

Minor Happenings: Rondon's Surgery Decision His To Make

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Monday, August 30 2010 11:28 AM - Last Updated Monday, August 30 2010 11:44 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.

Here is another update on all the *Happenings* in regard to the Indians' minor league system of the past week.

We are rounding third and heading home on the final week of the minor league ready season. Even though the season is winding down, the coverage for the minor league players and teams in the Indians' system will continue to be fast and furious throughout the month of September as we wrap things up and follow the affiliates in the playoffs. Once October rolls around things will slow down considerably, but the plan – like last offseason – will be to have at least one article/update post on the site daily, so be sure to keep following in the offseason!

Not to mention, with Instructional League, the Arizona Fall League, and all the other winter leagues, there will be lots to follow and report on at least until the holidays. And we all know what starts around that time....yes, another Top 100 ranking. So things will continue to be busy

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even though no affiliates are playing.

Speaking of busy, I plan to head to Lake County tonight to see right-handed pitcher Jason Knapp and I will be out of town over the weekend to see either Kinston or Akron in action.

Onto the *Happenings*...

Indians Minor League Pitcher of the Week

(for games from August 19th to August 25th)

Jason Knapp (Right-handed Pitcher – Lake County)

1-0, 2 G, 0.00 ERA, 9.0 IP, 1 H, 0 ER, 2 BB, 13 K, .036 BAA

He's baaacck.

Low-A Lake County right-handed pitcher Jason “The Terminator” Knapp wasted no time last week getting readjusted to full season affiliate ball with two dominating outings. Pitching on a short pitch count of 65 pitches or five innings – whichever came



first – he breezed through the opposing lineups allowing just three total base-runners over his nine innings of work and while he punched out a lot of hitters he was still very efficient with his pitch count. Including his five rehab outings at rookie-level Arizona he is now 1-2 with a 0.84 ERA in seven appearances, and in 21.1 innings has allowed 6 hits, 6 walks, and has 31 strikeouts.

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Knapp, 19, celebrates his 20th birthday on Tuesday. Even with the lost year recovering from offseason shoulder surgery, he is still way ahead in his development than most young pitching prospects. Assuming he is healthy, he will pitch next season at High-A Kinston at 20-years old, which is very young for the league, and if he continues to pitch well should be in Double-A Akron at 21-years old and Triple-A at 21 or 22-years old. If things really go well, he could be pitching in Cleveland in that 22-year old season as well.

With his youth, size (6'5" 235 lbs), and projection, there is not much not to like about Knapp. The key going forward – like with any pitcher – will be health. He is certainly one of the Indians top four to five prospects, and there will likely be serious consideration this offseason in tabbing him the #1 overall prospect in the system. But that's something to be considered another day as for now it is good to see the young, power righty back on the hill and doing what was hoped back when the Indians picked him up for Cliff Lee last July.

Honorable Mention:

Drew Sutton (COL - OF): .450 (9-20), 3 R, 2 2B, 0 3B, 1 HR, 4 RBI, 6 BB, 6 K, 3 SB, 1.256 OPS
Lonnie Chisenhall (3B - AKR): .370 (10-27), 6 R, 4 2B, 0 3B, 1 HR, 8 RBI, 0 BB, 7 K, 1.022 OPS
Juan Diaz (SS - KIN): .381 (8-21), 4 R, 3 2B, 0 3B, 0 HR, 4 RBI, 1 BB, 4 K, 1 SB, .933 OPS
Abner Abreu (OF - KIN): .364 (8-22), 4 R, 3 2B, 0 3B, 0 HR, 6 RBI, 0 BB, 9 K, .917 OPS
Casey Frawley (SS - LC): .407 (11-27), 5 R, 3 2B, 0 3B, 2 HR, 6 RBI, 2 BB, 8 K, 1.207 OPS
Felix Sterling (RHP - AZL): 1-1, 2 G, 0.00 ERA, 11.0 IP, 4 H, 0 ER, 2 BB, 8 K, .118 BAA

Previous Winners:

