

2009 Kinston Indians Preview

Written by {ga=consigliere}
Friday, April 10 2009 7:00 PM -

Last season was the first time Indians single A affiliate Kinston missed the Carolina League playoffs since 2000, as they had qualified for the playoffs for a league record seven straight seasons from 2001-2007. Gone are some high profile prospects like right-hander Hector Rondon, first baseman Beau Mills, catcher Carlos Santana, and outfielder Nick Weglarz. Coming in is a very promising group of players who mostly experienced success last season at Single-A Lake County. Tony previews the team in his latest.



It was a disappointing end to the season last year for the Indians advanced Single-A affiliate the Kinston Indians. While they finished the year with a winning record at 72-66, a long late-season losing streak proved to be the fatal blow to their playoff chances and they missed the playoffs for the first time in eight years.

Last season was the first time Kinston missed the Carolina League playoffs since 2000, as they had qualified for the playoffs for a league record seven straight seasons from 2001-2007. During that time, Kinston made it to the Mills Cup Championship Series four times, winning it all twice (2004, 2006).

Kinston has made the playoffs in all but six seasons in their 22 seasons as a Cleveland Indians affiliate and have never missed the playoffs in back to back seasons as part of the Indians farm system, so the pressure is on the players this season to keep that streak alive.

Gone are some high profile prospects like right-hander Hector Rondon, first baseman Beau Mills, catcher Carlos Santana, and outfielder Nick Weglarz. Coming in is a very promising group of players who mostly experienced success last season at Single-A Lake County.

The team will be led offensively by 2008 draftees third baseman Lonnie Chisenhall, second baseman Cord Phelps, and center fielder Tim Fedroff.

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Other key offensive contributors are expected to be outfielders Matt Brown and Lucas Montero as well as converted first baseman Matt McBride.

The strength of the team will no doubt be its pitching. The starting rotation boasts four high profile pitching prospects in lefties Kelvin De La Cruz and Eric Berger along with righties Jeanmar Gomez and Zach Putnam. Not far behind is crafty left-hander Ryan Morris who is also very much a pitching prospect.

Along with the impressive starting staff that has been assembled, there are also some nice arms in the bullpen that have major league potential. Right-hander Josh Judy will open the season as the closer and Chen-Chang Lee was a high profile international free agent signing last year. The rest of the bullpen is filled with several good arms with upside that should really help the team dominate on the mound from the first to last inning of nearly every game.

Minor League Affiliates

Columbus Clippers (AAA)
Akron Aeros (AA)
Kinston Indians (High A)
Lake County Captains (Low A)
Mahoning Valley Scrappers (Short Season A)
Arizona Indians (Rookie)

Coaching Staff

Manager: Chris Tremie
2nd season as Kinston manager, 4th season in Indians organization

Hitting Coach: Rouglas Odor
1st season as Kinston hitting coach, 21st season in Indians organization

Pitching Coach: Greg Hibbard
2nd season as Kinston pitching coach, 7th season in Indians organization

Starting Rotation

Eric Berger (LHP), Kelvin De La Cruz (LHP), Jeanmar Gomez (RHP), Ryan Morris (LHP), Zach Putnam (RHP)

The anchor of this impressive starting staff is the young phenom De La Cruz. He is a high ceiling lefty who pitches with his fastball and has a good feel for all three of his pitches with the ability to throw all three in the zone.

In the last two years he has shown much improved arm strength as his fastball velocity jumped

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from 84-86 MPH in 2006 to 88-92 MPH in 2007 to where it sat at 91-93 MPH last season in Single-A Lake County.

His fastball velocity still could increase because of his young age and he is still getting bigger and stronger.

He complements his fastball with curveball that is a 12-6 hammer and a projectable plus-plus pitch, and he has a feel for his changeup which projects to be a plus pitch too.

