

## Minor Happenings: De Le Cruz, Rondon Off To Hot Starts

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Wednesday, April 15 2009 7:00 PM -

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The Indians season is already over a week old, and the minor league season is underway, so with that it is time for this year's first edition of Minor Happenings. In this season's debut piece, Tony touches on the hot starts by top pitching prospects Kelvin De La Cruz and Hector Rondon. He also brings us up to speed on Adam Miller's return from the finger injury, Chris Gimenez's rough start, Chuck Lofgren's encouraging first start of the season, and all the impressive debuts and disappointments from the first week of the Indians minor league season.



*"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.*

The Indians season is already over a week old, and the minor league season is underway, so with that it is time for this year's first edition of *Minor Happenings*. For those new to this weekly article, it posts every Thursday during the minor league season through the end of September and serves as a lengthy recap of all the important news and developments in the Indians farm from the past week.

Anyway, I was in Lake County last night so I have some things from manager Aaron Holbert on some of his players. Also, in the coming week I will have a few player articles on some of the guys I talked to last night. This weekend I head out to Columbus for the opening of Huntington Park and hope to talk to a few players down there, though it is going to be a media frenzy all weekend so the pickings will be slim.

I'm just looking forward to checking out the new park and enjoying some Triple-A baseball in OHIO.

Also, don't forget, Paul Cousineau and I are on the air every Thursday night from 9:30-10:30pm talking Tribe and minor league prospects on [Smoke Signals](#). Tonight we will be talking about

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the Indians slow start and touch on some of the minor league highlights from the past week.

Also, while no minor league guest are scheduled for this week, we have a few e-mails out to some of our journalist friends and will likely have one of them on tonight to talk about the big league team.

### Indians Minor League Player Of The Week

*(for games from April 8<sup>th</sup> to April 15<sup>th</sup>)*

#### **Kelvin De La Cruz (Left-handed Pitcher - Kinston)**

*2-0, 2 games, 1.50 ERA, 12.0 IP, 6 H, 2 R, 1 HR, 2 BB, 19 K*

In a week where there were a lot of good performances in the first week of the Indians minor league season, one player stood out



from them all: Kelvin De La Cruz. The 20-year old lefty from the Dominican Republic was sensational in both starts this past week. In advanced Single-A Kinston's season opener last Thursday, De La Cruz went 6 innings and allowed 2 runs on 2 hits, 2 walks and had a career high 10 strikeouts.

He held lefties in the game hitless (0-for-11) with 4 strikeouts.

He followed that up on Tuesday by going 6 shutout innings and allowed 4 hits, no walks, and had 9 strikeouts.

His 19 strikeouts lead the Carolina League.

The key to his success in the early going in his return trip to Kinston has been much improved command and a sharpened curveball that has shown more depth. It is a pitch he really worked on in the offseason, and one of the main mechanical adjustments for it was just getting him to be cognizant of not allowing his arm slot to get too high and also finishing the pitch. His preparation has also improved, and it looks like he may be taking a leap forward this year in his already high prospect standing.

De La Cruz has greatness in his future if he can maintain health. He is the complete package as he is left-handed and has a good power fastball that sits at 92-93 MPH with arm strength to add more velocity as he matures.

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He has a plus-plus curveball that is quickly developing into a weapon and major league out pitch, and also has a developing plus changeup as well.

He has excellent makeup, is composed, speaks English, and just loves the game.

Right-hander Hector Rondon got all the press in the offseason and spring training, but "De La" should not be overlooked and in fact is much further along than Rondon was at this point last season, not to mention he is almost a year younger than Rondon.