08/13 to 08/19: Carlos Carrasco (RHP – Columbus)
08/06 to 08/12: Alex Kaminsky (RHP – Mahoning Valley)
07/28 to 08/05 T.J. House (LHP – Kinston)
07/22 to 07/28: Adam Abraham (3B – Lake County)
07/15 to 07/21: Jason Kipnis (2B – Akron)
07/08 to 07/14: Jesus Aguilar (1B – Arizona)
07/01 to 07/07: Matt McBride (OF – Akron)
06/24 to 06/30: Michael Brantley (OF - Columbus)
06/17 to 06/23: Jason Kipnis (2B – Akron)
06/10 to 06/16: Jared Goedert (3B – Columbus)

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06/03 to 06/09: Josh Rodriguez (INF – Columbus)
05/27 to 06/02: Paolo Espino (RHP – Akron)
05/20 to 05/26: Kyle Bellows (3B – Kinston)
05/13 to 05/19: Carlos Santana (C – Columbus)
05/06 to 05/12: T.J. McFarland (LHP – Kinston)
04/29 to 05/05: Trey Haley (RHP – Lake County)
04/22 to 04/28: Jason Donald (INF – Columbus)
04/15 to 04/21: Bo Greenwell (OF – Lake County)
04/08 to 04/14: Carlos Santana (C – Columbus)

Director's Cuts

Here are a bevy of quotes from Indians' Farm Director Atkins compiled over the last week and a half on some of the Indians players and also all the new talent being added into the system from the draft:

On adding new talent to the system: "There is no question that it is great news getting those guys added to the system at any point. No matter what day it is, when you add guys of that caliber it is exciting. The athleticism, the upside, and the very high role grades that are being put on them. A role grade is a grade that a scout puts on each player's skill, and when those grades



get to be significantly and consistently above average, it is usually a lot more exciting to read about for the player development staff members. We have been reading a lot of above average role grades recently with these guys that are coming into our system. Yes, them signing August 16th does create some inefficiencies as ideally you would like to have them introduced to the organization sooner than that. Those spots in Mahoning Valley, Arizona and even Lake County are very valuable to us and being used by the highest caliber player. But we are very glad to see them being added to the system."

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On the end of season plans for Drew Pomeranz and Kyle Blair: "Drew [Pomeranz and Kyle Blair] will be similar to Alex [White] from a year ago. If it different in every scenario, but in this case like in Alex's case, they have been shut down for a significant period of time. We feel good about their workload going into 2011, and we also have them coming to Instructional League so the start-stop-start-stop is what we want to avoid. But we will have them go into the affiliate level and get introduced to some of our staff members and some of our coordinators to get a feel for professional baseball which won't be shocking for some of these high profile guys who have played for Team USA and traveled on elite travel teams and been playing a very high caliber of baseball their whole lives. It still makes them more comfortable and in spring training and in a year from now when they are on their teams. Drew is in Mahoning Valley for a couple of weeks and then will head home and go to Instructional League."

On the new high school signings: "Some of them have already started playing games. Lavisky the catcher from St. Edwards already began and had his first game [last Wednesday night] which is pretty cool to see just thinking about how two days prior he was wondering whether or not he was going to be playing professional baseball for the Cleveland Indians and then the next day he is on a flight to Arizona and playing at our facility in Goodyear. It makes the last few weeks a little more fun to watch."

On the jump to the pros for high school position players: "It is significant, and there will be a correction. For some players the correction is pretty quick in three to five games. The biggest one is the wood bat and the consistency of the pitchers. They are not going to see guys commanding their fastball or commanding their secondary pitches or quite frankly having multiple weapons because those guys get out of the rookie leagues pretty quickly. [Those pitchers] will be coming out of those leagues and do develop out of those leagues, but the biggest correction for a young high school position player is the wood bat everyday in their hands. It is one thing to workout with one or play with one for a short period of time, but to play everyday to have to perform with one and make that adjustment to some young arms that are touching the mid 90s and have some life to their pitches is no easy task. The mental toughness is definitely a factor. The ability to deal with failure and handle a three punchout night will definitely come into play in a hurry. So the separator for those young players is their self esteem and their ability to handle failure."

