

Minor Happenings: Crowe Returns, But Barton Makes Most of Opportunity

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Friday, August 04 2006 7:00 PM -

The best Tribe minor league column on the net is back, and this week Lastoria reports on several developments from within the Indians farm system. Among the topics are a position change for Trevor Crowe, and possibly one for Kevin Kouzmanoff. Tony also talks about the player to be named later the Indians finally got in the Coco Crisp trade, and tells us what's going on with the forgotten Jeremy Guthrie and Andrew Brown.



Minor Happenings" covers the important developments and news in the Indians farm system over the course of the past week. Information in this report is collected from the various news outlets that cover each team, some national news, and in some cases from private sources connected to the Indians organization.

Director's Cuts

On Kouzmanoff: Farrell mentioned that Kouzmanoff has been impressive early at Buffalo and hasn't missed a beat, as in his first two games he hit 2 HRs and had 4 RBIs. He was ready for a promotion to Buffalo months ago, but was delayed because of his nagging injuries and because of Andy Marte being at Buffalo. He is now viewed as a legit 3B prospect at the major league level, and will create competition at the 3B position in Cleveland with Marte. There is potential for a move to 1B, and the organization is considering it. A permanent move to 1B is not likely, but he could be played at 1B some to create versatility. Ultimately, his performance at the major league level (when he gets there) will dictate what the Indians do with him, be it leaving him at 3B or making a permanent move to 1B (or even LF).

On Rafael Perez: Since being optioned to Buffalo, he has improved his fastball command. Also, the Indians have worked with him in developing a more regimented routine in getting prepared for game action coming out of the bullpen so he warms up quicker. Things were speeding up on him some during his brief stay in Cleveland, and some of his problems in Cleveland were a result of mechanical breakdowns, and a lack of getting proper leverage on hitters with his pitches. His ball was not on the required downhill plane and was being left out

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arm side.

On Scott Lewis: The organization is monitoring his innings pitched very closely. Coming off injury and surgery, they want to control the innings which is why he is on such a strict 70-75 pitch count. Since he has pitched a minimal amount of innings the past few years, they don't want to have him jump up this year to 150-160 IP. Right now, the goal for him is 110 IP. To date, the biggest key has been that he has made 20 starts and has not suffered any setbacks. Because of his strict pitch count and a smaller pitching roster at Akron, Lewis probably won't be in line for a promotion to Akron this year and likely pitches all year at Kinston. Since he can only pitch 4-5 innings a start, it would be too taxing on the Akron bullpen.

On Stephen Head: Even though he has struggled this year, he still profiles as a good 1B. He is a smooth defender, and has above average power. Right now, he is being challenged at Kinston to show some consistency in re-creating his hitting stroke in each at bat. One of his better qualities as a hitter is he is not pull oriented, and can handle pitches on the outside part of the plate.

Crowe Down, But Not Out

Official word came out over a week ago that hot outfield prospect Trevor Crowe could probably miss at least a month after an MRI diagnosed him with a more serious grade-2 ankle sprain. Well, so much for that. Crowe was activated this past Thursday and was in the Akron lineup hitting leadoff (he DHed). In the end, he only missed about 2 weeks rather than the initial 4 - 6 weeks it was thought he'd miss. According to Tribe Assistant GM Chris Antonetti, Crowe was running bases at full speed earlier this week and the ankle showed no signs of any lingering effects from the injury.

Position Change All But Confirmed

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In an interview in the Akron Beacon Journal last week, Crowe did verify that the Indians have told him his future in the organization might be at 2B. He also mentioned that the Indians told him he would start taking ground balls at 2B to get him ready for full-time work at 2B in the Arizona Fall League. Crowe is advancing quickly through the Indians' farm system, and the Indians need to find a position for him. A move to 2B for Crowe wouldn't be anything new for him since he played both outfield and second base during his time at the University of Arizona. Crowe is open to the change, although he has hinted he feels he is much more of an impact player defensively in CF.