### Honorable Mentions:

Michael Aubrey (1B - Columbus): .542 (13-for-24), 3 R, 2 2B, 1 3B, 1 HR, 7 RBI, 1 BB, 0 K

Matt LaPorta (OF - Columbus): .400 (8-for-20), 6 R, 3 2B, 1 3B, 1 HR, 3 RBI, 0 BB, 2 K

Carlos Santana (C - Akron): .286 (5-for-19), 4 R, 0 2B, 0 3B, 2 HR, 10 RBI, 6 BB, 5 K

Hector Rondon (RHP - Akron): 2-0, 2 games, 1.59 ERA, 11.1 IP, 9 H, 2 R, 2 BB, 11 K

Matt Brown (OF - Kinston): .500 (11-for-22), 4 R, 1 2B, 0 3B, 0 HR, 4 RBI, 3 BB, 4 K

Adam Abraham (C - Lake County): .348 (8-for-23), 2 R, 2 2B, 0 3B, 1 HR, 1 RBI, 1 BB, 3 K

Joey Mahalic (RHP - Lake County): 0-1, 2 games, 2.00 ERA, 9.0 IP, 6 H, 2 ER, 5 BB, 8 K

### **Director's Cuts**

Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins this week had some comments about left-hander Aaron Laffey's call to Cleveland and the Triple-A Columbus lineup:

*On Aaron Laffey:* "I think what Aaron brings is his entire body of work. As great as he was in 2007 and the ups and downs of 2008,

after you look at everything he has accomplished in his minor league career, he is becoming a professional starting pitcher. He knows what he has to do to make adjustments. What he will have to do to have major league success is continue to make adjustments and continue to work off his strengths which is sinking his fastball on the plate.

He is one of the best competitors we have had in our minor league system.

He will have to make sure he stays behind the ball and is aggressive and attacks.

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What we always know that we can count on with him is he loves to compete and he will be aggressive.&quot;

*On the Columbus lineup:* &quot;It has been great. Matt LaPorta, Michael Brantley and Luis Valbuena, those are the three guys off to the hottest starts as they are tearing the cover off the ball. Michael Aubrey as well, but every single one of his hits has fallen, while Brantley and LaPorta are getting line drive outs.

Torey Lovullo, our Triple-A manager, a couple days ago thought Brantley was 15-for-13 because he felt like he had more hits than at bats.

Every time those guys come up it seems like they are in a good position to hit.

They are all off to great starts and playing a complete game playing great defense and running the bases well.

There are a lot of great things coming out of Columbus, not to mention how young all of those individuals are who have a lot of upside to come.&quot;

### Battery Mates Power Akron

Akron Right-hander Hector Rondon is off to a spectacular start in his Double-A debut. In the season opener last Wednesday he

carried a shutout into the sixth inning before tiring and was taken out of the game. He finished the night by going 5.2 innings and allowed 1 run on 5 hits, 1 walk and had 6 strikeouts.

He followed that up with an identical start yesterday (Wednesday) going 5.2 innings and allowed just 1 run on 4 hits, 1 walk, and had 5 strikeouts.

In two starts, he is now 2-0 with a 1.59 ERA and in 11.1 innings has allowed 9 hits, 2 walks and has 11 strikeouts.

Rondon filled out some in the offseason, and just looks like a completely different pitcher on the mound this season and has quickly surged into the upper-echelon of right-handed pitching prospects in baseball. His fastball has more life, he looks more composed on the mound, and his velocity and secondary pitches continue to improve every year. He wowed Indians officials with a sensational spring training, and with his hot start in Akron there is

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no telling where he could end up this season.

Given the Indians conservative nature of handling prospects, it seems highly unlikely that even if desperate they will not have him pitch any meaningful innings in Cleveland this year. He is only 21-years old, and he still needs some work in Akron refining his delivery and secondary pitches to better ensure that when he gets that call to the bigs he can handle it.

However, when you look at the starting pitching situation in Cleveland at the moment, if this continues into June and Rondon is continuing to dominate in Akron and maybe Columbus, why not try him out?

He is already on the 40-man roster and an option is already being burned this year anyway, so if a need is there and he is pitching like he is now he should be called up.

His power arm and live fastball would be a breath of fresh air to the Indians rotation, and even while the Indians want his breaking ball and changeup to be tightened up a little bit, he has demonstrated already that he may be a guy who you finish off at the big league level.

