

Minor Happenings: Santana Shines In AAA Debut

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Friday, April 16 2010 7:00 AM - Last Updated Friday, April 16 2010 7:42 AM



"Minor Happenings" is a weekly column which 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.

The 2010 season officially got underway last Thursday, and with that it is time for another season of Minor Happenings to get you all caught up on the news and developments in the Indians farm system. Things were a bit hectic this week, and with so much happening I have decided to split the report into two this week with the first half posting today and the second half tomorrow (Friday). As you will see, the *Happenings* this week is very much focused on the Triple-A Columbus team, which should be much of no surprise considering I spent last weekend in Columbus watching the team as well as talking to players, coaches, etc.

Also, be sure to listen into our [Smoke Signals radio broadcast tonight](#) as Paul Cousineau and I recap the week that was for the Cleveland Indians from the big leagues all the way down to Single-A. You also have a chance to win two free tickets to a Lake County Captains game, so be sure to listen in!

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For those interested, I will be in Akron this Saturday and Lake County next Tuesday. Hope to see you there!

Onto the *Happenings*...

Indians Minor League Player Of The Week

(for games from April 8 through April 14)

Carlos Santana (Catcher - Columbus)

.423 AVG (11-for-26), 8 R, 2 2B, 4 HR, 8 RBI, 5 BB, 2 K, 1.478 OPS

Indians catcher and top prospect Carlos Santana wasted little time in getting his season off to a hot start with a sensational opening night performance last Thursday - on his 24th birthday no less - where he went 4-for-5 with a 2B, 2 HR, and 4 RBI. Since



then he has continued to roll and has been one of the early stars of the minor league season as not only are people in Cleveland talking about him, but just about any national publication or site that follows the minor leagues has already made mention to his hot start. For his efforts in the first week of the season the International League on Monday named him their Batter of the Week.

In the first week of the season Santana has demonstrated everything to Columbus fans that his scouting report said coming in. He has very good power, has an exceptional feel for hitting, is a smart hitter and patient (5 BB, 2 K), and can pull the ball or go opposite field. In fact, one of the early positive signs besides the numbers has been the opposite field home run he hit last Thursday night, which is something the Indians really want to see more of since last year he really got into more of a pull mode at the plate. He is just a rare commodity at the plate in that it is rare to find someone like him who is so aggressive yet at the same time is so patient and exhibits outstanding strike zone discipline.

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The question everyone is asking now, is when will Santana be in Cleveland? If big league starter Lou Marson continues to struggle and Santana continues to rake in Columbus, is there a chance Indians fans will see Santana sooner than later?

In a nutshell, no. Right now, regardless of the hitting numbers for Santana, the Indians are in no hurry to call Santana up. In a contending year it would be another story, but one advantage to a rebuilding/retooling year (whatever you want to call it) is they can be patient and let Santana work on some of the nuances to the catching game in Columbus like his communication skills with his pitchers, calling a game, and shoring up his defense, things that are much harder to do at the big league level since everything is so focused on winning and losing whereas the focus in the minors is mostly on development.

Plus, the Indians want to get an extended look at Marson to see what they have and determine if he can be a suitable backup for Santana, or if they can increase his value where a team may want him as an everyday starting catcher. Once these next two to three months are up, the Indians won't have such an opportunity to get an extended look at Marson since Santana should be up sometime in June or July and is expected to be the everyday catcher for the next half dozen decade or so.

It is important to remember that Santana is entering just his fourth season as a catcher. He was signed by the Los Angeles Dodgers in 2004 as a third baseman and outfielder, but they moved him to catcher at the start of the 2007 season. So while he has a rocket arm and does a good job receiving and blocking balls, he is still picking up on a lot of the nuances to the position with game calling, handling his staff, and taking control of the team as the leader on the field. He will be in Cleveland at some point this season, likely just before or after the All Star break, but the Indians are doing the right thing with keeping him in Columbus to finish off his development, control his service clock, and also at the same time get an extended look at Marson.

