

Minor Happenings: Espino In The Zone

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Saturday, August 08 2009 7:00 PM -

This is the third installment of three planned Minor Happenings articles this week. Part 1 touched on the recent trade acquisitions and their debuts, and Part 2 touched on more of the noteworthy news in the system. Today Tony talks with Kinston pitching coach Greg Hibbard, talks more about the Jon Meloan saga, and looks at Hector Rondon's six starts in Columbus. Also, Tony will be in Lake County on Wednesday to see the Indians debut of Jason Knapp.



"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.

This is the third installment of three planned *Minor Happenings* articles this week. [Part 1](#) touched on the recent trade acquisitions and their debuts, and [Part 2](#) touched on more of the noteworthy news in the system.

For those wondering, I will be in Lake County on Wednesday to see the organizational debut of right-hander Jason Knapp, though this is subject to change if his start is moved up to Tuesday or back to Thursday. Either way, I am going to the game he pitches. I will also be in Mahoning Valley mid-week depending on what day Knapp ends up pitching.

If he goes as scheduled on Wednesday, I will be in Mahoning Valley on Tuesday night.

Onto the *Happenings*....

Indians Minor League Player Of The Month (for July)

Andy Marte (Third Baseman - Columbus)

.385 AVG (30-78), 20 R, 11 2B, 0 3B, 9 HR, 24 RBI, 9 BB, 13 K, .448 OBP, .872 SLG

For the month of July third baseman Andy Marte was red hot, which might be the understatement of the season. He pounded out an incredible 20 extra base hits and put up a .872 slugging percentage, and on top of that hit a blistering .385.

He was as

good as he has ever been in the four years in the Indians system, and he parlayed that into a second chance with the Indians (or third, depending on how you look at it) when his contract was purchased and he was added to the big league roster at the end of July when Ryan Garko was traded. Marte for all intents and purposes is done in the Indians minor league system and will never play another inning there as he can't be optioned back and if he is DFAed he'll be picked up or elect free agency. In any case, he finishes his 2009 season at Triple-A Columbus hitting .327 with 18 HR, 66 RBI and a .963 OPS in 82 games.

Aside from Marte, there were a ton of strong performances among Indians prospects for the month of July, so many that several players who hit well over .300 are not even listed in the honorable mentions this month because of so many players having outstanding months at the plate and on the mound. Triple-A first baseman Jordan Brown had another stellar month hitting .364 with a 1.043 OPS and played 17 of his 21 games in the outfield (1 at 1B, 3 as DH).

Double-A catcher Carlos Santana was the runner-up to Marte for Player of the Month consideration with unbelievable production numbers with eight homers and 29 RBI.

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Also, several of the Indians second level pitching prospects like lefties Ryan Edell and Russell Young and righty Marty Popham all had outstanding months.

Of particular interest is the performance for the month of the hitters out in rookie-level Arizona, namely third baseman Jesus Brito, first baseman Chris Kersten, and catcher Roberto Perez. These are three guys to definitely put on the long term radar and are interesting to watch going forward, though one caveat with some of the ridiculous numbers being put up by these guys and other Tribe hitters in the Arizona League is it really looks like it is a hitter's league.

The Indians old rookie-level home in the Gulf Coast League has a 3.48 league ERA this season while the Arizona League this season has a 4.43 league ERA.

This follows suit with last season with the Gulf Coast League having a 3.76 ERA and the Arizona League a 4.34 ERA.

Still, it's always fun to see some success at the plate for hitters at the lower levels, and in the coming weeks I will have more on some of these guys in the Arizona League and even the Dominican Summer League.