The other part of this dynamic duo is catcher Carlos Santana who is hitting .263 with 2 HR, 10 RBI and a .986 OPS so far on the young season at Akron, but so far it is in games where Rondon starts where his best is brought out and put on full display. In Rondon's two starts, Santana is 3-for-7 with 2 HR and 8 RBI, and in the four games played when Rondon does not start he is 2-for-12 with 0 HR and 2 RBI.

In both starts, Santana has hit a booming home run in the first inning to stake his battery mate to a big lead as he hit a three-run home run on opening day and then yesterday hit a grand slam.

Santana has all the tools offensively, and the Dodgers moved him behind the plate to take advantage of a rocket fueled throwing arm. There have been a lot of comparisons made to him and current Indians catcher Victor Martinez because of their offensive skill set and because they both switch hit and moved from another position to be a catcher.

There are some differences though.

Santana is a couple inches shorter than the bigger bodied Martinez, and he is also leaner and a little more muscular than Martinez was in the minors.

Another big difference is unlike Martinez who lumbers around the bases, Santana is very athletic and runs well.

Santana and Martinez are both aggressive hitters, but Santana also has shown a penchant to be able to take more walks.

Santana likely will not fit into the Indians plans this year, nor even at Triple-A Columbus either, as the plan is to really hone in on his defense this season at Akron and have him ready where

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he could make the jump to Cleveland if needed sometime in 2010. He just needs experience behind the plate.

### Coaches Corner: Aaron Holbert

I was at Single-A Lake County last night to watch left-hander T.J. House pitch, and after the game Captains manager Aaron Holbert had some comments on House and a few other players:

*On T.J. House:* "He is going to go through some growing pains and we are going to go through a few with him being so young. He



is very green, so we are going to have to take our time with him and help him with the maturity process a little bit because he is 19 years old. We understand that he is going to go through some adversity as there are more mature players in this league.

What he has done in his two starts has been tremendous with no runs the first game and two tonight, and he just reached his pitch limit so we had to get him out of there.

I know he paid way too much attention to the guy at first in the third inning.

It was throw over, step off, throw over, step off, ball, ball, throw over, ball, that sort of deal and he walked the hitter.

He lost his focus on what he was supposed to do to get the batter out.

We were up 4-0, and all we need to do is make one pitch.

So that is one thing we are going to have to work on and make these young guys understand the importance of each and every out, and when you have a lead the importance of that one base-runner versus the hitters at the plate."

*On Abner Abreu:* "I believe that the cold weather is a part of [his early struggles]. I know he had a very good year last year in the GCL, but these guys are a little older, a little more mature, and a little wiser and the curveballs, sliders, and splitters are going to get better as he moves up.

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I think he is really geared up for the fastball and leaving the zone on some pitches, and then is slow on the curveball.

If you look at his at bats tonight, he got himself out more than the pitcher did.

The strike threes that were called were hanging curveballs, and if he was sitting back and recognizing the pitch he could have probably driven them.

Really he got himself out tonight.

He is a confident kid, so that is not going to be a concern.

It is just a matter of time before it clicks in.&quot;

*On Alexander Perez:* &quot;He looked good the other night. He did a good job establishing his fastball early for strikes, mixing in some changeups, and then in the 4th inning started breaking off that good curveball he has. It was not like in spring training where he was getting himself in trouble throwing it early by going curveball, curveball right off the bat and guys learned they had to look for it right away.&quot;

*On Kyle Landis:* &quot;That closer's role is not the easiest of jobs. Everybody is looking at him to slam the door, so there is some added pressure to that and he has done a fine job.

He became the closer in the middle part of the season last year and then was promoted to Kinston, so we know he can handle the role.&quot;

### Miller Progressing Well

Out in Goodyear, Arizona right-hander Adam Miller is continuing to work his way back from a frustrating injury to the middle finger of his pitching hand. He experienced some discomfort in the finger early in spring training that shut him down, and when he came

back from the short layoff he had an issue to where he could not bend the tip of his finger. As a result, because of the issue Miller had two choices: learn how to pitch with it or face career-threatening surgery and the loss of the entire 2009 season.