More Crowe

Crowe once was a serious racquetball player as a kid, and was so good he became nationally ranked in the sport and even competed on the Junior National Team in 1998. He credits his time playing racquetball with helping develop his hand-eye coordination. Also, recently a National League scout commented on Crowe being "fun to watch" and that he "brings a whole new level of energy to the field." Indians GM Mark Shapiro admits that Crowe is on the fast-track to the major leagues because of his "very mature and polished approach to hitting." Shapiro also commented that Crowe "plays with a lot of energy and a little bit of an edge, and he is a prototypical leadoff hitter." The Indians believe that his performance to date is enough to believe that he could be in the minor leagues this time next year.'

Opportunity Knocks

With Crowe's injury, outfield prospect Brian Barton got an opportunity to move up and get extended action in the Akron outfield. Barton was called up to Akron from Kinston when Crowe was put on the disabled list, and in 14 games at Akron is hitting .429/.491/.755 with 5 HRs and 11 RBIs, along with 8 stolen bases. Maybe it is time to give the 24-year old undrafted free agent signing out of the University of Miami, FL some prospect love, as Barton quickly is becoming a very intriguing prospect with his blend of speed and power. In a combined 96 games at Akron and Kinston, Barton is hitting .326/.424/.553 with 18 HRs and 68 RBIs, along with 34 stolen bases in 38 attempts. He definitely is a Top 5 candidate for Indians Minor League Player of the Year.

Miller Time!

Wow. After a very lackluster 2005 season where he went 2-4 with a 4.86 ERA in 15 starts at Mahoning Valley and Kinston, Miller has bounced back in a big way. The Indians #1 prospect is back to form after a dominating July, and now seems to be 100% recovered from the strained elbow ligament that pretty much washed away his 2005 season. For the 2006 season to date, Miller is 12-5 with a 3.01 ERA, 1.16 WHIP and has 128 strikeouts in 125.2 IP. Even more impressive, since July 1st he has made six starts, and in those six starts he is 5-0 with a 0.50 ERA and has allowed only 25 hits, walked 11, and struckout 41 in 36.2 IP. Also, in each of his last two starts he has racked up 11-strikeouts. The confidence is flowing once again with this kid, and reportedly the difference has been the command and confidence in his secondary pitches (slider and changeup). With Miller Rule 5 Draft eligible this offseason, he'll be added to the 40-man roster. Being on the 40-man roster, he'll likely be one of the first starters the Indians turn to in 2007 if an injury or two befalls a starter at the major league level.

Sticking Around

Hot pitching prospect Chuck Lofgren won't be leaving Kinston anytime soon. Normally, a player who is 14-5 on the season with a 2.17 ERA should be well on his way to the next level. But, according to Indians officials, he'll likely stay put in Kinston the rest of the season. The Indians recently had a sit down with Lofgren to discuss his progress and the slider he has been working on since Spring Training, and they came to the conclusion that there is no rush to promote him too soon. Lofgren will use the remainder of the season to work on his fastball command and continue to develop the slider.

Brown Out

In the midst of all the young pitching call-ups to Cleveland the past few months, one name

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has been passed over repeatedly: Andrew Brown. It has been a mystery to some fans why he has been passed over by so many pitchers, especially after the hardthrowing right-hander went into Spring Training as one of the three finalists for the final bullpen spot with Danny Graves and Jason Davis. According to Buffalo Bison's manager Torey Luvullo (BS Alert), the Indians are looking for Brown to throw strikes more consistently and be dependable out of the bullpen. Yes, Brown did struggle early in the year with walks, but the last month or so has settled in and cut down on the walks significantly. One has to wonder what the Indians are doing here, as Brown is out of options after this season. With the 2006 season a loss, there is no better time than now to find out if he is part of your future. It definitely is puzzling why the likes of Guillermo Mota and Brian Sikorski are pitching in Cleveland and even still on the team, and not Andrew Brown. On the year, Brown is 5-4 with 3 saves and a 2.73 ERA in 35 appearances out of the Buffalo bullpen.

