compiling the Indians Top 30 Prospect list for *Baseball America's* annual "Prospect Handbook" in 2005 and 2006. The "Prospect Handbook" is an annual book that *Baseball America* prints that profiles every major league team's top 30 prospects, in depth reviews of each team's farm system, and draft history. In addition, it also provides an early draft board for the upcoming June Amateur Draft, as well as overall organizational farm system rankings and individual prospect rankings, etc.

Over the past few years, I have had the opportunity to correspond with several people in the Cleveland media who write on and follow the Indians, but Chris by far has been the most cordial. With that, I'd like to give a big thank you to Mr. Kline for agreeing to do this Q&A once again.

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With that, onto the Q&A:

Q: We've heard very little regarding J.D. Martin and how he is doing after Tommy John surgery. How is his rehab going, and any idea when we will see him in action?

Chris Kline (CK): My pleasure to be back here again. This time around, I have a new title, however. Not to toot my own horn or anything, but I'm now listed as 'National Writer,' which is pretty cool--though nothing really significant has changed on the old job description front. For those of you that don't know, I spent a month in Florida this spring and a full week in Winter Haven. I hit the Haven as my last stop, and I have to say that it was great to wind down there seeing so many familiar faces after being on the road forever. Before that, it was a different camp in a different city in a different hotel across Florida. I ended up putting over 2,500 miles on my rental car . . . Thank God for unlimited mileage.

Anyway, enough dilly-dallying, let's touch on Martin: When I saw him for the first time, he looked like an entirely different person in some ways. His hair is all fro'd out, but beyond that, he looks like he's grown into his body more and really is beginning to fill out. That's good news on a couple different fronts--first, it means he has an improved chance to add some more velocity. As we all know pitchers who come back well from that surgery tend to add a few miles (MPH), but with J.D., if everything goes well over the rest of his rehab, I think he has a chance to make a significant jump. The added bulk will also allow him to maintain his delivery and arm action better, especially through his lower half. In talking to both J.D., extended pitching coach Tony Arnold and farm director John Farrell, they are hopeful to get him on a mound competitively when camp breaks in late May. That will likely mean Mahoning Valley to start, with Akron right around the corner, probably by the end of June--depending on how he responds.

Q: You mentioned a few weeks back 3B Matt Whitney looked awesome in Spring Training, yet he is off to a very bad start. How is he doing in his recovery from injury, and what are the chances he becomes a big league

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player? Are the injuries still lingering, or is he simply going through an adjustment period?

CK: Wow, great question(s). When I saw Whitney play for the first time in spring training, I was so excited that I called the BA headquarters and touted him as my pick for comeback player of the year (even though we don't hand out such an award) and went on to predict him jumping back into the Tribe's Top 10 list for the 2007 Prospect Handbook. That's how impressed I was with his approach at the plate, and even more so with his defense. The agility and mobility was there for the first time in a long time, and he really looked like he was in a comfort zone.

Yeah, he's off to a slow start, but it's nothing physical. Right now, he's an enigma to me. He has all the talent in the world, but doesn't look like he's having fun at all. Seeing him for a week in Kinston, you'd think he was getting his teeth pulled or something--it was little more than going through the motions in BP and infield. When I asked a scout I trust very much about him, he went even further, really questioned his desire, adding "It just looks like he doesn't want to be here." Here didn't mean Kinston, because it's not the greatest place in the world to be, it meant playing baseball--period. And that's not a good sign. Maybe it's early, maybe he's a little burned out for some reason, but hold me to those early predictions. I think you'll see something out of him this season, but really, he has to stop moping and get after it if this is what he truly wants to do. His makeup's never been a question before, but there's a pretty big red flag on him in my mind right now.

Q: Adam Miller has had a few impressive outings early in the season. His velocity isn't all the way back, yet he appears to be "pitching" more. Is he really all the way back in terms of "stuff"? How does he look so far? Can we expect him to return to his old self?

CK: Interesting story about Miller from this spring--Roger Clemens came to Winter Haven and sat down with Miller personally to talk about his routine, etc. And that energized him, obviously. No, the velo isn't all the way back, but he's making his

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pitches when he has to and he's battling--which is more than I saw last year. Not that he didn't battle, but he tended to give in a little more when things were going badly. He's grown up a lot since the elbow injury, which is huge.

Q: What is the deal with Ramon Alvarado? What can be expected of the prospect acquired from the A's in the Kaz Tadano trade?

CK: Alvarado is 20 and basically has a set of average tools across the board. He's still very raw, overswinging at pitches and pulls virtually everything. He needs to overhaul his approach at the plate and is a corner outfielder all the way with enough arm to play right field if needed. Yeah, like this organization needed another outfielder...