The Indians shut him down for a few days and worked with him on a new grip where he used his index finger along with his middle finger to release the ball. The results to date have been astounding, as while his release point has been re-worked he is throwing all of his pitches and

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the command is close to what it was before the change.

The next step is getting him into games.

Miller had only been throwing bullpens to keep up with regular work and apply the new changes to his delivery to compensate for the finger issue. But he was scheduled to throw against live hitters for the first time in batting practice this past Monday and then again tomorrow (Friday).

No word yet on how the Monday session went, or if he even had it, but this is a big step in his progression back to pitching in real games.

He has compensated well with the changes, and even with the increased work and intensity he has continued to be effective.

Assuming all continues to go well, he is still a few weeks away from getting the all clear to start pitching in extended spring games. There is no ETA on when he may be activated and sent to Triple-A Columbus, but his progression so far is great news and he would be a welcomed addition to the Indians bullpen in Cleveland the second half of the season if he can make it all the way back by then.

### Lofgren Has Encouraging Start

Left-hander Chuck Lofgren is returning to the Double-A Akron rotation for the third season in a row, but considering what he went through last season emotionally, mentally, and physically on and off the field, returning to Akron is just fine with him. Last year at Akron he went 2-6 with a 5.99 ERA in 28 games (15 starts), and in 85.2 innings allowed 93 hits, 52 walks and had 72 strikeouts.



Things got so bad for him, the Indians sent him to extended spring training for a month in June to clear his head, and when he came back he pitched out of the bullpen and had some success in that role.

Coming into this season it was sort of an unknown whether he would stick in the rotation or be moved permanently to the bullpen. But, the Indians are sticking with him as a starter because they like his stuff and feel he fits better in that role. Because of his decline the past two years from a numbers standpoint, many fans are curious to see how things shake out for Lofgren this season.

His first start on Monday was a mixed bag, but mostly it was a positive outing for him as he was

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much closer to the Lofgren of old.

He only lasted 4 innings but allowed just 1 run on 4 hits, 4 walks and had 2 strikeouts.

He pitched in tough weather conditions and had to sit out a long rain delay to start the game which affected his pre-game preparation. A steady rain fell while he pitched, and he escaped a bases-loaded jam in the second and stranded five runners on base in the first two innings alone limiting Altoona to just a 1-for-6 mark with runners in scoring position.

The command may not be all the way back yet, but he battled in some less than ideal conditions and he got the outs when he needed them most, something he did not do last year.

An encouraging start for sure, and nice to see.

### Gimenez Off To Tough Start

Triple-A Columbus catcher and do-everything player Chris Gimenez had an amazing spring training where he went to big league camp for the first time and turned some heads with his performance up there. He knew he was a longshot to win a spot on the



Indians 25-man opening day roster out of camp, but just as important was making a first impression with the big league coaching staff, and that he did. The Indians now view him as a legitimate depth option to use at some point this season if a need arises at a plethora of positions on the field or if they want some more versatility on the bench.

Unfortunately for Gimenez, all that fun has been left out in the Arizona sun. Since leaving Arizona and going to Columbus to start the season, everything that went so well out in spring training is now going so very wrong.

Six games into the season he is hitless in 18 at bats with 9 strikeouts, and in addition to his struggles at the plate he was also smashed over the head by the back swing of a bat on Tuesday night.

The blow left him bloodied and mostly frustrated to no end, and he left the game for treatment requiring five stitches.

So, it is easy to see how his first six games with the Clippers have been nothing short of a disaster.

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For any other player, the Indians and the coaching staff would probably worry that one of their prized prospects is pressing after such a miserable start to the season. But not Gimenez. He is so open to instruction and help, is very positive and confident about his abilities, and has such outstanding makeup, it is only a matter of time before he puts it all together and things begin to spark for him.