Honorable Mentions:

Jordan Brown (OF/1B - Columbus): .364 AVG (28-77), 15 R, 10 2B, 0 3B, 3 HR, 17 RBI, 10 BB, 8 K, 1.043 OPS

Carlos Santana (C - Akron): .311 AVG (28-90), 17 R, 5 2B, 0 3B, 8 HR, 29 RBI, 10 BB, 22 K, 1.015 OPS

Ryan Edell (LHP - Akron): 1-1, 6 games, 2.38 ERA, 34.0 IP, 30 H, 9 ER, 5 BB, 35 K, 1.03 WHIP, .234 BAA

Russell Young (LHP - Kinston): 2-2, 6 games. 1.80 ERA, 40.0 IP, 37 H, 8 ER, 4 BB, 25 K, 1.03 WHIP, .247 BAA

Steve Smith (RHP - Lake County): 0-0, 9 games, 0.00 ERA, 5 saves, 10.0 IP, 5 H, 0 ER, 0 BB, 11 K, 0.50 WHIP, .139 BAA

Marty Popham (RHP - Mahoning Vy): 3-1, 6 games, 1.59 ERA, 34.0 IP, 27 H, 6 ER, 5 BB, 46 K, 0.94 WHIP, .214 BAA

Vidal Nuno (LHP - Mahoning Vy): 2-0, 7 games, 1.14 ERA, 23.2 IP, 16 H, 3 ER, 8 BB, 22 K, 1.01 WHIP, .188 BAA

Jesus Brito (3B - AZL Indians): .418 AVG (38-91), 29 R, 10 2B, 7 3B, 2 HR, 23 RBI, 11 BB, 18 K, 1.228 OPS

Chris Kersten (1B - AZL Indians): .422 AVG (35-80), 21 R, 13 2B, 1 3B, 2 HR, 16 RBI, 5 BB, 19 K, 1.142 OPS

Roberto Perez (C - AZL Indians): .355 AVG (27-76), 16 R, 7 2B, 0 3B, 2 HR, 22 RBI, 10 BB, 12

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K, .964 OPS

Jesus Aguilar (3B - DSL Indians): .300 (27-90), 17 R, 9 2B, 0 3B, 3 HR, 21 RBI, 12 BB, 14 K, .894 OPS

Previous Winners:

June: Nick Weglarz (OF - Akron)

May: Jordan Brown (1B/OF - Columbus)

April: Matt McBride (1B/OF - Kinston)

Coaches Corner: Greg Hibbard

While I was out checking out High-A Kinston the past two weeks I not only had a chance to talk to a lot of players, but I also had a chance to sit down and talk with a lot of scouts and coaches at length and talk about the players. Here is a conversation I had with Kinston Pitching Coach Greg Hibbard on several of the members of his pitching staff:

On Scott Barnes: "You know, just on first look and seeing him for the first time and not knowing anything about him as I really



did not get any advance notice on what we were going to see I was very impressed. Just from his mound presence that he showed, the maturity of taking control of what he wanted to do.

He took control of the infield which was really good to see as far as when there was a left-hander up he would look over at the first baseman and say 'hey I will get over' or whatever.

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Those are some veteran type things you like to see out of a young kid.

Just watching his bullpen before the game it was very distinct and focused in what he was trying to do.

When you just talk about stuff, he commands a fastball, breaking ball and a changeup so he has confidence in all three.

He really likes to use his fastball which is good to see, and I thought he did a good job commanding it down in the zone to both sides of the plate to both left-handed and right-handed hitters and pitched in to both guys. Then he also showed a behind in the count ability to throw offspeed, so these are some things you like to see in a young kid if he can do it.

After the fact he struggled in the one inning he came back and put up two easy zeroes which is another thing you like to see a kid bounce back from.

It's all about him right now.

It's just sit back and watch what he can do.

Apparently, he is doing some things right that is allowing him to pitch deep into games.

Right now would not be a good idea to give him too much information about this league or the hitters.

If he comes to me and asks me about certain guys we may give him some information on that, and I feel like he is ready for that.

I feel like if he asks me about a guy in the lineup he can execute our gameplan."

On Eric Berger: "He still has a couple limitations that are kind of glaring. Controlling the running game is something he has done a better job at.

His times to the plate and his comfort level when he has runners on base have gotten better.

But it is just his move to first and when he throws over and some things like that that needs to be tightened up.

And that is not really a drastic thing for us right now that needs to be changed or worked on as much as maybe some of his secondary stuff.

Like getting better with his changeup which he has done a great job with and it now has actually become more of a weapon.

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His fastball command has definitely improved from day one of the season to now.

His breaking ball needs to improve a little bit more I think.

