

Kipnis Ready To Face Challenges Of Upcoming Season

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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We are about eight weeks from the start of minor league spring training in early March. By now almost every player in the Indians system is well into their offseason workout programs and has already begun preparations for the 2010 season. For second baseman Jason Kipnis, it's all about preparing himself to handle the daily grind of his first full season. Taken in the 2nd round of the 2009 Draft out of Arizona State University, he only played in 29 games last year with short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley, but even still it was an eye opener for him on how much of a struggle it can be to play baseball professionally every day. Tony had a chance to speak with him this week.



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Kipnis, 22, is about to embark on a 2010 campaign which will consist of a full month of games and practice during spring training in March, followed by a 140 game regular season from April to early September, and then likely topped off with play in October and November in some kind of fall league. It will be a long nine month season where he'll likely play in close to 180 games if he stays healthy,

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which is a significant increase over the three to four month season he had as a college player where they played at most four to five times a week.

"I definitely underestimated the grind that it is to play everyday," said Kipnis in a recent interview about his thoughts on his first go around as a professional in 2009. "I think it would be a common answer if you asked a lot of people. My body both physically and mentally definitely [got] tired."

Kipnis only managed to play in 29 games last year for the Indians partly because he signed late, but also because he had a minor elbow injury that he suffered in the College World Series. So while he was signed in early July, he did not make his professional debut for Mahoning Valley until August 3rd because he was still rehabbing from the injury.

"I hyperextended my elbow laying out for a ball in Omaha [in a game] versus North Carolina," recalled Kipnis. "I never even knew it happened as it just hurt and I did not tell the trainer and put a sleeve on it for the last game. Once I finally signed with the Indians they took a physical and an MRI and found a little hyperextension with some swelling and a sprain in the elbow. So they sent me out to Mahoning Valley and I just did rehab until I could start playing."

For a player itching to get his first professional at bat and game over with and starting what he hopes is a prosperous career, it ate at him the entire time he sat on the Mahoning Valley bench for games but was not cleared to play.

"The thing was the elbow hurt, but I was still working out and swinging as I thought I was going to go right down [there] and play right away," said Kipnis. "But then once I signed they said I would be out for two weeks which actually once I got [there] turned into more than that, but it was worth it though. It is better to be safe than sorry and to get healthy first."

Since Kipnis only played for a little over a month, the Indians never really approached him with any changes with his swing or defense until after the season because of their 30-Day Rule where they only observe new players to the organization. When he reported to Instructional League in mid-September that is when they started making some changes, the big one being his switch from the outfield to second base.

The position change to second base is one that if it goes well could vault Kipnis

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into the upper-echelon of second base prospects in the minors and potentially one day an above average player at the position at the major league level. The Indians were so happy with what they saw out of him there in Instructional League, that they decided to go full bore with the position change and will have him go into spring training strictly as a second baseman and believe he can stick at the position.

For Kipnis, the change from the outfield to second base is a big opportunity for him. He has an advanced, polished approach at the plate and packs a good powerful punch in his small 5'10" 175-pound frame. But he is only an average defender as an outfielder and lacks the plus range of a center fielder, and he lacks the big bat teams covet from a corner outfielder. As a result, he kind of gets lots in the shuffle as an outfielder and is just another solid prospect, but as a second baseman his offensive tools play up and increase his value tremendously as a prospect. One rival scout out in Instructional League liked Kipnis so much at second base that he said "if he can stick there he has the bat that could make him explode as a prospect."

He has experience at the position as he played there in high school and originally enrolled at the University of Kentucky as a freshman as a shortstop. He also prefers to play the position, which is a big plus when making a position switch as it always helps when the player is 100% on board with the change.

While it is uncertain still how things will shake out for him at second base, it still comes back to how he performs as a hitter. In just 29 games at Mahoning Valley in 2009 he showcased his wide base of skills offensively when he hit .306 with 1 HR, 19 RBI and 3 stolen bases. He also had a .388 on-base percentage and .459 slugging percentage. The Indians like his ability to consistently put the bat on the ball and work counts, and the feeling is he could potentially some day become an offensive-oriented second baseman who could hit 15 or so home runs a year with a high on-base percentage.

As Kipnis goes through the development process, the Indians will continue to tinker with his setup at the plate and swing, though very few adjustments have been made so far.

