

Minor Happenings: Berger Is King

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Thursday, April 23 2009 7:00 PM -

Tony's been doing his weekly "Minor Happenings" column for us for several years now, and there is no better place to get your weekly snapshot of all the things happening in the Indians minor league system. This week, Tony talks about Eric Berger, his Minor League Player of the Week. He shares notes from his recent conversation with Farm Director Ross Atkins. And also provides many notes from the slew of players and coaches he talked to while visiting the Indians new park in Columbus this past week.



"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.

Lots to cover this week. In case you missed them, earlier in the week I wrote articles on [Mark Thompson](#)

, [Tony Sipp](#)

and

[Huntington Park](#)

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I also have pieces in the hopper for this coming week on Chris Nash, Jordan Brown, David Huff and Chris Gimenez, so it should be another busy week of player features on the site. I will be visiting Akron this coming Tuesday night to see right-hander Hector Rondon pitch as well as talk to several of the players.

Also, we had Indians.com beat reporter Anthony Castrovince on our show [Smoke Signals last](#)

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[night](#) , so be sure to check that out if you missed it.

We touched on a lot of topics ranging from the Laffey-Lewis decision, Sipp's arrival, the starting rotation and bullpen, as well as his life as a beat reporter.

Great stuff from Mr. Castrovince, and not surprising considering it is coming from someone who has really separated himself from the pack as far as covering the Indians goes.

Anyway, onto the *Happenings*....

Indians Minor League Player of the Week

(for games from April 16th to April 22nd)

Eric Berger (Left-handed Pitcher - Kinston)

1-0, 2 games, 0.90 ERA, 10.0 IP, 6 H, 1 ER, 4 BB, 15 K



Among the Indians four affiliates in action, advanced Single-A Kinston has been home to many of the hot starts in the system so far. Last week lefty Kelvin De La Cruz took him the honors, and this week it was a close race between Berger, first baseman Matt McBride, and third baseman Lonnie Chisenhall for Player of the Week honors.

While the tear McBride is on and the two grand slams by Chisenhall the last two days were impressive, Berger gets the nod for some dominating pitching in both of his starts from the past week.

Last Thursday, Berger set a career high with 8 strikeouts and mowed down the opposition allowing 1 run on 5 hits and 2 walks in 5 innings of work. He followed that up with an even better outing this past Tuesday going 5 shutout innings and allowing just 1 hit, 2 walks and had 7 strikeouts. On the season he is 1-1 with a 1.93 ERA in three starts, and in 14.0 innings has allowed 10 hits, 8 walks, and has 20 strikeouts. Berger was highly regarded as a pitching prospect coming into the season, and his performance his first three times out are really solidifying him as a high upside starting pitching prospect for the Indians. Gu

ys like Zach Putnam, T.J. House, Trey Haley and Bryce Stowell may get more pub from the 2008 Draft, but Berger at this point may be the most advanced and closest to the big leagues

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out of all of them.

Lord knows the Indians need some pitching!

Honorable Mentions:

Matt McBride (1B - Kinston): .444 AVG (12-for-27), 7 R, 4 2B, 2 HR, 7 RBI, 6 BB, 3 K

Lonnie Chisenhall (3B - Kinston): .321 AVG (9-for-28), 4 R, 1 2B, 2 HR, 12 RBI, 3 BB, 6 K

Cord Phelps (2B - Kinston): .462 (12-for-26), 8 R, 4 2B, 1 3B, 0 HR, 5 RBI, 5 BB, 5 K, 1 SB

Tomo Ohka (RHP - Columbus): 1-1, 2 games, 2.31 ERA, 11.2 IP, 11 H, 3 R, 3 BB, 7 K

Alexander Perez (RHP - Lake County): 0-0, 1 game, 0.00 ERA, 7.0 IP, 2 H, 0 R, 0 BB, 7 K

Previous Winners:

4/8 to 4/15: Kelvin De La Cruz (LHP - Kinston)

Director's Cuts

Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins was in Columbus this past weekend to take in the festivities of the grand opening of new Huntington Park and the official beginning of the Indians presence in Columbus, OH as a minor league affiliate. He shared some thoughts this week on the new stadium and lefty Tony Sipp who was recently called up to Cleveland:

On Tony Sipp: "Tony is a converted outfielder as he played outfield in college at Clemson University and pitched some. He has had some of the highest swing and miss percentages in our system ever since he has been here.

He is coming off Tommy John surgery, so he didn't pitch until the end of last year.