For now, he is temporarily sidelined as the Indians monitor his progress after being hit in the head with the bat and want to be sure he does not have a concussion.

He is day-to-day and should be back in soon, and when he does get back in maybe the force of the bat to his head jarred a few hits loose for him so he can get on a roll offensively.

### Command Still A Problem For Miller

On Sunday, Single-A Lake County lefty Ryan Miller's 2008 second-half struggles with his command reared its ugly head again. Once again he had trouble with walks because he just was not able to command and locate his pitches consistently.

He finished

the game going 4.1 innings and allowed 3 runs on 1 hit, 5 walks and had 7 strikeouts. He also hit a batter.

His Jekyll and Hyde routine was on full display again as he was in control and cruised through the first inning and then got into trouble the rest of the game mostly because of his walks and a hit batter. The bottom fell out in the fourth inning when he lost the strike zone and walked four straight batters.

Miller's struggles are not from a lack of hard work as he worked as hard as he ever has this past offseason and came into spring training in the best shape of his career. His problems are more mental than physical at this point as the main issue is a lack of confidence to throw his fastball for strikes.

For now, Miller will remain in the starting rotation, but with starters in waiting out in Arizona in extended such as Bryce Stowell and Chris Jones, he will only get probably five to seven starts before the Indians may make a move to yank him out of the rotation if he continues to struggle.

The general feeling around baseball is he profiles as a big league reliever anyway, so this could just speed up that transition where he could finish the year in the bullpen at Lake County or Kinston.

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### LaPorta Okay In More Ways Than One

On Saturday night Indians top outfield prospect Matt LaPorta had to be removed in the middle of the second game of a double-header for Triple-A Columbus because of an injury. LaPorta complained of some tightness in his right mid-section and was

promptly removed for precautionary reasons because of the cold temperatures. He sat out and did not play on Sunday, but was back in the lineup in the outfield on Monday and suffered no setbacks from the minor injury.

While it is a big sigh of relief that he is okay physically, it is also a big sigh of relief that LaPorta also appears to be back mentally as well. It is well documented how much LaPorta struggled with the Indians after the trade last year, but it is very good to see him come into the 2009 season in control and on a mission. He started

things off with a great spring training in big league camp, then in the last week of minor league camp he was awesome playing with Columbus in several minor league spring games.

But what is really good to see is that he has come out strong and confident, and the numbers show as in six games he is hitting .400 (8-for-20) with 1 HR, 3 RBI and a 1.255 OPS.

Consider that in 17 games with Double-A Akron last year he hit just .233 with 2 HR, 8 RBI, and a .649 OPS.

Yes, I'd say he is locked in and may be over his troubles that plagued him last year.

### Abreu Settles Into Lake County

Outfielder Abner Abreu is settling into his new surroundings in Lake County. For a lot of Latin American players venturing into their first full season of professional baseball stateside, it can be just as much a continuing process of adjustments learning the

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American culture as the adjustments needed at the plate each game. Something many people may not know about Abreu is not only was he a baseball junkie growing up in the Dominican Republic, but he was also very smart, especially in math.

His mom teaches psychology and his father is a carpenter, and they enrolled him in English classes when he was 11 years old.

He is not proficient with the English language, but he continues to improve and is able to communicate and understand his coaches and teammates who speak to him in English.

The Indians signed Abreu as a 16-year back in October 2006 because they loved his raw ability with the bat and his loose, wirey frame. In just a little over two years, Abreu has put himself on the prospect map as he was in the Top 20-30 list for almost every major national publication that ranked Indians prospects. He is now 6'3 and 170 pounds, and looks a lot like his favorite player Alfonso Soriano at the plate.

He has excellent power to all fields, and as he matures the Indians feel he could become special from a raw power standpoint.

He is a very aggressive hitter, so as a result high strikeout totals will always be a result, but as long as he is pounding the gaps and hitting balls over the fence consistently the Indians will live with it.

### Impressive Debuts

There were a lot of very good first week performances from some well established prospects in the system, but there were also some very nice debuts from two of the Indians top picks in the 2008 Draft, left-hander T.J. House and right-hander Zach Putnam.