Honorable Mentions:

Brian Buscher (3B - COL): .444 (8-18), 4 R, 2 2B, 1 HR, 5 RBI, 4 BB, 0 K, 1.222 OPS

Jose Constanza (OF - COL): .389 (7-18), 7 R, 2 2B, 1 HR, 5 RBI, 0 BB, 1 K, 1 SB, 1.056 OPS

Jason Donald (2B - COL): .391 (9-23), 5 R, 3 2B, 0 HR, 2 RBI, 3 BB, 4 K, 1.003 OPS

Wes Hodges (1B - COL): .370 (10-27), 6 R, 5 2B, 1 HR, 5 RBI, 4 BB, 4 K, 1.118 OPS

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Cord Phelps (2B - AKR): .368 (7-19), 5 R, 1 2B, 1 HR, 5 RBI, 3 BB, 5 K, 1.033 OPS
Nick Weglarz (OF - AKR): .320 (8-25), 3 R, 1 2B, 2 HR, 6 RBI, 7 BB, 9 K, 1.069 OPS
Nick Hagadone (LHP - KIN): 0-1, 2 G, 0.00 ERA, 9.1 IP, 7 H, 0 ER, 3 BB, 10 K
Greg Folgia (OF - LC): .375 (9-24), 3 R, 0 2B, 2 HR, 6 RBI, 3 BB, 3 K, 1.054 OPS
Bo Greenwell (OF - LC): .440 (11-25), 8 R, 2 2B, 0 HR, 7 RBI, 4 BB, 1 K, 5 SB, 1.037 OPS
Jeremie Tice (3B - LC): .360 (9-25), 3 R, 4 2B, 0 HR, 8 RBI, 1 BB, 6 K, .890 OPS
Joe Gardner (RHP - LC): 1-0, 2 G, 2.00 ERA, 9.0 IP, 5 H, 2 ER, 4 BB, 18 K

Director's Cuts

Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins is at High-A Kinston this week to see some of his prized starting pitching prospects in action, and this week shared some thoughts on his talented starting staff in Kinston as well as the makeup of the Triple-A Columbus roster:

On the strength of the farm system: "It was a very positive and productive spring training. We are extremely healthy on the minor



league front, and really looking forward to seeing how the trade infusion, the selections of the last draft, the progress of some young Latin American players, and how that all plays out over the course of the 2010 season. It is the deepest and most balanced we have felt in a long time."

On the Kinston rotation: "They are off to a good start on the pitching front, and they are punching out a lot of guys which is a very good sign. They are doing it with some powerful stuff, especially the first three guys who have a chance to be elite in Alex White, Nick Hagadone and Kelvin De La Cruz. All three guys are throwing the ball well. De La Cruz has thrown the ball better in the past, but he still looks fine. There is a lot of ceiling there with all three of those guys, and all three are very powerful and been in the mid-90s and as you know Nick has been

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above that."

On where to assign Alex White to start his career: "There is certainly a lot of thought, time and energy that goes into making sure we are putting him in the right place for each step and at the same time to have some success. The situation here for Alex is he grew up 30 minutes from Greenville and went to the University of North Carolina. In his first start they had 2000 more people in the same game on the same night a year ago. That's in most part attributed to him on every subjective account. He is really an impressive young pitcher and seemingly a very impressive young man. He has not burned any bridges along the way and has a lot of fans here locally. He has a lot of upside as a pitcher. He is an impressive athlete and impressive person."

On the Columbus starting rotation: "They are young with ceiling, especially Carlos Carrasco and Hector Rondon. Those two jump out because of the youth, projection, and the chance to be better than what they are. Jeanmar Gomez is very solid and has some upside there as well, and we feel very good about Yohan Pino and Scott Lewis as well. Lewis has been there before, and if he can sustain some health we could have something there again. But the key pieces are Carrasco and Hector Rondon."

On Carlos Santana: "I think Carlos has made incredible progress since he has converted to the catching position. Time will tell, but he will certainly benefit from being around a more veteran pitcher, having to be a leader at a position that demands that, and will benefit greatly from some Triple-A time. How much time is really going to be dictated by his [defensive] performance."

On Trevor Crowe: "It was very tough [to send him down]. No one plays this game at the professional level to stay in the minor leagues, especially someone of his caliber. It was a very tough initial blow to him, but certainly one he can handle. His quote to me was 'hey I wasn't good enough last year when I got the opportunity so I have to do that the next time and I will be better for it'."

Ambriz Looking To Get Healthy

Indians Rule 5 pick right-hander Hector Ambriz is currently on the major league disabled list with elbow tendonitis. He is currently on a 30-day minor league rehab assignment which started

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on April 10th, so the Indians have until May 9th to make a decision on



whether to activate him on the big league roster, complete a trade with the Arizona Diamondbacks to obtain his full rights, or offer him back to the Diamondbacks. There is also the possibility that after the 30-day rehab period is over that he is not healthy, but at the moment all signs point to that not being the case.

"It is feeling a lot better," said Ambriz in the Columbus clubhouse after his first rehab appearance with the Clippers on Saturday night. "The plan is to get healthy, go out and pitch and throw up some zeroes."