In the last two years he has shown much improved arm strength as his fastball velocity jumped from 84-86 MPH in 2006 to 88-92 MPH in 2007 to where it sat at 91-93 MPH last season in Single-A Lake County.

His fastball velocity still could increase because of his young age and he is still getting bigger and stronger.

He has the talent and intangibles to grow a lot the next few seasons and has a chance to be really good in the near future and move into the upper echelon of starting pitchers in the minors.

Gomez is a surprise return to Kinston after spending the entire season there in 2008, though his return is a result of so much pitching depth at the Triple-A and Double-A level. In his first four seasons in the Indians farm system Gomez has been very good showing considerable upside with his growth potential in size and stuff.

He has a good feel for his three pitch mix of a fastball, slider and changeup.

His fastball consistently clocks in at 89-91 MPH topping out at 93 MPH, and his velocity continues to increase each year with good potential for future strength gains because of his plus arm strength.

His curveball shows good potential, and his changeup is an average pitch that he commands well.

Being so young, inconsistency is one of the major growing pains for pitchers his age, and is something he will concentrate on improving in order to move up to Akron this season.

Berger has a standard three-pitch mix of a fastball, 12-6 curveball, and changeup. Before undergoing Tommy John surgery in July 2006, he touched 96 MPH with his fastball but currently sits between 90-93 MPH now. When the 2009 season begins, he is expected to finally be 100% recovered from the surgery so there is a good chance that his velocity will kick up another MPH or two. The curveball and changeup grade out as average pitches, but while he shows more confidence in the changeup, his curveball has more depth to it and has the potential to be an above average offering and swing-and-miss pitch at the next level.

Putnam is a well put together, very strong pitcher. His power fastball sits at 92-93 MPH and touches 96 MPH, and his devastating split finger is nasty and already considered a major

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league out pitch.

curveball, and changeup, with only the slider at the moment having the potential to be a plus pitch.

He also throws a slider, He is an aggressive, power pitcher who shows excellent composure in tight games and is a notorious big game player. Dow

on the road, Putnam may profile more as a dominant late-inning reliever, but with his five-pitch arsenal the Indians will give him every opportunity to stick as a starter where he has top/middle of rotation potential.

With all the hard throwers in the rotation, Morris is more of a pitch-to-contact pitcher and is what many would call a crafty lefty because he relies on hitting his spots and getting hitters to roll over on balls and putting them in play. He features a four-seam fastball that consistently clocks in at 87-91 MPH, is a strike thrower, and sinks the ball well pitching to the bottom of the zone. He also throws a slurvy breaking ball and changeup, with his changeup being the better of the two secondary pitches at this time. His lack of a true plus pitch or surgeon-like command makes people overlook him a little bit, but he should be a consistent performer in the organization for the next several years.

Bullpen

Gary Campfield (RHP), Dallas Cawiezell (RHP), Jonathan Holt (RHP), Josh Judy (RHP), Matt Meyer (LHP), Chen-Chang Lee (RHP), Heath Taylor (LHP)

Judy is the high profile reliever of what is a very strong collection of talent in the bullpen to start the season at Kinston. He will open the season as the regular closer, a role he could flourish in given his good composure on the mound and bulldog mentality in tight situations.

He is armed with a fastball that sits 92-94 MPH but can get up to as high as 96 MPH, and he complements it with a sharp slider and changeup.

This season, he will work on getting more sink on his pitches and also tighten up his slider as it has a tendency at times to flatten out.

Lee was one of the top amateur prospects available last year out of Taiwan that the Indians were able to sign for \$400,000. He throws from a sidearm slot with a fastball that sits at 90-92 MPH and touches 94 MPH.

Upon signing, the Indians converted him to a reliever and began the transition to the bullpen right away when he reported to the Fall Instructional League back in September, and with a move to the bullpen his average fastball velocity is expected to tick up a MPH or two. He gets good movement on all his pitches and has shown a good ability to command the strike zone.