Just the overall command of it, using it as a lead strike and in fastball counts from time to time, or when he has to make it to put a guy away it is very crucial for him to be able to execute the pitch and right now it is still a little bit inconsistent.

I think it is definitely improved.

He is such a competitor that I feel like he gets away with maybe a lack of stuff sometimes because he competes so well."

On Russell Young: "He is a very interesting guy. His stuff is about average, but he has a good feel for a changeup and his curveball is not really a put away pitch but he likes to throw it and he will throw it for strikes and throw it in any count.

Fastball command is pretty good and he keeps it down and pitches it to both sides of the plate.

More than anything I feel like he has really learned to pitch with his stuff and not try to be somebody that he is not.

Sometimes I think we get caught up in trying to be maybe a power guy when we are averaging 87-88 on our fastball.

I just feel like he pitches to contact and relies on his defense a lot.

I think he has done a really good job with that in his last seven to eight starts.

Doing that I believe it has allowed for him to be more of a high level guy if he can do that at each level.

Unfortunately, as you go to the next level they will figure it out quicker, but his stuff is improving.

He knows that his breaking ball needs to get a little more consistent and his changeup needs to improve.

He knows that fastball command is a big part of pitching.

He is a very good evaluator and I think he is very honest with himself, and I think he is doing a really good job of working on the limitations are in front of him right now."

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On Paolo Espino: "He reminds me a lot of a Russell Young. They both are kind of similar. Paolo knows what he has to do to get outs, and I feel like when he gets in trouble is when he pitches away from contact. He has got to be a guy who makes them put the ball in play early in the game or early in counts, and he has to throw his breaking ball for strikes.

Here of late he has done a better job of that in his past few outings.

In his defense he did have a little bit of arm fatigue [a few weeks back], and there for about three starts in a row his command kind of left him a little bit.

When your arm is tired you just feel like you have to do a little extra and the next thing you know you are missing up with the fastball and not locating as well.

So we have him back on track a little bit and gave his arm a little breather and we missed some sides and it has kind of given him a little boost of energy in the way he is throwing and he actually feels better.

In his last couple of outings he has done a better job of using his changeup.

He throws kind of a split-changeup and he is using it in fastball counts of 1-0 and 1-1, so he is not as predictable when he is throwing his fastball.

If he had a little two-seam action that would be helpful for him, but right now it is not something he is worried about because he has the split-change that he throws to contact."

On Alexander Perez: "I see a very mature guy. Right off the bat I was very impressed with the way he carried himself in bullpen sessions and in game settings.

There are some little things that he needs to tighten up a little bit with just his mannerisms as far as being overconfident.

I think that kind of relays its way into him being a very cocky guy, which he is not as he is just very confident.

So we are trying to channel that in the right direction.

He kind of walks on the field and walks off the field, and he is just very laid back.

That is just his personality, and he doesn't mean anything by the way he acts it is just something we need to tighten up a little bit.

Having said that, he is a strike-throwing pitcher and he has command of three pitches.

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He likes to throw his fastball and has an above average curveball.

His changeup I believe is average to above also, as he likes to throw it, is not afraid to double up, and is not afraid to throw it over the plate.

When you have confidence that kind of stuff will happen.

The fastball usage he is very aware of and concerned about it.

After a game he will come in and ask what his percentage of fastballs was.

I feel like if you attacked hitters with your stuff and you kind of pitched your way through the game and got outs and you are at 60-65% then that is perfect.

One game he was 58% and he was a little cautious of why it was a little low, not really as I feel like he pitched well with his stuff.

He just needs to understand that it is so easy for him to get caught up in using his secondary stuff because it is so good.

At this level it is easy to get people out when you have a good breaking ball.

We are trying to teach him how to be able to pitch at the higher levels where you have to use your fastball.

He has a little bit of deception in the way he throws.

He is kind of very soft when he breaks his hands and leaves the rubber and then all of a sudden has a very fast arm.

That's very good for a changeup.

I think his changeup is just okay as far as action, but his arm action is so good that it fools the hitter right out of the hand that it gets them out on their front foot.

I think his changeup is going to improve over the next year or so also, it is just right now he is learning how to use it."