That's what Ambriz has done so far as in two appearances he has pitched a total of two shutout innings, allowing four hits, no walks, and racking up four strikeouts. The Indians envisioned him in a bullpen role when they selected him in the Rule 5 Draft this past December because his biggest strength is his ability to attack hitters and throw strikes. But having not pitched out of the bullpen before and trying to impress the powers that be, Ambriz overexerted himself and suffered a minor setback with his arm in spring training.

"It was my first year coming into camp as a reliever as I have always been a starter," said Ambriz. "I just probably tried to let it all out and something happened."

With the Indians bullpen showing some early season inconsistency and struggles, they may soon turn to Ambriz and give him a shot to see what he can do before sending him back to the Diamondbacks. Eventually the Indians will have to make a decision on him one way or another.

"Well, I hope so as that is my goal," said Ambriz about maybe soon getting that major league opportunity. "Ever since they Rule 5ed me that has been my goal and obviously it was their goal for me to get up there. So I am just here to get healthy."

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Manager's Minute: Mike Sarbaugh

Triple-A Columbus Clippers Manager Mike Sarbaugh took about ten minutes of his time on Saturday to talk about some of the players on his roster and what is expected of them this season:

On Carlos Santana: "I think just for him being able to go level to level, and having that full season [in Akron] last year I think is



really beneficial for him. Coming here we all know he is ready for this level, and the consensus has always been that the bat has always been there. I think it's just about defensively being more consistent with his game-calling and his receiving. He has done a great job blocking balls here the first few days, and he has always been pretty quick behind the plate. It is just helping that pitcher get out of a situation, and having him think along with that pitcher. I think having more experienced players will be very helpful for him with what they have seen and their experiences."

On Santana's English: "I think his [English] is definitely improved since last year. I think sometimes it will come into play, but I think if he does what he needs to do I think it will all take care of itself. I think it is all about him being able to go up to a Mike Gosling and being comfortable talking to him [in English] about how they are going to attack a guy or where he is going to set up. I think just for him to get comfortable where he knows that this is his staff and he is able to talk to each guy and is comfortable speaking the language, and I think it will help him the more he confronts that."

On Hector Rondon: "We all know he has that explosive fastball, but he is going to have to be

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able to throw his secondary pitches for strikes and know how to use them. I think he is still learning as he is only 22 years old and I think that is just part of his development. I think coming here last year in the second half of last year definitely helped as well as his second big league camp. He had a little bit of a tough outing the other night, but everybody did. He just didn't have his real good fastball command, and that happens. I think he is definitely where he needs to be and he just has to keep working and get better every start. I think he got away with using his fastball at anytime last year [in Akron], but I think he now knows that when he does go to it that he has to have it plus the location. He knows that, and it is something he is going to have to work on."

On Jeanmar Gomez: "For him I think it is to just continue doing what he did last year and just throw strikes down in the zone. The one thing with Jeanmar [which stands out] is the maturity we saw from him last year and how he built off of each start. I think when he got there a little bit early on he had some jitters with the new level. He really matured a little bit last year and seeing him in major league camp this year he did well and his confidence is good and he is right where he should be. It's all part of development where you just go out and pitch your game, keep learning from it, and take each start and try to keep getting better."

On Wes Hodges: "He is a first baseman now, so he will be over there unless he DH's or has a day off. Opening night he really made some nice plays over there, especially for his first game under the lights at a new position. I was really happy with how he played. He is still learning and getting comfortable over there. I feel the transition is going well especially when we are maybe four weeks into it. [The position switch came about] in spring training. When he first got there they just kind of introduced him to it and had him start taking some ground balls, do some early work, and then gradually got him into a few games. And then when he went down to minor league camp he spent the entire time over there. It's been good, and I think he has taken to it and enjoys being over there."

On Jason Donald: "Coming in it is more 50-50 [that he will split time at second base and shortstop], maybe a little more at second base. But the one thing I want him to do when he plays second base is play there three to four games in a row so he can kind of get comfortable as much as he can, and then when he goes to short keep him over there for four to five and then move him back. We'll see how it goes, but I know moving from the left side to the right side takes a little bit to get comfortable over there. I think he has picked up on it pretty well, and it's going to be a process but he has done well."

Role Changes

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Infielder Jason Donald is going to spend a lot of time at Triple-A Columbus splitting time at second base and shortstop. Prior to last year he had always played shortstop, so he will get a much heavier dose of playing time at second base this season in order



to more familiarize him with the position, one that many think he could eventually settle in at as the everyday guy in Cleveland. To help his development and get him more acquainted to the position as well as stay sharp at shortstop, manager Mike Sarbaugh plans to have him start at least three games in a row at second base and then start three games in a row at shortstop, and just repeat the process with a day off in between the position switch each week. The transition to second base is a huge reason why he was never really an option to make the big league team out of spring training. Other factors like making sure he is 100% healthy from the back injury (he is) which sidelined him late last year and also managing his service time certainly were considered, but the main one was finishing off his development by getting him some more Triple-A at bats and working on his transition to second base. In six games this season he is hitting .391 with 0 HR, 2 RBI, and a 1.003 OPS.