Putnam was excellent in his Carolina League debut for advanced Single-A Kinston. In 5 innings of work he allowed 1 run on 5 hits, 2 walks and had 5 strikeouts.

He was in command all night, poised, and showed the confidence that has many excited about his potential.

Putnam is a 5<sup>th</sup>

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round pick out of the University of Michigan, and even though he has been in the system for barely eight months, he is already one of the top pitching prospects in the system.

With his athleticism, makeup, mid-90s fastball and assortment of pitches, he has the potential to be a dominant pitcher in the big leagues.

It remains to be seen if he ends up a reliever or starter, and it should be noted that had right-hander Bryce Stowell not come up lame in spring training with an injury, Stowell would have opened in the Kinston rotation and Putnam in the Kinston bullpen.

House made two starts on the week, one very good and one that was just okay. In both games he showed off his impressive arsenal of a low 90s fastball, nasty slider and rapidly developing changeup. Ho  
use was a late signing with the Indians last year, so he never pitched in the Indians system last season.

His start last Friday was his Indians debut, and he dominated going 5 innings allowing no runs on 2 hits, 3 walks, and had 4 strikeouts.

He was a 16<sup>th</sup>

round pick out of Picayune Memorial High School (MS), and slid because of signability reasons and because he was pretty committed to attend and play at Tulane University.

But, when the coach that recruited him to go to Tulane stepped down and took another job, House rethought his option to start his professional career right away and ended up signing with the Indians.

### Disappointing Starts

It's early. But, this is the time of year in baseball where so many people have a tendency to overreact and magnify everything when players and teams under perform the first week of the season. So with that, let's put these first week performances under the microscope, shall we?



Advanced Single-A Kinston right-hander Jeanmar Gomez did not get his return trip to Kinston started off in the right way last Friday. He was able to work his way deep into the game, but the

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final line was not close to his standards:  
hits, 5 runs, 0 walks, 5 strikeouts, and 2 home runs.

6 innings, 7

That's not what you expect from a highly touted pitcher in the system making a return to the league he pitched the entire season in the previous year.

He followed that up with a solid start on Wednesday night tossing 5 innings and allowing 2 runs on 4 hits, 2 walks, and had 1 strikeout.

Single-A Lake County left-hander T.J. McFarland may have had the worst pitching performance of a prospect in the first week of action in the Indians system. On Monday he was given a 7-2 lead going into the fourth inning, but quickly turned it into a 9-7 deficit as the first seven batters reached base in the top of the fourth inning and he retired no one before he was eventually sent to the showers for a reliever. He finished the game going 3+ innings and allowed 9 runs, 9 hits, 1 walk, and had 2 strikeouts.

On the hitting side, lots of top hitting prospects are off to very slow starts. Here are some notable hitters hitting under .200:

Nick Weglarz .105, Jared Goedert .154, John Drennen .143, Chris Gimenez .000, Lucas Montero .167, Cord Phelps .095, and Chris Nash .130.

### Release Notes

In addition to the players I mentioned in my Goodyear Notebooks two weeks back when I was out in Arizona for spring training, the following players have also since been released: outfielder Jason Denham, right-hander Juan Diaz, right-hander Jose Jimenez, right-hander Jacob Reust, left-hander Jose Rodriguez, catcher Robbie Alcombrack, right-hander Denny Montero, and catcher Juan Aponte.

Also, former Tribe farmhands Ryan Mulhern (Pirates) and Jake Gautreau (Tampa Bay) were released at the end of spring training by their teams. And, in an interesting note, outfielder Bryan Pritz was released by the Red Sox.

Why mention Pritz?

Well, he is right-handed pitcher Randy Newsom's partner for [Real Sports Interactive](#)

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And to whoever is wondering where in the world right-hander Gregorio Rosario is, he in fact is still in the Indians organization. He is in extended spring training rehabbing from an unknown injury.

### Affiliate Notebook