"We've done nothing major, mostly just minor stuff," said Kipnis. "I told them my arms [were] getting kind of tired from all the swinging everyday [last season] as I started to foul off pitches that I usually put in play and

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am able to drive. My barrel was getting a little slower and loopy, so we made a little adjustment to shorten up my swing a little to keep my hands in front of my head. I like my hands back a little bit more, but it is more effective to have them more in front as it provides a shorter path. So I am working on some kind of happy medium for the best of both worlds where I can keep the power but get the bat speed."

As with any hitter entering the professional ranks, one of the biggest adjustments is the transition from metal to wood bats. In Kipnis' case, he already had some experience with wood bats after playing summer ball for two summers in the Virginia Valley League in 2007 and the Cape Cod League in 2008. He also used wood bats in a couple of tournaments in high school. He believes his experience with wood bats prior to beginning his professional career gave him a good understanding on what to expect with the bat change.

"You miss the metal bat, that's for sure, but after a week you don't even notice it anymore," said Kipnis. "You definitely have to square the ball up more and if you want it to go anywhere you definitely need to hit it on the sweet spot. There are really no cheap home runs with a wood bat like with a metal bat. After your hands get a little roughed up and toughen up a little more the wood bat just becomes your normal bat and you don't really remember the metal bat very much."

Going into draft day this past June, Kipnis did not know what to expect. As a draft eligible sophomore in 2008, the San Diego Padres selected him in the 4th round but he did not sign. He went on to win PAC-10 Player of the Year honors in 2009 and was named a first team All-American after he led his Arizona State team in almost every category by hitting .387 with 68 runs, 20 2B, 15 HR, 68 RBI, 47 walks, and 24 stolen bases. He also had a .500 on-base average and .731 slugging percentage.

Kipnis' excellent performance over the 2009 college season as a junior improved his draft stock to where he was projected as a late first round to second round pick. He was with Mike Leake, Josh Spence, and a few other teammates at Arizona State coach Pat Murphy's house watching the draft on TV and on-line when his advisor former major leaguer Bobby Witt called him to tell him the Indians were very interested in taking him with their second round pick.

"My advisor at the time Bobby Witt called me first," said Kipnis.

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"He told me 'the Indians are thinking about offering you this and taking you right here, and this would be the offer and the estimated slot'. He asked how that sounded and I was like 'absolutely'. He then just sent me a text and said 'they are about to pick you right now' and so when it came to their pick they called my name and it was a great feeling."

Kipnis still had a year of eligibility left, but he pretty much knew from the time the Indians picked him that he was ready to sign and get his professional career going.

"It was the best time to go for me," explained Kipnis. "I was on the fence a little at first. I was a red-shirt sophomore [in 2008] and was taken by the Padres in the 4th round, so I was on the fence with that one and unsure whether to go or stay. I kept it as an open option to go back, but I knew I may not have the same opportunity I might have [last] year. Something I learned from my coach when I was drafted by San Diego is he said 'when you are ready to go you'll know you are ready to go'. That's why when San Diego drafted me I just thought about it and I had learned so much my first year at ASU I just thought about what another year could do for me and I was not ready to go yet. After [last] year I felt like I achieved what I wanted to achieve in college baseball and was mentally and physically ready to go onto the next level."

In an odd twist of fate, just a couple days after the draft he and his Arizona State team found themselves matched up against the North Carolina Tar Heels in the opening round of the College World Series. North Carolina's ace starter right-hander Alex White just happened to be the Indians first round pick, which pitted the Indians top two picks of the 2009 Draft against each other just days after the draft.

They would soon likely be teammates and friends in the Indians organization for a long time, but they didn't waste the opportunity to give each other a little playful ribbing in what was their final confrontation against each others as opposing players.

"We didn't give too much crap," laughed Kipnis on whether the smack talk was flying before their game. "We introduced ourselves at opening ceremonies and said hi and congrats to each other and that we're looking forward to playing with each other and best of luck in the organization. But we knew at that point we were still not Indians yet. He was still a Tar Heel and I was a Sun Devil,

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so we kept it professional. We said we would be friends after this, but right now we still have to play against each other. I definitely respect him as a pitcher. He is a good pitcher and he pitched a hell of a game out there [in Omaha]. I think he has a bright future ahead of him."

Kipnis is from the Chicago area and is a diehard Cubs and Bears fan. That said, he knows who signs his paychecks and where his loyalties ultimately lie these days. He's thrilled to be with the Indians and is just happy to be playing the game he loves for a living.

"I gotta be an Indians fan now," chuckled Kipnis. "I had a great year at school, had a lot of fun, learned a lot more from my coaches and teammates, and in the end it all paid off. I am just happy to be in the Cleveland organization."