Left-handed pitcher Jeremy Sowers is still in the organization and was just recently activated at Triple-A Columbus where he will be pitching out of the bullpen. Sowers was designated for assignment near the end of spring training to open a roster spot on the 40-man roster, and when he went unclaimed on waivers he was outrighted to Columbus (he was not a free agent so had to accept the assignment). All spring Sowers struggled with some discomfort and inflammation in his left shoulder which never really allowed him an opportunity to compete much for a big league job in the spring, and somewhat surprisingly allowed him to pass through waivers untouched. Sowers is supposedly feeling better and is expected to make his season debut for Columbus on either Friday or Saturday by pitching an inning or two out of the bullpen. The Indians may finally be moving on from Sowers as a starter and now looking at him as a reliever, a move that is long overdue if you ask me.



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As for first baseman and outfielder Shelly Duncan, he is not only major league depth for the big league team, but he provides a much needed veteran presence in the middle of the Columbus lineup which should pay big dividends to the likes of Carlos Santana, Wes Hodges, Jason Donald, and others. Already in the first week the benefits of having him in the middle of the lineup protecting the others has shown itself as he takes a lot of pressure off the other young hitters. He won the International League MVP last year while playing with the Yankees Triple-A affiliate Scranton/Wilkes-Barre, so it is nothing but a good thing to add his bat to the lineup. He is still working his way back from a right elbow injury which slowed him in spring training, and it has shown in the first week of the season as in seven games he is hitting .208 with 1 HR, 8 RBI and a .740 OPS.

So, Who Is #3?

While there is little doubt that catcher Carlos Santana will be up with the big league club by sometime around mid-season and become the #1 catcher, one thing to consider is what happens if something happens to current big league catchers Lou Marson or Mike Redmond in the meantime? The Indians are pretty committed at the moment that no matter what Santana likely will not



see big league action before June. So, with that said, in the event Marson or Redmond are hurt they would turn to either Triple-A Columbus backup Damaso Espino or Double-A Akron starter Wyatt Toregas.

Toregas is still in the Indians' organization. At the conclusion of spring training he was removed from the roster to clear space for the addition of one of the three non-roster veteran invitees the added to the roster, and after clearing waivers he was outrighted to Akron. Players who are removed from the 40-man roster for the first time have no say in the matter as they cannot choose to sign with another team and instead must accept the assignment if they clear waivers. It was no doubt a blow for Toregas who went from battling for a big league opportunity to going all the way to Double-A, and most of all making roughly 1/30th the amount of cash that he could have made in the majors. That said, he was sent to Akron so he could play everyday,

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something that is obviously not an option for him at Triple-A Columbus as long as Carlos Santana is there. In five games he is hitting .263 with 0 HR, 3 RBI, and a .687 OPS.

Espino is a minor league lifer who is not a prospect, but has developed a solid reputation as a good defensive catcher who can be a serviceable backup. He won't hit much, but he does all the little things, does a very good job handling a pitching staff, and has been helpful in Santana's development by serving as his mentor. He was a non-drafted free agent signing with the Cincinnati Reds in 1999, so has spent the better part of the past 11 years in the minors. The Reds traded him to Kansas City in 2003, and



then Kansas City traded him to the Indians in 2008. Since being acquired with the Indians, he has served as Santana's backup catcher for a majority of his time in the organization. In two games he is hitting .250 with 0 HR, 1 RBI and a .500 OPS.

When it comes down to it, as long as Torgas is in the organization he is likely the defacto number three catcher in the short term. He was already deemed worthy enough of a 40-man roster spot once, and the Indians still value his defensive abilities and the way he takes charge of a pitching staff. To go along with the experience of being on the 40-man roster and already spending some time at the big league level in 2009 with the Indians, Torgas also has a better bat that is more major league caliber that has some pop in it.

Now, after this season the situation will be different as Torgas will be a minor league free agent (unless placed on and kept on the offseason 40-man roster, which is unlikely). There is almost no way Torgas would re-sign with the Indians, so if that does come to pass then Espino is likely the #3 catcher in waiting at Triple-A Columbus next year for the expected big league catching tandem of Santana and Marson. In the event Marson is traded, Espino could become the backup in Cleveland unless the Indians prefer to re-sign Mike Redmond or another veteran catcher like him with lots of major league experience.

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