It really has not phased him.

He is back to 100%, he has an electric fastball that is swing and miss, he has an electric slider that is swing and miss.

The only question is how consistently will he throw it over the plate.

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We have confidence that he will, and I think when he starts throwing it over the plate at a very high percentage he is going to be dominant.

He really has the chance to be special.

He is very athletic, fields his position well, and controls the running game.

He is the kind of pitcher that we feel his transition to the major leagues may not be as daunting as it is to some.

I think he will see this as 'who is the next hitter and who am I facing', and that is the type of mentality we like to talk about when making a transition to the big leagues."

On opening day in Columbus: "I think from a Columbus perspective, it was probably as good as it could possibly be. The fans just seemed to really be enjoying themselves, it was a beautiful day, and the weather was perfect.

There was a fly over and not an empty seat in the house or an empty patch of concrete in the house as everywhere you went there was a body.

It really has an impressive layout with the skyline and the way the field plays.

From a Cleveland standpoint, it just keeps getting better.

The fact that our players are playing in that setting, in that environment so close to home.

The fact that it is a great gameday experience as well as a great development experience.

I can shoot down there in two hours, our strength and conditioning coordinator can shoot down there in two hours.

Anyone who is Cleveland based now has the access to Columbus, Akron, Lake County and Mahoning Valley and it is such a short drive.

It is not just me, Mark Shapiro, Chris Antonetti, or John Mirabelli, it could be our nutritionist, our media consultant, or a yoga instructor, whoever that individual may be they all are Cleveland based for the most part.

So having that quick access to players and the fact that they are in a brand new stadium and it is a very nice playing environment, it is as much like the major league experience as I have seen in a minor league ballpark."

Two Out of Three Ain't Bad For Putnam

You win some, and you lose some. That has been the case with advanced Single-A Kinston

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right-hander Zach Putnam who has mostly impressed in the early going of the season, but had a rough outing on Wednesday night. In his three starts to date, Putnam



has had just one bad inning and the rest of the time he has been flat out dominant. That bad inning was a doozy though on Wednesday night as in the first inning he allowed hits to the first seven hitters he faced before recording an out, and when the dust settled he finished the inning allowing seven runs on eight hits (seven singles).

If this were the major leagues, a starter likely would have been immediately yanked after such a rough first inning since the focus is more on winning, but this is the minor leagues and a pitcher needs to get his work in. So, Putnam came back out in the second inning and was back on his A-game and actually ended up pitching four shutout innings allowing two baserunners until he was lifted in the sixth inning.

Amazingly, when he came out of the game he was in line for the win as a Kinston rally in the top of the 6th inning put them up 8-7 going into the bottom of the inning.

The fact that Putnam was able to rebound from such rough first inning, but keep his composure and come back out and not only give his team five innings to save the bullpen but also give them a chance to come back and win is why the Indians are so high on him from a makeup and toughness standpoint.

The way he battled back and handled adversity during that start is why many feel he can one day be a dominant late inning reliever in the big leagues.

Prior to that start on Wednesday, Putnam was great in his first two outings combining to throw 11 innings and allow just 3 runs, 9 hits, and 3 walks while striking out 13. He actually had a 180 of an outing his prior start on Friday as he set down the first 14 men he faced and was perfect through 4.2 innings before a weakly hit ball down the first base line kicked off the bag for a hit.

He hit 95 MPH several times in the outing as well.

His numbers through three games have him at 2-0 with a 5.63 ERA, but if you take out that one bad inning out of 16 total innings so far, in those other 15 innings he has a 1.80 ERA. This may be seen as picking and choosing with the stats, but it also illustrates how there is also a lot more behind the numbers than what you see with a pitcher's win/loss total and composite ERA.

Does one horribly bad inning equal 15 impressive ones?
You decide.

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Coaches Corner: Scott Radinsky

I was in Columbus over the weekend and talked to many players, staff and coaches. One person I was able to pull aside and talk to briefly is Columbus Pitching Coach Scott Radinsky.

Here is what he said about a few of his pitchers:



On coaching: "Well, I finished playing here. I love it. I enjoy the responsibility of being in charge and being the guy for the 12 pitchers I have.

I really like working with the guys and the relationships we build.

Being able to not make an impact, but sitting back and watching them kind of apply what we have worked on, that's great."

On David Huff: "We are just trying to get him to stay under control and are not really changing anything. He has a tendency to fall off to third base. It is more him being conscious of it than reinventing anything.

