

AFL Update: Command Is Graham's Key

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Tuesday, November 03 2009 7:00 PM -

Tony checks in with an update on the happenings for the young Tribe farmhands out in the Arizona Fall League. Zach Putnam has been starting, Josh Rodriguez playing the outfield, Carlos Rivero at third base, and Matt McBride is back at catcher. Tony also helps us get to know one of the new guys from the recent July trades - Connor Graham - a little better and let's us know what he is up to out in Arizona.



The Indians have eight players out in Arizona participating in the Arizona Fall League (AFL), and one of the more intriguing players assigned to the prestigious offseason league is right-hander Connor Graham.

Graham is a new player in the Indians organization, having been with the Indians for just over three months since being acquired from the Colorado Rockies in exchange for Rafael Betancourt on July 23rd. He is still settling in with the Indians, having finished the season at Double-A Akron before coming out to Arizona to play in the AFL.

"Things are not going too bad," said Graham in a recent interview. "I am trying to get a little more consistent and kind of get back in the groove I was in earlier this year [at High-A Modesto]. I am kind of working through some stuff right now. The guys [have been] awesome and it is a great staff. You kind of become part of the team very quickly, so it was a pretty easy transition."

Graham was part of a big influx of pitchers the Indians acquired in several July

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trades where they added a lot of raw, big, strong, and powerful arms to the farm system. He has a power fastball that sits around 92-95 MPH and has topped out at 97 MPH, and he complements it with a plus slider that has good hard, biting action and a changeup which is a work in progress.

At 6'6" and 235 pounds Graham has impressive size to go with his impressive arsenal, but what he really needs some work on is his fastball command. He is still very much a project, and the big key into morphing himself from project to true prospect will be determined by his ability to consistently command his fastball low in the zone and to both sides of the plate.

"Yeah, [my fastball is my best pitch] when I am commanding it," said Graham. "That's my biggest area of improvement needed, to be able to command the fastball down in the zone. I think when I am doing that I can be pretty tough."

Graham finished the season 8-7 with a 3.72 ERA in 24 combined starts between Akron and Modesto, and in 118.2 innings allowed 108 hits, 66 walks, and had 126 strikeouts. In six appearances out in the AFL he is 0-0 with a 7.04 ERA and in 7.2 innings has allowed 8 hits, 10 walks, and has 6 strikeouts.

Graham is out in Arizona to get more work in and continue to work on his delivery and mechanics, but he is starting to show some wear. He has struggled with his command since the AFL season kicked off having walked ten batters in just 7.2 innings, most of that the result of a disastrous two thirds of an inning six walk effort back on October 15th.

"Right now I am kind of worn down," said Graham. "I got shut down from lifting weights and doing abs in spring training, so it is kind of catching up right now. So right now my biggest thing is getting back in shape and getting my legs under me again. I think my mechanics are being affected by that. So that's the biggest issue right now getting back into shape and getting my legs strong again."

While his fastball command has come and gone, Graham's secondary pitches have been pretty consistent all season. He has also even been working on a new pitch that was added to his arsenal shortly after joining the Indians.

"The slider has been getting more consistent throughout this year,"

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said Graham. "I am pretty happy with it right now. I have also been working on a splitter, and that is still a work in progress. I threw it in college and had not thrown it in a couple years, so I am working on that again."

The AFL season is still only at its halfway point, so Graham is still concentrating on finishing strong there. Once the AFL season wraps up just before Thanksgiving and his offseason commences, the biggest focus for him this offseason will be to work on his strength and conditioning and go into spring training strong and ready to handle any role the Indians have planned for him. When the Indians acquired him from Colorado they kept him in the rotation, but it looks like next season he will be moved to the bullpen.

"Everything works off my fastball, so if I can get my fastball command where it needs to be I think everything else is going to fall into place too," said Graham. "So definitely my fastball command is going to be a big thing. Coming into the season in the best shape in my life is what I am most looking forward to. After the Fall League to get into the gym everyday and working hard and showing up ready to go."

This Week In The AFL



Many thanks to Al Ciammaichella for writing this report on my [site](#).

It has been an interesting couple of weeks in the AFL, as the Peoria Saguaros now stand at 9-10 on the season, good enough for a 2nd place tie in the 3-team AFL

West Division. More importantly, former Akron closer

Vinnie

Pestano

has been added to the Sags roster, which is great to see after he was shut down in the middle of a great season for the

Aeros

.

