

Abreu's Raw Talent On Display With Captains

Written by {ga=consigliere}
Monday, May 25 2009 7:00 PM -

Over the course of the past two seasons, there have been few highly regarded hitting prospects to pass through Single-A Lake County. Sure, the Captains have had several solid hitting prospects come through last year and this season, but few considered to have a potential impact bat in the big leagues. The one exception is outfielder Abner Abreu. Tony had a chance to talk to the Indians promising young slugger on a recent trip to Eastlake to see the Captains play.



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The one exception is outfielder Abner Abreu. Many who watch him may come away less than impressed if they see him play just one game, but he is one of the best hitting prospects to come through Lake County in some time, maybe since outfielders Brian Barton and Trevor Crowe were in Lake County for parts of 2005. His youth combined with his unbelievable raw power make him an exciting player to watch as he continues to learn day in and day out, and you have to watch him over the course of several games to truly appreciate how special of a player he is.

"Abner is impressive," said Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins in a recent interview. "When you look at him he looks a little like a young Vladimir Guerrero. He is a lean, lanky type of powerful athlete. He has plenty of arm strength, he is almost an average runner, and has well above average power."

Abreu had a breakthrough season last year when as an 18-year old in the rookie level Gulf

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Coast League he hit .251 with 11 HR, 37 RBI, and had an .827 OPS. He lead the league in doubles (16), home runs (11), total bases (107) and slugging percentage (.538), and was second in RBI (37). So far, as a 19-year old in the South Atlantic League, after a rocky start he has really held his own.

"He's only 19 in the South Atlantic League and is getting his fair share of breaking balls," said Atkins. "It probably has a lot to do with that he looks like Guerrero. He is not quite as big and strong, but I think just the look when he comes up to hit where catchers are immediately putting down the "2" sign. But he is an impressive athlete. He can throw and run and has a lot of raw power. He'll be someone that we are talking about for some time to come."

To date, Abreu is hitting .279 with 4 HR, 21 RBI and has a .763 OPS in 38 games. One of the more glaring things when you look at Abreu's stats so far this season is his 5 walks to 45 strikeouts. It is an amazing ratio, one he needs to work on if he wishes to experience success as he moves further along in the system. A noted free swinger, plate discipline and correcting his stance are two of the biggest things he is working on at the moment.

"I have been working on my stance," said Abreu in a recent interview at Classic Park. "I was standing too straight up and I now lean more forward since I was leaning too far back. I feel very relaxed because I know I have time to work on things and put up better numbers."

Only 19-years old in a league where most of the pitchers are 21-23 years of age, he has more than held his own even though many pitchers made him look foolish the first month of the season with breaking ball after breaking ball. He only hit .208 with 0 HR, 3 RBI and a .532 OPS in 17 April games, but in 21 games in May he is hitting .341 with 4 HR, 18 RBI and a .965 OPS. It is clear that Abreu's patience and hard work are starting to pay off.



Not only is he adjusting to a better level of pitching in the South Atlantic League in full season Single-A, but he is also learning to adjust to playing in a full season itself.

"The big difference I have seen so far is the control of the pitchers," said Abreu. "Their command is better. Also, it is a new experience because I have only played for three months before, and now I have to play for a full season. I feel very excited about that and I look forward to seeing what I can do in a full season."

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At 6'3" 170 pounds, you wouldn't think of Abreu as much of a power hitter because of that tall, skinny build. His strong hands and natural whip in his bat help generate very good bat speed, which is where his natural raw power comes from. As he grows into his body more and matures, his power is expected to increase. Right-handed pitcher Paolo Espino joked that all that strength comes from "rice and beans", but the modest Abreu says it is just something God-given.

"Some people ask my father how I hit the ball so hard, and he just says it is the grace of God," said Abreu. "God is the person who has given me that strength."

Abreu also speaks English well, though is still learning to speak it more fluently. He first learned English in school back in the Dominican Republic when he was younger as his mother is a school teacher. Since signing with the Indians, he continues to take part in their English Program where many of their Latin American players take part in English and American Culture classes for two hours a week.

Abreu thinks it is very important he learn to speak English so he can better communicate with his teammates and better be able to handle the environment living in the United States.

"It is very important, yes," said Abreu about speaking English. "When I was in the Dominican I started in university to learn to speak English. I forgot all the English I knew because in the Dominican I didn't practice any. That is the problem and why I do not speak too fluently. Before games and practices we take English classes. Right now we take them twice a week for an hour at 12 o'clock."

As the season rolls on and ultimately ends, Abreu's goal this year is to continue to improve his plate discipline and get better with his overall game.

"I would like to feel good about what I have done in the season," said Abreu. "Over the past year some people told me I had to be a more disciplined hitter. I would like to feel that I worked on that this season, and at the end of the season see the results in the work I have done on that."

So far, Abreu is off to a good start.

Photos courtesy of Tony Lastoria and Lake County Media Department