

## Minor Happenings: Phelps Is Second To None

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Wednesday, September 24 2008 7:00 PM -

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Today is the final regular version of Minor Happenings this season, and what a year it has been from Tony, providing our readers with insane levels of insight into the happenings of the Indians farm system. T has a couple player features still coming our way, and will wrap up his coverage of the 2008 minor league season next week with his year end &quot;Tony Awards&quot;, a very popular piece we run every year right after the conclusion of the season.



*&quot;Minor Happenings&quot; 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.*

Today is the final edition of *Minor Happenings* this season. This is a special edition covering a few interviews I recently had with some players and coaches at short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley. I'll have two final player features on right-handed relievers Jonathan Holt and Josh Judy sometime over the weekend, and I'll wrap up the coverage of the 2008 minor league season with my year end Tony Awards piece this coming Tuesday or next Thursday.

I'll still be updating my [blog](#) all offseason with news snippets that come in, and will continue to air my weekly radio show &quot;[Smoke Signals](#)&quot; every Thursday from 9:30-10:30 PM EST.

Check out the show tonight as I will be solo and will be spending 100% of the time on the Indians minor league system.

Also, in case you missed them, I posted player features on [Frank Herrmann](#), [Neil Wagner and Brian Juhl](#) in the past few days.

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Thanks to everyone for reading this year, and especially thanks to Ken Carr all season for his generosity and help with pictures for these articles. Minor league spring training is a little over five months away, and you can count on me being there in Arizona providing all the

*Happenings*

in the Indians farm system.

### Phelps Is Second To None

The Indians may have finally found a solution at second base in the system. For years now, second base and shortstop have largely been the weakest positions in the Indians farm system, but that appears to be changing with a good collection of shortstops in Lonnie Chisenhall, Carlos Rivero, and Josh Rodriguez.

Unfortunately, the Indians still have a problem at second base and it is the

weakest position in the system.

The arrival of Cord Phelps should hopefully help provide a little spark to the position. The fact that Phelps, a 2008 third-round pick out of Stanford University, is the top second base prospect in the system says a lot of what is above him.

The path to the big leagues is really only blocked by Jared Goedert and potentially Josh Rodriguez who started to split time between shortstop and second base this year; however, but Goedert and Rodriguez had disappointing seasons this year.

Phelps charge to the top of organizational depth chart at second base is based a lot on not only how high he was taken in the draft, but also because of his outstanding professional debut at Mahoning Valley this year where he hit .312 with 2 HR, 21 RBI and an .830 OPS in 35 games. He provides a complete package at the position with his defense, hitting, and his ability to run well.

While he has a long way to go to prove himself, just having a player in the organization with his talent at a position of need is a breath of fresh air.

"I try to be a complete player and I think everybody tries to do that," said Phelps. "I definitely pride myself on my defense and my hitting and I try not to have any holes, but again there are always areas for improvement.

It is always an adjustment when you step up a level.

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---

But it was fun [this year], and the atmosphere in Mahoning Valley was a good place to play.

I think as a player you always are looking to do better.

There are some things I thought I did well, and definitely things I need to improve on.

The offseason will be a good chance to get some rest, but at the same I am looking forward to getting back into it and making improvements.&quot;

Looking at Phelps' numbers, it looks like he handled the transition from college to the professional ranks with ease. According to Phelps, however, this was not the case as he faced the toughest pitching he had faced to date and is still in the process of developing a routine and refining his approach at the plate.

&quot;You don't see weak pitching necessarily and they generally make less mistakes [than pitchers in college],&quot; said Phelps. &quot;You just need to be ready for a pitch when it comes. You can't always be looking for a good pitch to hit, so you just need to be a little more aggressive at the plate.

I talked with the hitting coaches at Mahoning Valley about my approach to my at bats and what you are supposed to be thinking in certain situations.

I think that is part of my game that needs improvement.&quot;

While Phelps is firmly planted at second base for the time being he does have experience at other infield positions which can create some versatility for him down the road to help him break into the big leagues.

&quot;My first two years in college I played all three infield positions,&quot; said Phelps. &quot;My freshman year I played third and second, my sophomore year I played third, second and shortstop, and my junior year I just played second.

I have tried to get comfortable with all of them, but they are all definitely different.