On Bryce Stowell: "We are piggybacking him and McGuire both basically to allow him to have his work day, and it keeps his innings at bay and his pitch count down.

He is built up to 70-75 pitches, but only letting him work once every five days so far has been good for him.

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He is also getting that work day where he is getting a 40-pitch side inside the five day routine.

I really like the way he is bouncing back, his side days are 100%, and he gets after it pretty good.

He is just kind of raw with what he is working on as far as his delivery goes and his arm slot.

There are a couple things he is trying to solidify right now as his breaking ball and changeup needs a little work.

But he definitely has a fast arm, and he likes to pitch.

He is very aggressive and goes after hitters and does not run away from contact, and that's kind of the guy you want to see.

"It is such a feel pitch, that to me things can change that feel.

Giving up hits, giving up runs, being afraid to throw it can change the way you throw it with conviction.

I think right now he is not sure what to trust when he throws it in a game.

He can do some things on the side when he throws it, but when he gets in a game it is not there.

It probably is just a confidence thing right now and it is just going to take some time the more he throws it.

It might be where we start making him throw it ten times a game, and he has got to use it strictly as an out pitch.

Unfortunately it might hurt the team because he is using his third best pitch to get outs, but it is about development and it is about him getting better.

Like I said, it is just such a feel pitch that he has got to throw it in game settings."

On C.C. Lee: "We are trying to solidify [his arm slot]. It is kind of like pulling teeth to get him to believe where his slot should be.

We'd like to see him kind of at a low three-quarter, I mean he is a side-to-side guy, but he needs to keep his hand above his arm a little bit and stay on top of the baseball.

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He has such a power arm that when he flies open his elbow will drop and he gets underneath the ball and everything kind of works uphill and he does not create much angle.

He is not a real tall guy, so if he loses that arm slot and gets low it gets even lower.

His breaking ball is also going to benefit from having a better arm slot.

Here of late I think he has thrown the ball the best here in the last eight or ten outings.

He has been more consistent, and I think he had just one outing where he struggled a little bit.

But he has definitely shown a better breaking ball.

We threw a little light side yesterday and hopefully tonight we are going to throw some split changes and start mixing that pitch in a little more to both left and right-handed hitters as I just want him to throw it in a game and just get some confidence in it.

It can be a groundball pitch for him and that is something he is going to need."

On Dallas Cawiezell: "He is right over the top and he comes in with a lot of confidence. He throws the ball over the plate.

He will give up a couple hits, but he does not run away from his fastball.

We are just getting him to believe that he has to pitch inside a little more.

He throws kind of a fork-split and we are trying to get him to throw that a little harder.

It gets to where it is a little loopy and an early see out of his hand.

We are trying to make that a little bit more of a power pitch.

It has been in the 77-78 MPH range and we are trying to get it in the 81-84 MPH range just to create some later depth and some later sink.

But he is definitely an interesting guy.

He is a big body who is very durable.

I feel like we have worn him out, but he just keeps wanting more.

That's the kind of guys you want in the pen."

The Meloan Saga

Boy, has the career of former Indians right-handed pitching prospect John Meloan unraveled this year. Going into the season as a reliever on the Indians 40-man roster, he was considered major league bullpen depth that the Indians would be able to turn to



at some point this season when a need arose. As the season progressed and the Indians need was obvious for relievers, he never got the call and instead eight or nine other pitchers at Triple-A Columbus were summoned.

In fact, several of the pitchers the Indians turned to instead of Meloan were guys they picked up off the waiver wire during the season.

Then on July 2nd the Indians completed a then curious trade sending Meloan to the Tampa Bay Rays in exchange for right-hander Winston Abreu. It left many Indians fans puzzled on why they would "dump" a seemingly promising arm for nothing.

Well, the reasoning behind the trade centered around the idea that the Indians were just ready to move on without him and also were planning many upcoming roster moves where he would likely be designated for assignment anyway, whether later in the month or this coming offseason.

Over the course of the season the Indians became very disinterested with Meloan as he had problems working through some delivery issues and really since joining the Indians organization last July his performance was not very good in games and in side work.