Cawiezell is a bit of a project, but at 6'6 and over 250 pounds he is a specimen and an intimidating presence on the mound. He has a major league body and pounds the zone with an explosive fastball that sits at 92-93 MPH and tops out at 95 MPH. He gets good downward action with his fastball, but it lacks much movement so he relies more on his ability to locate it to both sides of the plate and has a ton of confidence in it.

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He complements his fastball with a slider and splitter though both pitches need more work, but the split finger could develop into an out pitch at the higher levels.

Holt is a strike-thrower who has an impeccable ability to command and control all of his pitches.

His fastball only sits around 88-91 MPH, but he has good arm side run and sink, and he complements it with a slurvy slider and changeup.

He does not have the best pure stuff, but it plays up because of his ability to throw strikes and throw any pitch in any count. His durability and ability to keep hitters off balance will certainly be an asset to the Kinston bullpen this season.

Meyer is returning to Kinston for the third straight season. After going 4-2 with a 4.23 ERA in 42 games for Kinston last year, he was pushed back to Kinston partly because of too much depth in the bullpen at Triple-A Columbus and Double-A Akron and partly because he still needs more work commanding the zone with his fastball.

He throws from a three-quarters sidearm slot with a fastball that sits around 91-92 MPH and sits at 93 MPH, and he also throws a slider which is his best pitch.

For him to move forward, it is all about working on his fastball command, tightening up his slider, and repeating his delivery.

Campfield throws from a low three-quarter (submarine) arm slot, similar to fellow Tribe farmhand Randy Newsom. His fastball sits at 89-91 MPH and has topped out at 93 MPH, and he gets good hard sink on the ball from that his sidearm angle. He complements his fastball with a breaking ball that is more like a slurve, and he has a changeup that is still a work-in-progress.

He will spend a lot of time this season trying to really hone in on his command and throw strikes more consistently.

Taylor had a great year in his professional debut at short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley in 2007 going 3-3 with a 2.35 ERA in 12 starts, then opened at Kinston last year only to go down injured with a partial tear of the UCL in his left elbow. He features a traditional three-pitch mix of a fastball, curveball, and changeup, with his fastball sitting around 88-91 MPH.

He is finally healthy and his velocity is reportedly all the way back and he is ready to pick up where he left off after 2007.

Catchers

Alex Castillo (C), Richard Martinez (C)

Both catchers are organizational level players and should share the catching duties this season.

Castillo should get the bulk of the time as he spent most of the 2008 season at Kinston and is

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returning for a second season.

In 76 games with Kinston last year, he hit .226 with 8 HR, 44 RBI, and a .667 OPS.

He shows some occasional pop with the bat, but is a hacker and lacks much discipline at the plate.

Martinez is the more interesting player of the two as he may have some upside offensively. Last year in 44 games at Lake County he hit .304 with 5 HR, 13 RBI and a .864 OPS.

He showed some increased pop last year, and he also displayed some good patience at the plate and the ability to work counts (104 BB, 141 K for career).

His build looks a lot like former Indian Ronnie Belliard both in look and even his stance at the plate.

In addition to catching, he also plays first base, so he will likely give McBride a breather at first base a game or two a week.

He should be in the lineup often at catcher, first base or designated hitter.

Infielders

Cristo Arnal (INF), Lonnie Chisenhall (3B), Adam Davis (INF/C), Matt McBride (1B), Cord Phelps (2B), Ronald Rivas (SS)

The attention in the early going on the offensive side of things will be on 2008 first round pick Chisenhall. He is the most gifted hitter in the Kinston lineup with major league potential as an everyday player at third base. He is a throwback baseball player who just loves the game, knows how to play, and has that "look" of a star in the making.

He is a gap to gap line drive hitter with a sweet swing, but because of his plus bat speed he should become a good home run threat down the road.

He is playing in the Carolina League at 20-years old, which is a few years young for the league, but he has the maturity and advanced bat to handle it.