If I had to move to a different position or wherever, it would definitely [be an adjustment] to get back into it.&quot;

Phelps will likely skip Single-A Lake County next year and move right to advanced Single-A Kinston, but no matter where the hardnosed switch-hitter ends up he is happy he signed with the Indians and that his professional career has started.

&quot;I am definitely glad I decided to sign,&quot; said Phelps. &quot;Cleveland is a great organization and they seem to really care about their minor leaguers and their development.

So I am really happy with my decision.

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Obviously by choosing to be a professional you leave certain things behind, but there definitely comes a time for that and I am glad I moved on.&quot;

### Coaches Corner: □ Anthony Medrano

Anthony Medrano is the hitting coach for the Indians short-season Single-A affiliate Mahoning Valley Scrappers. Medrano is a former player who owns a 14-year professional playing career, and actually played under Indians manager Eric Wedge in Buffalo several years ago and was named the team MVP. He struck a good rapport with Wedge, and Wedge promised him whenever he



hung up the cleats that if he needed a job to give him a call. This past season was only his second year in the organization as a coach, and this year was his first as the hitting coach as last season he came in as just an extra coach in Mahoning Valley to sort of learn the ropes.

I recently had a chance to talk to Medrano and here is what he said about a few of the hitters that made up the heart of the Mahoning Valley lineup this year:

*On Lonnie Chisenhall:* &quot;Oh man, me and Travis Fryman always joke that if we could start over with that swing we'd do something (laughs). He has a very good swing plane, is short to the ball, and is a very talented hitter.

He is definitely going to have more power down the road.

He is a growing kid and going to get a little bigger and stronger and the balls he is hitting off the wall right now are going to start going out of the ballpark.&quot;

*On Tim Fedroff:* &quot;He is a real good competitor and puts up some good at bats, puts the ball in play and gets his hits. He covers some ground out in the outfield as well. Right now he is just a singles and doubles guy as he is not a big power guy. He might go home this offseason and put on some pounds and start driving the ball, you never know.&quot;

*On Cord Phelps:* &quot;He handles himself really well at the plate and has a good gameplan. He puts the ball in play and has the potential to drive the ball a little bit.

He does a pretty good job at second base, moves around well, and turns a good double

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play.&quot;

*On Isaias Velazquez:* &quot;He is a very exciting player who has a lot of athleticism and swings the bat very well. Defensively he needs some work as he makes some good plays but makes unnecessary throws.

It is just mental things with his defense that he needs to kind of clean up a little bit, but he really works hard when he is in the cage and has a very good swing.

You see him during the season sometimes you'll see him take some big 'ole crazy swings and he'll just swing and miss, but I think down the road as he refines his swing a little and doesn't try to do too much he'll start driving some balls out of the ballpark.&quot;

*On Jeremie Tice:* &quot;He has some power in that bat and is one of the guys who I think will start driving the ball out of the ballpark more consistently. This year he got some good pitches to hit and he was fouling them straight back.

Sometimes when he didn't foul them back and put them in play he hit them a long way.

He has real good power potential and he drives the ball pretty well.&quot;

## Taylor Relieved With Recovery

If anyone happened to stumble upon a Gulf Coast League Indians box score in August, you may have seen the name Brandon Taylor from time to time and wondered &quot;Brandon who?&quot; Well, Brandon happens to be the first name of a left-handed pitcher who



commonly goes by his middle name of Heath. Once I connected the dots and realized that Brandon Taylor was in fact Heath Taylor and not some recently sign undrafted free agent I quickly realized that Taylor was on his rehab assignment after being MIA for almost three months with an elbow injury.

Taylor had a great year last season in his professional debut at short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley going 3-3 with a 2.35 ERA in 12 starts, and was one of the lone bright spots on a team lacking very many players who will get above the Single-A level. When spring training broke this year, Taylor was one of the big surprises as far as roster makeup is concerned as he started the year at advanced Single-A Kinston in the bullpen and ended up skipping Single-A Lake County where he was projected to begin the season in the starting rotation.

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---

After an impressive first few outings in Kinston, Taylor's performance declined rapidly as he suffered through a few bad outings. The problems ended up being the result of an injury to his elbow and he eventually went on the disabled list in early May after going 2-2 with a 4.79 ERA in 10 appearances at Kinston.