Q: Can you provide updates on injuries and recovery to noteworthy guys in the system (i.e. Hoyman, Martin, Cevette, etc)?

CK: All three of these guys are in extended, with Hoyman probably being the closest to being back at this point. The plan is to get Hoyman out, probably to Kinston, sometime in May. Martin and Cevette are likely going the longer route, mostly because the organization wants to be cautious. Cevette is the furthest behind, simply because he was the last one to have surgery (during instructional league last year).

Q: Tony Sipp has had three tremendous starts for Akron so far. Is he doing all this with his fastball and slider, or has he improved his changeup to the point where it's a legitimate third pitch?

CK: The changeup shows flashes and it grades out as at least average at this point, but the only reason he's starting at Akron is to stretch him out, work more innings before they can move him to the back end of the bullpen and get him to Buffalo by midseason. But yes, his fastball and slider are two plus pitches, and for

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me, the slider is plus-plus.

Q: Through Buffalo's first 18 games, big 3B prospect Andy Marte has 0 home runs and 4 RBI. Should Indians fans be concerned?

CK: It's early, dude. No reason to panic. The knock on Marte's approach when he was with the Braves was that he'd drop his back shoulder and pull off balls. But what he's been doing recently is dropping his hands more, which is causing him to get under balls, and he really uppercuts at times. He'll be fine. I know hitting coordinator Dave Hudgens worked with him a lot during the spring, and I know Buffalo manager Torey Lovullo has thought the world of Marte since 2003 when both were in the Carolina League. He has plenty of guys on his side, and if you hadn't noticed, this organization has a knack of surrounding their players with some of the best field staff and instructors in the game.

Q: The Indians sent Brad Snyder back to Akron to work on his two-strike approach, yet he is striking out at a ridiculous rate. What's wrong? Is there growing concern in the organization as a result of this poor performance to date?

CK: When Hudgens came over from the A's, he helped implement an organization-wide philosophy of drawing walks 10 percent of the time. It's not 'Moneyball,' it's not some drastic measure to get guys to look for walks like crazy, it's just the implementation of a more patient hitting approach--make pitchers work for it. And you're right, Snyder has been pretty abysmal with his two-strike approach. But I talked to Akron manager Tim Bogar last week, and he told me from what he saw, Snyder was hitting balls hard the other way within that two-strike approach, so that's a good thing. He's shortening up, taking what he's given and going with pitches--which is something he hardly ever had done in the past. It's a process and all I'm saying is, yes, the strikeouts are a concern, but, like a lot of things in this game, there are good things happening here beyond the numbers.

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Q: The much maligned Jeremy Guthrie is off to a great start at Buffalo. Did the proverbial light go on? Or, is he teasing us?

CK: The enigma of enigmas. A couple of years ago, I got tired of talking about Guthrie. But it's fun now. He's off to a solid start, but really, and I know it might seem like I say this a lot, but I never saw him more comfortable than when I saw him in spring training--both on and off the field. Here's a guy who tended to press and press and take everything everyone was telling him and try to put it to use. Now I think you see a guy who is beginning to understand his strengths and use them to his advantage. And while he's teased you before, I think he's closer to breaking through and going on a roll, which could be huge for his confidence. I'm not saying he's anywhere close to ever reaching his original ceiling, but it looks like the Tribe might finally get something back from him. We'll see what happens.

Q: Excluding Jeremy Sowers and Fausto Carmona, who are the top 5 pitching prospects in the Indians system and which major league pitcher is each of these prospects most comparable to?

CK: Jeez. Save the toughest for last, I guess. Starters or relievers aren't specified, but since you mentioned Sowers and Carmona, I'll go with starters. One of my favorites in the organization is Chuck Lofgren--who is as legit as it gets. He's got the best swing-and-miss fastball statistic in the system and follows that up with a hard curve, but his changeup is the biggest thing for him right now. And talk about aptitude . . . Think young Al Leiter.

Rafael Perez and Sipp are starting now, but they're relievers down the road. So that leaves Cody Bunkleman, Martin, Jensen Lewis, Jake Dittler, Hoyman and Scott Lewis as top guys that are closer than some of the young Latin arms or a guy with a crazy raw power arm like Carlton Smith. But Bunkleman was left behind in extended and is moving to the pen now, simply because he hasn't been able to develop a third pitch and the organization feels that his path will be faster as a reliever. I also think Lewis is destined for the pen for similar reasons . . . So you have Lofgren, Martin and Dittler as the top three guys with ceilings as starters.

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And of those three, put your money on Lofgren.

Stay tuned for Part II of the Q&A session with Chris Kline. Also, for more information on a Baseball America subscription or details on how to get the "Prospect Handbook", please visit www.baseballamerica.com .