On Matt McBride: "He has been great and is such a good story. He is a little bit of a throwback and is a warrior and a solider as anything you ask him to do he is going to do it and do more. The challenges we have put in front of him have been strong. We asked him to catch early in his career and then he had a shoulder injury and had to work through that. Then with playing multiple positions with first base, left and right field and he just has continued to hit. Every time

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someone has put a challenge in front of him he has answered. He is covering the outer half better, the power numbers are there, and he is doing it at every level. I think the health of his shoulder and getting back to 100% has allowed him to be more consistent. When he transitions in [to the big leagues] will have a lot to do with the players around him and also his continued success, but he is definitely a major league caliber player."

On Corey Kluber: "He has thrown the ball well. He is interesting as he brings to the table what we are looking for in a potential future starter as he projects to be able to start and haul 200 innings in the major leagues. How good he becomes is yet to be determined. He has a very good slider, has some power to his fastball, he has a very repeatable delivery, and a feel for changeup. I think the development of that third pitch and the command of his fastball will dictate how good he can be, but he certainly has the ability to one day start in the major leagues."

On Kyle Bellows: "He has been unbelievable, he really has. He has been probably one of the best defenders in our system, and you can talk about maybe one of the best minor league defenders at third base. Every single instructor that goes through there [in Kinston], every staff member that sees him, our pro scouts that see him, the first thing they talk about is the ease he plays defense, and in a conversion for him as well which is not easy. We like the athleticism to the swing and shortness to it. He has been committed to an approach, and in his first full season he has been solid. But the defense is what has been absolutely outstanding."

On Giovanni Soto: "He has been really impressive. Throughout the course of 2010 he has been dominant in the Midwest League. Our hitters and our staff saw him when he was on the other side of the field and actually had input in his acquisition. They were very glad to see him put on our uniform. He has immediately come in and has been comfortable and been himself in not trying to do too much. He is a guy with an exceptional cutter, some life to his fastball, and some athleticism where we think we can make some positive strides in his delivery there as well. There is some upside and some youth there, and a lot to like with what he has already done."

On Owen Dew: "It's great when players come in and make such a strong immediate first impression, and he has certainly done that. He is a sinker-slider guy and puts the ball on the ground at an extremely high rate. It warranted a promotion in a relatively short period of time, so we are happy for him and it is obviously a very positive first year."

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On Jason Knapp: "He has been absolutely dominant. He has been up to 99 MPH already, and coming off his rehab he is striking out a very high percentage of hitters that he has faced. He has been unbelievable thus far."

Rondon's Decision

There has been a lot of talk after the recent news that right-handed pitcher Hector Rondon had season ending Tommy John surgery last week as to why the Indians did not just have him undergo the surgery when the injury occurred in May.

Here is the thing: surgery is 100% the player's decision to make as the organization cannot make it or demand it from their



players. In the case of Rondon when his elbow came up lame back in May, the Indians provided him with the best information possible with top notch medical examinations and tests. Based upon the information obtained in those tests, evaluations, and expert options from doctors, the Indians gave their recommendation on what to do, but in the end Rondon had to decide on whether surgery or rest was the best option. He chose rest and rehab.

It is up to the player of course to be smart and listen to the advice being given to them by the team and doctors. Surgery is a scary proposition - especially one as involved as Tommy John which requires 12-18 months of recovery time – so a player may be inclined at times to put off the inevitable because of that. It is never a cut and dry decision as a career is at stake, and in the end the player has to do what he thinks is best for his health and career at the same time.

"I have had three guys with TJ concerns," said an agent who represents several minor and major league players. "It's an easy decision when it's a slight tear or a severe tear, but it's difficult when it's in between. Some guys do not want to have the replacement surgery because they want to do everything they can to avoid it, which some clubs have that philosophy as well."

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Other players feel like a slightly torn ligament will eventually go and they do not want to pitch with that possibility so they just decide to have the surgery to get it over with. Either way, the player collects the data, huddles with his trusted people and makes the decision for himself.”