I just want him to be consistent as a pitcher so he can go out and have success be it here or wherever."

On Tony Sipp: "He has been good here. With the amount of time he has had off the last year and a half I think he is still getting back under his feet, but the ball is coming out of his hand with good life to it. Even when he is not on, he has this thing inside that finds a way to get outs and get out of a jam.

He's got it. He is one of my favorites, more because of his guts inside and stuff-wise. How he gets after it, that's what I like, and I respect it. A lot of guys have good stuff, but they don't know how to use it. He knows how to use it, and he has some balls."

On John Meloan: "He had some delivery and command issues [in spring training], and he has worked his butt off to get it right, sometimes to a fault. As far as stuff-wise and physically, he can go out there and pitch every day and pitch 100 innings.

He stays in shape and is ready to go, but he is still working on trying to be consistent.

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His stuff definitely plays up as it is above average stuff, it is just a matter if he can compete the same every day.

Going back to the last five or six outings and into the end of spring training, I think he is starting to kind of believe that it is there.

You are starting to see it in his effort and he is starting to get a little more after it and he has the confidence that the ball is going to go where he wants it to go."

Clippers Dynamic Catching Duo

According to Columbus manager Torey Lovullo, catchers Chris Gimenez and Wyatt Toregas have a pretty set rotation on who will catch on what days. Over the course of a ten game period, Gimenez is expected to get the lion's share of playing time with six

starts while Toregas would get four starts. In addition to catching, Toregas will also see some time at designated hitter, and Gimenez of course will see time in the outfield and designated hitter.

With Toregas being the more advanced defensive catcher and really being developed more as a backup catcher, he is being more of a mentor for Gimenez since the Indians love Gimenez's offensive potential and want to see him continue to improve defensively behind the plate.

It has been a rough go of it early on for Gimenez who is mired in a season opening slump where in 11 games he is hitting just 4-for-36 (.111) with 0 HR and 1 RBI. He started the season 0-for-22 before getting three hits last Saturday, but since that one game he is only 1-for-11.

His early struggles are more him pressing than anything else, which happens when the numbers are not so pretty early on.

Just like the fans, players themselves tend to over-magnify the early numbers and performance and in some cases it can become a mental game that is hard to block out.

You see it with guys who get off to cold starts who struggle to get out of it, but also with guys who get off to hot starts who feel invincible at the plate.

Eventually, the cold and hot starts fade and things get back to normal.

The problem with Gimenez in the early going is after a sensational big league camp where he

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really was relaxed and impressed the Indians big league staff, he has gone to Columbus and been pressing from day one there.

When that happens, it usually leads to a hitter getting away from their plan and

trying to make things happen rather than letting it come naturally and sticking to their approach.

As a result, his hitting mechanics have been off some, and according to Hitting Coach Jon Nunnally his front foot was coming down late and he is not using his hands well with his swing.

They think they have corrected the problem, so it bears watching going forward.

Toregas continues to be very much the professional even though he has had his playing time cut in half. The Indians think very highly of him as a defensive catcher, and the feeling now is that if an injury were to befall one of Victor Martinez or Kelly Shoppach that they could turn to Toregas in a backup role with the big league club. In a way, his reduced playing time with Columbus is more to get him ready for such a role potentially with the Indians.

Even still, Toregas continues to work hard on his offense and to be more consistent as a hitter.

He had a big game on Wednesday hitting two home runs, and on the season he is hitting .261 (6-for-23) with 2 HR, 5 RBI and an .842 OPS in seven games.

De La Cruz, Brantley Sidelined

There was some good news and some bad news this week regarding Kinston lefty Kelvin De La Cruz, one of the Indians most prized pitching prospects in the system. The good news? He was named the Carolina League Pitcher of the Week for his

performance the first week of the season where he went 2-0 with a 1.50 ERA and had 19 strikeouts over the two starts covering 12 innings. He gave up just two earned runs on six hits while walking two batters.

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Unfortunately, while it was good news to hear that De La Cruz was honored with Player of the Week honors, the bad news is of much greater concern. On Friday it was learned that left-hander Ryan Miller was being promoted from Lake County to Kinston to make a spot start or two, but it was not known for who and why.

On Sunday the move was made official as Miller was officially activated on the Kinston roster and filled the spot in the rotation for the ailing De La Cruz.

Miller was okay in his outing, going 4 innings and allowing 1 hit and 1 run with 2 strikeouts, but again had control problems with 5 walks.