The Indians then went and designated Abreu for assignment on August 1st. He cleared waivers, but instead of accepting an outright assignment to Triple-A Columbus he elected to become a free agent.

Then get this, he resigned with Tampa Bay on Thursday and then the next day (Friday) Tampa Bay designated Meloan for assignment after they picked up catcher Greg Zaun in a trade with Baltimore.

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Tampa now has ten days to release, trade or outright Meloan to the minors.

If absolutely no one bites on him in a waiver claim - in which they would have to insert him onto their 40-man roster - it is a clear sign of how far his value has fallen.

You can get on the Indians for dumping a guy, but when a second team dumps the same guy and then no one else wants him, that's pretty damning.

I don't know if the Meloan deal will ever truly make sense to the diehards, but bottom line it has been surprising to learn over the past month that he is not as valued in baseball as originally thought. When I [talked to him and Columbus Pitching Coach Torey Lovullo](#) literally less than a week before getting traded I did not get the sense there were any attitude problems or other issues outside the lines which affected his standing, though sometimes the player and team can hide these issues well.

In any case, this should pretty much close the door on Meloan's story with the Indians.

He seemed like a down to earth and quiet guy, and I wish him the best as he goes through what I am sure is a very troubling, confusing time for him.

All this shows is how hard it really is to get to the big leagues.

Espino In The Zone

One particular prospect in the system who has bounced back well from a down year last season is High-A Kinston right-hander Paolo Espino. In an injury riddled season last year, in 26 combined appearances between Kinston and Low-A Lake County he went 2-2 with a 5.54 ERA (66.2 IP, 74 H, 23 BB, 68 K). This

season he has bounced back and in 22 combined

appearances between Lake County, Kinston and Double-A Akron he is 5-8 with a 3.56 ERA, but where he has really flourished is in the Kinston rotation where in 16 starts he is 3-6 with a 3.08 ERA (84.2 IP, 64 H, 21 BB, 67 K).

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Espino's last four starts have been awesome in that he has pitched 28.1 innings and allowed just 5 runs (1.59 ERA) on 12 hits, 2 walks, and has 24 strikeouts. On Wednesday night he had his best outing of the season when he carried a no-hitter into the eighth inning before finally allowing a home run (the only hit and run for the opposition in the game) with one out in the eighth. On the night, he threw 92 pitches, gave up one hit, one run, one walk, had six strikeouts, and recorded 14 fly ball outs to just two groundball outs.

The best news is his performance came in front of Farm Director Ross Atkins and a few Indians staff members who have been in Kinston the past week to watch the team play.

Espino's return to form is largely the result of him being healthy as he had some arm issues he battled through last year which slowed him down. He has also gotten much better at keeping the ball on the plate and attacking hitters with his fastball while effectively mixing in his offspeed pitches. His curveball already was a plus pitch, but he has tightened it up to where it is getting some much sharper break at the end through the strike zone resulting in more swing and misses or poorly timed swings.

The development of his pitches and approach is a sign he is maturing and learning how to pitch, and he is now back on the radar and could be a useful relief prospect for the Indians down the road.

Johnny Be Good

Triple-A left-hander Chuck Lofgren gets a lot of pub for his comeback season, but another guy who is having a very good year



and has resurrected his prospect status somewhat is Double-A Akron outfielder John Drennen.

He was seemingly left for dead as a prospect after a miserable 2008 campaign at High-A Kinston - his third straight year there - where in 117 games he hit .235 with 3 HR, 39 RBI and a .631 OPS.

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He has bounced back this season at Akron to hit .297 with 3 HR, 33 RBI and a .797 OPS in 72 games.

Since returning from a brief stint at High-A Kinston on June 1st

he has been on a tear where in 51 games he is hitting a smoking .337 (61-for-181) with 16 2B, 2 3B, 2 HR and 23 RBI.

Drennen turns 23 years old in a few weeks, so he still has some time left in his prospect clock. From a numbers perspective he is having a solid season, though with limited pop his bat does not project well at the big league level as a regular, but his versatility and athleticism could make him a solid fourth outfielder down the road.