Timing also factors into the decision. A torn elbow ligament in March may force the surgery issue more quickly as the player realizes that he could very well be back around the start of the next season. A torn ligament in May or June though means the player will likely miss at least half of the next season, so there is no rush and instead rehab for a few months is chosen to see how the elbow responds.

This may have been the case with Rondon who injured his elbow in mid-May, and with the prospect of having surgery and missing the rest of this season and a lot of next season he likely opted for rehab and rest to see if surgery could be avoided. When it became clear in his return to throw program he was not getting better and pain remained, then the decision for surgery was made for him as there was no other option.

I think sometimes we think just because an organization has the rights to a player that they control everything these players do, but this is not the case in baseball (and I assume in any sport). When it comes to operating and cutting into a player's body, in the end it is 100% the decision of the player on if they feel the surgery is necessary or the right thing to do. Not the team.

Urshela Returns

Short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley third baseman Giovanny Urshela was back in the lineup Friday night after missing two weeks with a hand injury. He had been hit on his hand with a pitch on August 13th and was not expected to be out very long, but



the Indians took the very conservative approach and held him out of action until he was 100%.

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Urshela has picked up right where he left off as in the three games since returning to the lineup he is 4-for-13 with 2 RBI. In 52 games this season he is hitting .294 with 3 HR, 32 RBI, and a .708 OPS. Those numbers may not appear to be very impressive, but when you consider his age (18) and how he has really held his own offensively in a league so much older than him (mostly college players), they are remarkable.

Urshela is a fast riser in the Indians' system, and is very likely to find himself as one of the highest rated prospects in the system going into next season. He continues to develop at a quick pace and shows an advanced maturity for his age in being able to make adjustments and implement instruction. He also has the instincts and physical tools to continue to grow as a player where his performance should hopefully continue to improve as he gets older. Defensively, he is in a world all to his own as he shows exceptional "gold glove" ability at third base with his range, hands, and arm. There is a lot of room for growth, but he has certainly made a big impression among NY-Penn League coaches and scouts with his defense and emerging bat.

Phelps Playing Through Injury

Triple-A Columbus second baseman Cord Phelps has been in and out of the lineup recently because he is battling through a left wrist injury that occurred back on August 5th when he hurt it swinging the bat. As a switch-hitter, the wrist bothers him more

when he swings from the right side than the left side, so he has often sat when a left-hander has started against Columbus. In the few instances when he has had to face a left-handed pitcher he has not switched to the right side of the plate and instead just continued to hit from the left side.

The injury is unfortunate, and has obviously cooled Phelps off some in August. He hit .296 with 2 HR, 23 RBI and a .743 OPS in 53 games at Double-A Akron to open the season, and since

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joining Columbus on June 10th he was hitting .339 with 4 HR, 18 RBI and a .950 OPS in 44 games up until the injury on August 5th. Since the injury he is only hitting .262 with 2 HR, 12 RBI and a .766 OPS in the 17 games from August 6th until now.

The injury has not dampened Phelps' prospect standing though, as he is now firmly in the big league picture as a Major League option in the very near future. The 23-year old has shown a little more pop in his bat this season and an ability to pound the gaps and drive the ball on a line to all parts of the field. He consistently gets on top of the ball and swings at good pitches, which combined with his solid defense at second base makes him an interesting option in Cleveland, possibly next season.

Playoff Chase

Here is a quick update on the playoff chase for Triple-A Columbus, Double-A Akron, and High-A Kinston. Note, Low-A Lake County is already in the playoffs after winning the first half division title, and short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley has been



eliminated from contention.

Columbus: With 8 games to go, they are 1.5 games behind Louisville for the IL West Division title and are 2.5 games ahead of Buffalo for the lone wildcard berth.

Akron: With 8 games remaining, they have been eliminated from contention for the EL Western Division title. They are 3.5 games behind Harrisburg and 2.0 games behind Bowie for the lone wildcard berth.

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Kinston: With 8 games to go, they are 1.0 games behind Winston-Salem for the second half CL Southern Division title. Winston-Salem won the first title, so if they win again then the second place finisher in the second half will get a postseason berth. Kinston leads Salem by 3.0 games and Myrtle Beach by 3.5 games for that berth.