"It was just a couple pitches," recalled Taylor. "I went out one particular day and it was a two inning day. I threw the first inning and I threw a curveball and something didn't feel right, but I finished the inning and it was alright.

But the next inning the first batter I threw another curveball and it was just done.

I thought I tore it, but luckily it was just a partial tear and I rehabbed it.

I thought it was going to be a lot worse than it was. It was a struggle going through rehab for so long, but it turned out good.

I'm glad I didn't have to have the surgery."

When Taylor was shutdown in early May he had no baseball activity for six to seven weeks and did not start throwing until July. The injury sidetracked a good start to his career after he dominated in Mahoning Valley last year and was off to a good start in Kinston this year, but after rehabbing the partial tear of the UCL in his left elbow from June until late August in Winter Haven the elbow is now as strong as ever.

"Oh yeah it was frustrating," said Taylor. "It was more frustrating because I had a little trouble before that with my arm.

It was never as painful as it was then, but I didn't feel 100%.

I was trying to throw through it and I think bad stuff happens when you make bad pitches.

I was hoping 'well maybe the next time I go out it will get better' and it just kept gradually getting worse.

It is great now and feels a lot better.

I feel better now than I have in two or three years, even through college and stuff.

I have no problems and am throwing my curveball harder than I ever have before and without pain."

One thing I have always wondered about is how players get over the anxiety of throwing that first curveball when coming back from a serious elbow injury. The thoughts that race through a players head where they may question if they really are 100% or if they are ready to snap off a breaking ball, which Taylor admitted being hesitant with once his throwing program called for

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him to start throwing breaking balls.

“The first time out in rehab when they had us working on curveballs I was like 'oh great',” said Taylor. “When I threw my first bullpen when we were throwing curveballs I was like 'alright, I'm going to see what happens'. I kind of spun one up there and nothing happened.

As soon as I threw it the first time and it didn't bother me I was like 'alright, I got that pitch back.'

I haven't really thought about it and it hasn't bothered me since, so that's a good thing.”

Taylor features a traditional three-pitch mix of a fastball, curveball, and changeup, with his fastball sitting around 88-91 MPH. Now that Taylor is 100% recovered from the injury, his focus is on his health and making up for lost time. He is currently in the Fall Instructional League in Arizona participating in games and getting regular work on the side, and later this offseason he will pitch in the Hawaii Winter League to make up most of the innings he lost while he was out for three months.

“Just getting healthy and back into the zone,” responded Taylor when asked about his offseason pitching goals. “I was out for so long that I have been a little rusty trying to throw strikes. I have been mainly working on that with controlled velocity, which is basically just trying not to do too much with it.”

Once the fall and winter leagues are finished and Taylor has a chance to rest and get ready for next year he hopes when spring training breaks next year he gets another shot to pitch in Kinston.

“I am hoping that I get a chance to go back to Kinston,” said Taylor. “I started off good but had a couple rough outings at the end.

I'd like to go back there and get a chance to pitch.”

## Fedroff Excited To Be An Indian

Outfielder Tim Fedroff wasted little time in acclimating himself to the professional ranks this year. The 7th round pick out of North Carolina University signed late on August 6th and didn't arrive in Mahoning Valley until August 10th, but in the 23 games he ended up playing at Mahoning Valley he impressed by hitting .319 (29-for-91) with 0 HR, 12 RBI and a .789 OPS.



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"I got [to Mahoning Valley] and just had a good time," said Fedroff. "Played some games and the season went quick.

It wasn't long for me, but in the time I was there it went quick.

Baseball is a job [now] which is nice because it is what I always wanted to do.

I am ready for it."

As a player, Fedroff is well-rounded in that he have above average speed, has good range and an average arm in the outfield, makes good contact and has some pop in his bat. He pounds the ball gap-to-gap, and at 5'11" 220-pounds there have already been some comparisons to his build and the way he plays and performs to the Giles brothers.

Fedroff's average to above average skills across the board are the result of his high school coach making him work extra hard in the areas he needed improvement.

"It kind of goes back to my high school coach," said Fedroff. "He was real big on not really working hard on your strong points, but working extra hard at your weaker points and trying to make every player the most well rounded player they could be.