Guthrie's Comeback Season Continues to Roll Along

Jeremy Guthrie was masterful last Wednesday July 26th in a 3-1 Buffalo win. It was probably his most dominant performance in his minor league career, as he fired a 1-hit complete game. Guthrie's only blemish came in the 1st inning, where with one out he walked a batter, sent him to 2nd with a wild pitch, and the next batter doubled him home. After that, Guthrie retired 25 of the next 26 batters, and he ended the game with 7 strikeouts, 2 walks, and 13 groundball outs, and threw 109 pitches (76 were strikes). Guthrie followed up his 1-hitter with a good outing this past Monday, going 6 innings and allowing only 2 runs on 4 hits to go with four strikeouts and three walks. Guthrie got the win, and is now 7-3 on the year, and also has 24 career wins at Buffalo, good for 4th all-time in Bisons history. Only Rick Reed (35), Dorn Taylor (34) and Joe Roa (28) are ahead of him on the list. Guthrie is 3-0 with a 1.23 ERA in his last three starts, and has struckout 14 batters and allowed only 8 hits in 22 IP.

Mad Max

Since being acquired on July 21st from Atlanta for famed Indians closer Bob Wickman, catcher Maximiliano (Max) Ramirez has been dynamite. Ramirez is a 21-year old native of Venezuela, and a solid 5'11" and 170 pounds. In his first 12 games at Lake County, he is hitting .308/.491/.641 with 3 HRs and 9 RBIs. On the season, he is hitting .288/.420/.474 with 12 HRs and 46 RBIs in 92 games combined at Lake County and Atlanta Low-A affiliate

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Rome. Ramirez has come as advertised, as not only is he a hitting machine, but his patience at the plate is excellent (68 walks and a .420 OBP). Ramirez made his presence felt quickly, as he slammed a solo home run on the first pitch of his first at-bat at Lake County.

Head-ing In the Right Direction

For fans that glance through the box scores and stats for the Indians minor leaguers, Top 10 prospect 1B Stephen Head's numbers to date may be a cause for concern. On the season, he is currently only hitting .224/.307/.364 with 10 HRs and 58 RBIs at Kinston, but the organization is not worried at this point. Of note, he has a healthy 43:53 walk to strikeout ratio.

The main reason for his struggles with his average and slugging is a byproduct of his swing mechanics getting overhauled. Farrell recently mentioned that Head's hand position and setup were causing inconsistencies with his swing path, so the organization made some adjustments. With the new revamped approach to hitting, Head has been slow to adapt to the adjustments and at times has been overly aggressive trying to do too much too soon. Even with the down year average-wise, Head is having a good year in the HR and RBI department.

Coco Crisp Deal Completed

This main cog of this deal were completed a long time ago, but in the deal the Indians also received the infamous player to be named later (PTBNL). Well, the Indians finally received that player: 24-year old right-handed, sidearming pitcher Randy Newsom. Not much is known of Newsom, other than he was signed as an undrafted free agent by the Red Sox in 2004 out of Tufts University. Also, in 36 relief appearances over the span of 2004 and 2005, Newsom compiled a 3-3 record with a 3.76 ERA in the lower levels of the Red Sox farm system. Before being acquired by the Indians, in 2006 he was 2-1 in 20 relief appearances with a 3.59 ERA and 1.32 WHIP. Newsom was assigned to Lake County, but was recently moved up to Kinston. Since joining the Indians organization, he is 0-0 with 4.50 ERA in 4 combined appearances at Lake County and Kinston. Not much of a worthy prospect, and just roster filler at this point.

Top Pick Signed

The Indians signed their top pick from the 2006 June draft, 21-year old UCLA left-hander David Huff. Huff has reported to short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley, but since Huff logged so many innings at UCLA this year, the Indians are expected to be careful with him. He has been out of action for over 6 weeks, so he will be ramped up on a pitching program before he sees any game action likely in a week or two at the Valley. Huff was a supplemental 1st round pick taken 39th overall in the draft, and was compensation for losing Bob Howry to the Cubs. This year at UCLA, Huff compiled a 7-4 record and a 2.98 ERA in 16 starts, while striking out 100 in 129.2 IP. The Indians feel Huff, who is often compared to Barry Zito, has a chance to advance through the farm system rapidly like Jeremy Sowers did, and is expected to start the year at Kinston in 2007. Huff received a \$900,000 bonus to sign.