Random Notes

Triple-A Columbus right-handed pitcher **Carlos Carrasco** may have made his final minor league start of the season on Friday night. He went 7.0 innings and allowed 1 run on 5 hits, 1 walk and had 6 strikeouts bringing his season total at Columbus to a 10-6 record and 3.65 ERA in 25 starts (150.1 IP, 139 H, 46 BB, 133 K). His velocity was back up to a consistent 93-95 MPH and his secondary stuff was crisp. His next scheduled start is this Wednesday September 1st, though it is still uncertain whether he will make that start for Columbus or be called up to the big league club and be inserted into the rotation. Either way, even if he does start for Columbus on Wednesday that would be his final start and then he would join the Indians after that.

Triple-A Columbus right-handed pitcher **Bryce Stowell** is still sidelined with an elbow injury and there has been no word on how long he will be out or if surgery will be required. He is very likely done for the season either way given where we are at in the year, but what a big blow this will be if he has to miss any time next year if this is determined to be more serious. In 42 combined appearances between High-A Kinston, Double-A Akron and Columbus he was 3-1 with 7 saves and a 2.14 ERA (67.1 IP, 42 H, 36 BB, 102 K).

Double-A Akron left-handed pitcher **Matt Packer** has continued his breakout campaign with yet more quality outings for Akron recently. In his last outing on Saturday he went 6.0 shutout innings and allowed 6 hits, 1 walk and racked up 8 strikeouts. In five starts for Akron he is now

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1-2 with a 3.60 ERA (30.0 IP, 30 H, 7 BB, 23 K), and aside from one dud outing back on August 17th when he allowed 9 runs in 5.0 innings, he has been sensational. Overall, including his time at Low-A Lake County, in 29 appearances this year he is 9-7 with a 2.08 ERA (125.2 IP, 107 H, 20 BB, 115 K). He has shown an ability to command three pitches for strikes, understands how to pitch, and has shown good composure on the mound. He is not an over-powering pitcher and pitches more to contact and is a strike thrower. While he relies on his fastball, slider and changeup mostly, he is also working on developing a curveball to add another quality pitch to his repertoire.

High-A Kinston right-handed pitcher **Matt Langwell** has had a great season that no one has really talked about. In 42 appearances out of the bullpen he is 4-2 with 5 saves and a 1.99 ERA (54.1 IP, 40 H, 13 BB, 57 K). This is the second consecutive outstanding statistical season for the Indians' 11th round pick out of Rice in 2008 as with Low-A Lake County last

year he was 1-4 with 4 saves and a 1.97 ERA in 45 appearances (68.2 IP, 54 H, 22 BB, 68 K). He has simply been dominating in his last 14 appearances as he has not allowed a run (18.0 IP, 7 H, 2 BB, 19 K).

High-A Kinston infielder **Justin Toole** has been the ultimate utility man this season, a role very fitting of his last name. In 32 games between Triple-A Columbus, Double-A Akron, High-A Kinston, and Single-A Mahoning Valley he has appeared in 9 games at first base, 9 games at second base, 5 games at third base, 1 game at shortstop, 8 games in the outfield, and even 1 game as a pitcher. He is hitting .184 (14-for-76) with 0 HR, 5 RBI and a .455 OPS in those 32 games.

Low-A Lake County outfielder **Delvi Cid** has been a man of speed this year, as his 68 stolen bases have shattered the previous Lake County record of 47 which was set by current Double-A Akron outfielder Lucas Montero in 2008. The amazing thing is how many stolen bases he has been able to accumulate given he only gets on base at a .319 clip. If he were to ever get that on base number into the .360-.375 range one could only wonder the possibilities and how much more havoc he could create for opposing teams on the basepaths. He dropped his switch-hitting approach back in early June to where he is now just exclusively a right-handed

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hitter, and since June 1st he is hitting .293 with a .357 on-base percentage. If he can find a way to sustain that on-base percentage as he moves up the minor league ladder in the coming seasons, opposing pitchers beware.

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