It is important to have the five tools that scouts and everybody really looks for, so I really just worked hard at every aspect of the game."

Even with his well-rounded game, Fedroff still has things to work on. While he likes hitting, he believes he will need to make some big strides to become a better defensive outfielder, especially at a new position in center field.

"Of course I like hitting the best, but if I had to say what I need the most work on it is probably playing center field," said Fedroff. "At North Carolina I always played right field, and that is what I have been practicing everyday the past two years.

At this level center field is a lot of ground to cover and it is a tough position to play.

I am going to be focusing a lot in working on that and making the adjustment."

Fedroff had the option to go back to school, but signed for \$725,000 just days before the August signing deadline. Fedroff was ready to get his professional career going and has had no second thoughts about his decision to sign.

"I thought it over a lot, and once I made a decision there was really no looking back," said Fedroff. "I feel like I made a good decision, and it is a great organization to be in. I was real fortunate to have the opportunity, and I think I did the right thing.

I really did not know what to expect.

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They throw you into the short-season and you know the minor leagues are not a glorious lifestyle by any means.

It is a lot of hard work and I was fully prepared to go at it full force.&quot;

Fedroff is currently participating in the Fall Instructional League out in the Indians new Arizona spring training complex. A big reason for going out to Arizona is to continue to get him acclimated to professional baseball and expose him to what spring training will be like next year.

Fedroff will play on a full-season team next year, which means 140+ games in a little over five months.

That is just one of the things he will need to learn to adapt to next year.

&quot;The speed of the game is the same,&quot; said Fedroff. &quot;It is just swinging the wood bat. Everybody at this level can play and they have shown it.

Everybody is trying to get better and working hard to be the best player they can be.

I'd say that is the biggest adjustment is working hard day in and day out because it is a grind and if you are not ready for the schedule it will catch up to you real quick.&quot;

### Haley's Comet Returns Early

Right-hander Trey Haley, 18, was one of the Indians biggest draft signings who agreed to a \$1.25 million signing bonus hours before the August signing deadline. This year at Central Heights High School in Nacogdoches, Texas, Haley went 8-2 with a 1.55 ERA in

13 games (50 IP, 23 H, 34 BB, 98 K), and had signed a letter of intent to pitch for Rice University before signing with the Indians.

After signing with the Indians, Haley reported to the Gulf Coast League to get his arm back in shape since he had not thrown all summer. The Indians actually exposed him to some game action by letting him throw one scoreless outing in the Gulf Coast League before moving him up to Mahoning Valley the final week of the season to make two appearances and get some experience around the clubhouse. The numbers at Mahoning Valley were ugly (1.1 IP, 4 H, 8 R, 6 BB, 1 K), but it was more just to get his feet wet

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and get him exposed to the baseball environment.

"It was good," said Haley about his late season game experience. "I was just trying to get back into the swing of things really since I had not been throwing all summer.

I was just getting the arm back in shape since I kind of relaxed all summer since [the Indians] did not want me to really play in a summer league.

So I just worked out and ran to stay in shape."

Haley is an intriguing young talent. Because of his age, the opportunity to miss on him is far greater than a player with the same stuff in their early 20s who is a little more established, but it is hard not to like what you see from Haley. His fastball sits around 91-94 MPH and already tops out at 95 MPH, and due to his youth he has the arm and body (6'4" 190-pounds) to grow and add more velocity down the road (I can already envision the "Haley's Comet" headlines).

In addition to the fastball he also throws a curveball and changeup, with the curveball rating as a plus pitch and the changeup an average pitch at the moment.

His ball has good movement, he commands the strike zone well at a young age, he is intelligent, and he has good poise on mound.

"I guess I am very projectable as I have a lot of room to grow," said Haley. "I am just starting off, and I haven't learned how to pitch at this point as I have always been throwing.

I think once they work with me there is no telling where I can be once I learn how to work in and out and spot up the curveball.

Right now they just want me working on the fastball, curveball, and changeup.

Once I develop those maybe we can work on a slider later.

I haven't really had a feel for a changeup because I really never needed it in high school, but now these hitters can catch up to the fastball so you have to throw that changeup in there to keep them off balance."

*Photos courtesy of the Mahoning Valley Scrappers, Stanford University, and Perfect Game USA.*