Next year he likely is ticketed for a return trip to Akron at least to start the season due to the Indians depth in the outfield at the upper levels, which would do him some good as now that he is settled in and has seemed to grasp a better handle on the strike zone there may be a larger focus for him to attack the zone more so some of those doubles start turning into a few home runs again.

Random Player Updates

Right-hander Hector Rondon has now made six starts at Columbus since being called up in early July. He has had a quality start in five of the six outings, going at least six innings and not allowing more than two runs in those five quality starts. His one sub par outing came on July 28th when he went 5.0 innings and allowed four runs on eight hits, two walks and had four strikeouts.

In his six starts he is 3-2 with a 2.57 ERA, and in 21 combined appearances between Double-A Akron and Columbus he is now 10-7 with a 2.69 ERA (107.0 IP, 96 H, 22 BB, 108 K).

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Double-A Akron shortstop Carlos Rivero has gotten things going of late. After a disappointing first half of the season where he hit .220 with 1 HR, 25 RBI and a .569 OPS, he has slowly turned it on offensively hitting .265 with 4 HR, 17 RBI, and an .812 OPS in 22 second half games. He's really

been hot in his last ten games as he is hitting .306 and hit home runs in three consecutive games from July 30 to August 1.

While he has been somewhat of a disappointment this year at the plate, he has been very impressive in the field.

He recently had a 22-game consecutive errorless streak snapped, and his .973 fielding percentage is tops in the league by far (nine points) among shortstops.

The club record for fielding by a shortstop is Ivan Ochoa's .970 set in 2005, so if Rivero finishes strong he should shatter it.

Akron first-baseman Beau Mills is on one of his patented second half tears. On the season he is hitting .268 with 10 HR, 61 RBI and a .716 OPS in 111 games, but in 21 games since the All Star break he is hitting .306 with 3 HR, 14 RBI and an .811 OPS.

On the flipside he hit just .259 with 7 HR, 47 RBI and a .693 OPS in 90 games the first half.

Last year in his MVP season at High-A Kinston, he hit .268 with 9 HR, 47 RBI and an .821 OPS before the break, and then hit .327 with 12 HR, 43 RBI and a .962 OPS after it.

Affiliate Notebook

With four weeks left in the minor league season, even less time for the rookie level teams in the Arizona League and Dominican Summer League, it is time to start looking at who has a shot to make the playoffs and who does not. Here are the prospects for each team as well as some noteworthy news and notes:

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http://www.columbusclippers.com/ (5/15/09) - The Columbus Clippers are looking for a new home for the 2009 season. The team is currently in negotiations with several potential venues, but has not yet reached a final agreement. The team's current home is the Quicken Loans Arena, but they are looking for a more suitable location for the 2009 season.



http://www.akronaeros.com/ (5/15/09) - The Akron Aeros are looking for a new home for the 2009 season. The team is currently in negotiations with several potential venues, but has not yet reached a final agreement. The team's current home is the Quicken Loans Arena, but they are looking for a more suitable location for the 2009 season.



http://www.kinstonindians.com/ (5/15/09) - The Kinston Indians are looking for a new home for the 2009 season. The team is currently in negotiations with several potential venues, but has not yet reached a final agreement. The team's current home is the Quicken Loans Arena, but they are looking for a more suitable location for the 2009 season.



http://www.capefearcrawdads.com/ (5/15/09) - The Cape Fear Crawdads are looking for a new home for the 2009 season. The team is currently in negotiations with several potential venues, but has not yet reached a final agreement. The team's current home is the Quicken Loans Arena, but they are looking for a more suitable location for the 2009 season.



http://www.mahoningvalleyscrappers.com/ (5/15/09) - The Mahoning Valley Scrappers are looking for a new home for the 2009 season. The team is currently in negotiations with several potential venues, but has not yet reached a final agreement. The team's current home is the Quicken Loans Arena, but they are looking for a more suitable location for the 2009 season.



http://www.cincinnati.com/ (5/15/09) - The Cincinnati Reds are looking for a new home for the 2009 season. The team is currently in negotiations with several potential venues, but has not yet reached a final agreement. The team's current home is the Quicken Loans Arena, but they are looking for a more suitable location for the 2009 season.