

Mahalic Ready For Game One Assignment

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Tuesday, September 02 2008 7:00 PM -

Cleveland Indians Single-A affiliate Lake County is ready to kick things off tonight in the South Atlantic League (SAL) playoffs. On the hill making the start in the crucial playoff opener for the Captains will be 19-year old right-hander Joey Mahalic. Mahalic is a 32nd round pick in the 2007 Draft out of high school in Oregon, and in just over a year has moved swiftly through the system putting up some impressive numbers at a young age. Tony had a chance to talk to him on a recent trip out to Lake County.



Cleveland Indians Single-A affiliate Lake County is ready to kick things off tonight in the South Atlantic League (SAL) playoffs. The best-of-three series against the West Virginia Power (Milwaukee Brewers) will see Game 1 played tonight in West Virginia at 7:05 PM, and then move to Lake County for Game 2 on Friday night at 7:05 PM and then if necessary Game 3 on Saturday in Lake County at 7:05 PM.

On the hill making the start in the crucial playoff opener for the Captains will be 19-year old right-hander Joey Mahalic. Mahalic is a 32nd round pick in the 2007 Draft out of high school in Oregon, and in just over a year has moved swiftly through the system putting up some impressive numbers at a young age. In the Gulf Coast League last year Mahalic went 2-0 with a 4.88 ERA in seven games (four starts), and this year at Lake County went 7-6 with a 4.19 ERA in 20 starts.

Mahalic throws a sinking fastball that consistently sits around 90-91 MPH and tops out as high as 94 MPH. His sinker ball has good late movement, and he complements it with a slider and changeup. He was the High School Player of the Year in Oregon last year, and was a player after the draft that Indians Scouting Director John Mirabelli dubbed as their biggest sleeper in last year's draft.

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Things started off slowly for Mahalic this year as when full season teams started play in early April he was left behind in extended spring training to continue developing a routine and growing as a pitcher.

"A lot of people were going off to teams and I kind of felt like 'man, I wish I was playing on a team'," said Mahalic in a recent interview at Classic Park. "At the same time, I knew I had a lot to work on. I was pretty excited to be in extended to be able to work on a lot of stuff. I had a whole plan that was made by pitching coordinator Dave Miller and pitching coach Steve Lyons and they really laid out everything on what I needed to work on and how to get better."

When right-hander Santo Frias went on the disabled list with an injury in late April at Lake County, it opened the door for Mahalic to get a shot in the Captains rotation. Mahalic was promoted to replace Frias on the roster and in the starting rotation, and during his time in Lake County has continued to work on the plan that Miller gave him and has made a lot of strides as the season has gone on in becoming a more consistent starting pitcher. After a shaky first few outings, Mahalic has been one of Lake County's most consistent starters the second half of the season going 4-4 with a 3.63 ERA in 13 starts since the All Star break.

"There is great competition here and guys who can hit, but at the same time I feel I was ready for it when I came up," said Mahalic. "I have just been working on a routine and my changeup as a third pitch. In the bullpen I really attack the changeup, like my mechanics and staying on top and not pulling off with my shoulder. I am also trying to work on repeating my delivery. It is going good. [Lake County pitching coach] Ruben [Niebla] has helped me a lot here too, and it is definitely a process but I am really working hard on making myself better."

Niebla has been instrumental in Mahalic's development this year, and focused most of his attention on getting Mahalic to pound the lower part of the strike zone with his sinker.

"I think what I have tried to do with him is make sure that he stays on top of the ball with consistency," said Niebla. "He has a tendency to get under pitches and when he does his ball sails from side to side. He has a nice loose arm with good arm strength and able to sink the ball, but when he stays on top of his pitches he is able to sink it with a downhill angle and get a lot of groundballs."

Mahalic is a former two sport athlete at Wilson High School in Portland, Oregon where he not only played baseball, but was the star quarterback on the football team. Football was and still is his first love as he spent most of his summer's participating in camps and getting ready for the next football season in the fall.

"Whenever summer came I just wanted to play football," said Mahalic. "I never really played on a traveling baseball team and all that because I just wanted to be able to throw the football around in the summer. My dad played in the NFL, so it is kind of a football family. Football has always been important to me."

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His father, Drew Mahalic, is former NFL football player who was drafted by the Denver Broncos in 1975 and then played for the San Diego Chargers and Philadelphia Eagles from 1975 to 1978. Prior to his four-year NFL career, the elder Mahalic played quarterback in high school before moving to linebacker in college at the University of Notre Dame and was part of the 1972 National Championship team his sophomore year. His biggest claim to fame is he was the owner of the #45 jersey the year before Rudy Ruettiger took it in 1975 and wore it the season after Mahalic left.

You may be wondering why the younger Mahalic did not pursue a football career. Clearly he has a love for the game and passion to play, not to mention the bloodlines given the success of his father as a football player in college and professionally. But baseball ended up being his focus as his senior year he signed to play baseball with Oregon State who at the time were back-to-back national champions. He slipped in the draft to the 32nd round for signability reasons, and while it was hard to decide to sign or not with the Indians, when it came down to it he wanted to play pro ball.

"I have been playing baseball forever, and was throwing before I could walk," recalled Mahalic. "I definitely thought I was going to be a football player. Going into my senior year when I was signing college football was still something I was considering and going back and forth on. But baseball has just always been huge for me. The good thing about playing pro ball is if it doesn't work out I can always go back to [football]."

Given his young age, that is certainly an option Mahalic could consider down the road, and it is a path that has been taken by several former minor league baseball players in the past. Most recently, former Indians farmhands Mike Conroy and Rodney Choy Foo retired from professional baseball to pursue a football career by going back to college. Conroy went back to school at the University of Connecticut and plays wide receiver, and Choy Foo left the Indians after last season to try and play football at the University of Hawaii this year.

For the time being, Mahalic is 100% committed to his baseball career, and has even brought some of his football mentality to the mound with him when he starts.

"Yeah, definitely," said Mahalic. "I like to attack hitters. That intensity you get under the lights on Friday night in football, you can't beat that, so I try to bring that [to the mound] a little bit."

The Captains hope that is the case tonight.

Photo courtesy of Ken Carr