Mission Accomplished

The Indians also inked their 2nd round pick (69th overall), Georgia Tech 3B Wes Hodges. Hodges has a stress fracture in his left leg that he played with this season, but won't play this season. He signed for \$1,000,000. 17th-round pick Kyle Harper, a right-handed pitcher, was signed as well. Like with Hodges, the Indians gambled with Harper since he is recovering from Tommy John surgery on his throwing elbow. Both Hodges and Harper were signed to 2007 contracts so they can be held out of action the rest of this season and give them more time to mend. Both will go to the Florida Instructional League this fall.

Also, right-handed pitcher Paul Espino (10th round from Pendleton HS, Bradenton, FL) and left-handed pitcher John Gaub (21st round, University of Minnesota) were signed this week. With the signing of Hodges, Huff and Espino, all 15 of the Indians top 15 picks from the 2006 June Amateur Draft have signed. In addition, 21 of their top 24 picks have signed. The Indians did not have a first round pick this year as it was sent to the Angels as compensation for signing free agent Paul Byrd. Having so many players at the top part of the draft signed is tough to do, and the Indians apparently didn't hold anything back to sign these kids. Let's hope they pan out.

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Award Winners

In the last two weeks, the Indians have had three players in Buffalo, Akron, and Lake County receive Player of the Week honors. At Akron, 1B Ryan Mulhern earned Eastern League Player of the Week honors by hitting .423 (11-for-26) with 3 2Bs, 1 3B, 5 HRs, and 13 RBIs. At Buffalo, OF Jason Dubois received International League Player of the Week honors after he hit .417 (10-for-24) with 3 2Bs, 1 3B, 4 HRs, and 10 RBIs. Finally, at Lake County newly acquired catcher Max Ramirez received South Atlantic League Player of the Week honors after he hit a combined .727 (8-for-11) with 2 2Bs, 1 HR, 5 RBIs, and 7 walks. For the week, he had an .842 on-base percentage and a 1.182 slugging percentage.

Noteworthy Injuries

On Sunday, Ryan Garko was scratched from the lineup because he experienced some tightness in his lower back during batting practice. He missed three games and returned Thursday night and went 0 for 3 while playing 1B....Akron 1B Ryan Mulhern left the game in the third inning Wednesday after injuring his right knee sliding into home plate, and was supposedly only removed as a precaution. He has not returned to the lineup since, missing Thursday and Friday night's games.... Oft-injured 1B Michael Aubrey may actually have a small chance of returning and playing some this season. This past week, Farrell said they still had hopes Aubrey could return before the end of this season.

Parting Shots

Eddie Mujica gave up his first runs in the minors this past week, ending his scoreless streak at 24 games and 38.2 IP at Buffalo and Akron....Lake County Captains C/DH Chris Gimenez recently put together a 14-game hitting streak, but saw it all end when he hit into a game-ending 5-4-3 triple play with the bases loaded in the ninth inning....Outfielder Nathan Panther was assigned to Kinston this past week. Panther is in the midst of a lost season, as he was hitting .231 with 0 HRs and 23 RBIs in 66 games at Akron....Akron left-handed reliever Juan Lara was promoted to Triple-A Buffalo. In 40 appearances with Akron, Lara was

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4-2 with 7 saves and a 2.70 ERA and had 48 strikeouts in 46.2 IP....Kinston reliever Scott Roehl was called up to Akron. In 30 appearances with Kinston, Roehl was 3-5 with three saves and a 3.30 ERA.....When utility infielder Ramon Vazquez was optioned out to Buffalo, outfielder Jonathan Van Every was sent back down to Akron to make room for him.... .. C Omar Casillas was placed on Lake County disabled list with left calf strain...Right-handed pitcher Matt Loberg was transferred from Lake County to Mahoning Valley..... Kyle Collina was promoted from Burlington to Mahoning Valley....2B Jose Chavez was moved up from Burlington to Lake County.