On a more depressing front, the AFL Rising Stars Showcase takes place this coming Saturday in Surprise. Why is this depressing? Of the now nine players the Indians organization has sent to the

AFL

, only infielder Carlos

Rivero

was selected to play in the Showcase. The Showcase isn't just an all-star game, as the players are selected by scouting and Minor League directors from every organization, along with input from

AFL

executive director Steve Cobb. So while it is great that

Rivero

was picked, the fact that a guy like Future's Game participant Nick Weglarz

was not selected shows that some of the shine is coming off of his prospect star after a

disappointing

campaign in Akron. The Showcase will be carried live on

MLB

Network, so tune in on Saturday at 8:15 EST to check out

Rivero

as well as top

MLB

prospects like Buster

Posey

, Dustin

Ackley

, Mike

Leake

, Yonder Alonso and bonus baby Steven

Strasburg

(who is expected to start on the mound for the East squad).

- **Nick Weglarz's** stat line in Arizona is eerily similar to his production in Akron this year, and that isn't a good thing. The big Canadian currently sits at .240/.424/.280, with just one extra base hit (a double) and one RBI. Wegz has walked 7 times to

match his 7 strikeouts, but thus far has not shown the prodigious

power that I was hoping would show up in Arizona. The

AFL

is a hitters league, and the Indians were expecting that the 21-year old slugger would be able to hit for a higher average and more power than he consistently displayed in Akron. This can all change in as little of a week of course; we all saw this past June when

Weglarz

posted an OPS of over 1.000 that when he gets hot he gets

really

hot. But for now,

Weglarz's

performance in the

AFL

is a little

disappointing for a guy that many expected to be at or near the top of most Indians prospect lists this offseason

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- On a better note, catcher **Matt McBride** has had success

both at and behind the plate for the Sags. McBride leads the circuit

with a .500

OBP

, and his .368 batting average is good for a spot in the top-10.

He has 2 HR, 11 RBI, and has even stolen a base in two

attempts. Behind the dish, McBride has cut down 3-7 would be

basestealers

for a 43% success rate. McBride has moved around a lot in the

past year as the Indians try to find a place for his bat, and is

showing no ill effects from the move back to catcher in the

AFL

. An OPS of 1.125 is hard to ignore, even in the

AFL

. McBride would

certainly

be playing in the Rising Stars Showcase if it were a true all-star

game, but the presence of top catching prospects Jason Castro

and Lucas May will give McBride the day off.

- **Carlos Rivero** earned his way into the Rising Stars Showcase with his .319/.396/.426 stat line.

Rivero

has yet to hit a HR, but has 5 RBI, 2 SB and 5 BB. He has been

consistent at the plate, with at least one hit in 8 of his last 10

games.

Rivero

has been compared to

Jhonny

Peralta

at a similar stage in their careers, both in body-type and talent.

It appears that

Rivero

is getting a head start on the move from SS to 3B, as he has been manning the hot corner for Peoria.

- In an interesting note, SS **Josh Rodriguez** has been playing a lot of CF for the Sags lately in addition to seeing time at 2B. The former 2

nd

round draft pick out of Rice struggled with injuries in Akron this year, and position versatility is always a bonus. Rodriguez is only hitting .195/.290/.370, but does have 2 doubles and a HR. He seems to be struggling with pitch recognition and timing (13/4 K/BB ratio).

- **Zach Putnam** has started two games for Peoria, and has yet to give up a run in 5 innings of work. Putnam has given up just 2 hits and a walk while striking out 4. He has yet to factor in a decision, but has looked sharp. Putnam should be back to starting full-time next year, as his fastball can touch 95 MPH and his splitter is a true out pitch. Expect to see him in the Akron rotation with a chance to move quickly to Columbus.

- As mentioned, Akron's all-star closer **Vinnie Pestano**

was added to the Sags roster for this week.

Pestano

has had one appearance, allowing a run, two hits and striking out two in one inning of work. It is great to see

Pestano

back on the mound after another arm injury, and hopefully he can continue to pitch pain-free in the AFL

and be ready for Spring Training.

- Another Aeros reliever has impressed, as **Josh Judy**

has yet to allow an earned run in 8 2/3 innings while striking out 10. Judy has also walked 7 and given up 6 hits, so he has needed those strikeouts in order to get out of trouble. Judy has posted a 1-1 record, as he was tagged with a loss back on Oct. 14 after giving up 2 unearned runs in 1 2/3 innings of work.

- **Carlton Smith** has not been as sharp, as the ri

ghty

has given up 14 runs (6 earned) over 7 innings. Control is not the issue, as Smith has only walked one batter. His pitches are in the strike zone, but they are getting hit hard. Smith has given up 13 hits (including 2 HR) and struck out just two batters. Smith posted a 2.72 ERA in Akron last year, so his 7.71 ERA for Peoria is a bit unexpected.

- Bowling Green native **Connor Graham** has also had a bit of a rough go for the Sags, as he currently sports a 6.23 ERA in his 8 2/3 innings. Graham's problems have been with control, as he has walked 10 batters while striking out 7. The big righty has swing and miss stuff, he just needs to work on locating it in the strike zone. Graham is 1-0 with a save, and other than one disastrous outing where he walked 6 and gave up 2 ER in just 2/3 of an inning has been solid for Peoria.