He is also taking well to a transition from shortstop to third base and the focus this year will be in getting him more comfortable at the hot corner and continue to develop him there.

Phelps is probably next in line as far as position player prospects go that people will be most interested to see play in the early going. Like Chisenhall, Phelps was a 2008 draft pick and his advanced bat and approach has landed him all the way in Kinston to start his first full season.

Those in Kinston familiar with outfielder Trevor Crowe should love Phelps as he is a good base-runner, a great defender, and has a very polished approach at the plate.

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He puts the ball in play and pounds the gaps, and has the potential to drive the ball more as he is still adding power. While he is a patient hitter who often looks for a good pitch to hit, he is working on being a little more aggressive with his approach at the plate and to know what to expect in certain situations.

McBride is in the midst of a position switch as the former catcher was moved to the outfield this past offseason, but during spring training the Indians settled on him at first base. He is expected to be the regular first baseman, though he may get a start from time to time in the outfield. The move out from behind the plate is to save his shoulder which he has had some trouble with and also keep his productive bat in the lineup.

He has some good power potential, has a very good eye, and displays good bat-to-ball ability.

His main focus this year will be making the adjustment to playing a new position.

Rivas was sort of a surprise addition to the Kinston roster as the general thought in the offseason was he would return to Lake County and fellow shortstop Mark Thompson would bump up to Kinston. He actually performed well last year at Lake County, hitting .291 with 0 HR, 27 RBI and a .704 OPS, and was very good after the All-Star break hitting .308 with 0 HR, 16 RBI and a .742 OPS. He has some good size and moves well at shortstop, and while the power has not shown itself, down the road he could see a spike in the power department once he matures.

Davis will be the super utility player playing anywhere in the infield, some outfield, and also some at catcher. He has some good speed and can drive the ball into the gaps, but he needs to make more consistent contact at the plate. Arnal will be the reserve infielder, playing mostly at shortstop and second base.

Outfielders

John Allman (OF), Matt Brown (OF), Tim Fedroff (OF), Lucas Montero (OF), Roman Pena (OF)

Fedroff is making the jump from short-season Mahoning Valley right into the Carolina League. He showcased his advanced bat last year hitting .319 with 0 HR, 12 RBI, and a .789 OPS in 23 games with the Scrappers.

He is a well-rounded player in that he has above average speed, has good range and an average arm in the outfield, makes good contact and has some pop in his bat to pound the ball gap-to-gap.

He needs to make some big strides to become a better defensive outfielder, especially at a new position in center field, so he will be focusing a lot with the transition to center field this coming season and making that adjustment.

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Brown will take his post in right field where he can station his howitzer for an arm and play the above average defense he provides. He broke out last year with a very good season at Lake County hitting .308 with 8 HR, 75 RBI, and a .788 OPS in 122 games.

He is an intriguing outfielder who offers a great package of overall tools with good bat speed, raw power, plus arm strength, and average speed. He makes consistent contact, swings hard, and is very aggressive in the outfield. He could develop into a prototype right fielder if his bat starts to show more thunder down the road as he already is very good defensively and has a gifted arm.

After a disappointing season in 2007 where he only played in 37 combined games at Single-A Lake County and Mahoning Valley because of various injuries, Montero bounced back last year with a very good season hitting .258 with 9 HR, 49 RBI, 60 stolen bases, and a .728 OPS in 115 combined games between Lake County and Kinston. He is a versatile outfielder who can play all three outfield positions, and has a nice speed/power combo at the plate and on the bases.

Pena is an exciting left-handed hitter who has line-drive power to all fields, though has had some problems maintaining consistency with his swing and is a little small for a corner outfielder. He has a very good arm and plays good defense, and will need to work on his plate discipline this season. Allman is a natural hitter with the ability to hit for good gap power, but has little room for growth in the power department professionally.

He runs well, plays good defense, has a good arm, and plays hard, which is a perfect fit in a backup outfielder role that he will be in.