But the question at hand is what happened to De La Cruz? He was fine in his last start on Tuesday April 14th when he went 6 shutout innings and allowed 4 hits, no walks and had 9 strikeouts.

Apparently, he is expected to be okay, but the Indians staff has taken precautionary measures to sit him for a start or two after he tweaked his elbow in practice shortly after his April 14th start,

likely during his bullpen session. This is certainly concerning given his great start to the season and his prospect status, so this is something to monitor to see when he comes back, how effective he is, and if the injury lingers.

Triple-A Columbus Outfielder Michael Brantley was pulled out of the game on Saturday because of a lingering hamstring issue. He was having trouble running down the line to first base on some of his hits, and had trouble catching up to a few balls in the outfield.

It was not the effort Lovullo or the Indians were used to out of Brantley, and it wasn't for a lack of hustle, it was just because he couldn't go all out like he normally does because of the sore hamstring.

Brantley has not played since, and continues to get treatment each day on the hamstring and work to get back into game action.

He is day-to-day and expected back in the lineup by week's end.

Hot Bats

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First baseman Matt McBride is off to a great start in what is a comeback season for him. In 14 games so far this year with

advanced Single-A Kinston, he is hitting .370 (20-for-54) with 2 HR, 13 RBI and a 1.100 OPS. More impressively, he has already piled up 9 doubles and he has more walks (8) than strikeouts (6).

Currently, he is 4th in the Carolina League in hitting, 6th in on-base percentage, 4th in slugging percentage, 2nd in OPS, 4th in RBI, and 1st in doubles.

McBride has always been one to pile up a lot of doubles, which is an indicator that a power explosion could be coming for him sometime down the road. The Indians moved him out from behind the plate to save his arm and because they like his potential offensively, and to date he has shown exactly why they have moved him from catcher to the outfield and first base.

Given that he turns 24-years old in May, he may not stick in Kinston for long and will go to Double-A Akron very quickly if he keeps this hot start going into May.

Outfielder Matt Brown is also off to a hot start this season, and was rewarded for that hot start by winning the first Carolina League Player of the Week Award of the season. For the week, Brown hit .457 (16-for-35) with 6 runs scored and 4 RBI for Kinston.

Brown led the entire Cleveland Indians Player Development System with a .308 average last year at Single-A Lake County.

On the season, he is hitting .383 (18-for-47) with 0 HR, 5 RBI and an .896 OPS in 13 games.

He ranks 2nd in the Carolina League in hitting and in hits (18).

Sensational Starts

Akron right-hander Josh Tomlin was terrific last Friday in a 3-1 win over Bowie. He put up his first quality start of the season and held Bowie to just 1 run and only 4 hits over 6 innings, walking 1 and striking out 1.

He faced just one batter over the minimum in his final four innings, and allowed only one runner to reach scoring position over that span as well.

While he is every bit the prospect, Tomlin just continues to perform and showcase that knack to

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put up great stats and just win ballgames.

In two starts this season he is now 1-1 with a 1.64 ERA and in 11 innings has allowed 7 hits, 1 walk and has 3 strikeouts.

Akron Left-hander Chuck Lofgren had his best outing in over a year this past Sunday as he went 6 innings and allowed 1 run on 2 hits, 1 walk and had 3 strikeouts. He took a perfect game into the fourth inning as he retired the first ten batters he faced before giving up a walk.

He took a no-hitter into the fifth before surrendering a solo home run.

It was his first win as a starter since May 1, 2008 and first quality start since May 6, 2008.

In two starts this season, Lofgren is 1-0 with a 1.80 ERA and in 10 innings has allowed 6 hits, 5 walks, and has 5 strikeouts.

His early success has been the result of improved command.

While his velocity is still around 87-91 MPH, he is using his core and legs much better throughout his delivery and has reduced his violent landing some.

Last Thursday, Lake County right-hander Alexander Perez was brilliant in his second start of the season going 7 shutout innings and allowed just 2 hits, no walks and had 7 strikeouts. Perez did not factor into the decision as the game was scoreless until the 10th inning when Lake County plated three runs to win 3-0.

On the season, Perez is now 0-0 with a 0.69 ERA and in 13 innings has allowed 5 hits, 2 walks, and has 13 strikeouts.

I said before the season started that Perez could be a breakout candidate, and so far he is looking every bit like one.

Chisenhall's Sweet Homecoming

Kinston third baseman Lonnie Chisenhall's 2009 season is a homecoming of sorts. The 20-year old is from Morehead City, NC,

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