

Minor Happenings: Year End Discussion With Ross Atkins

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Thursday, September 30 2010 7:45 AM - Last Updated Thursday, September 30 2010 4:15 PM



"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 a year end conversation I had with Indians Director of Player Development Ross Atkins in the past week. We discussed a lot of the highs and lows in the system this year, a year where the highs really outnumbered the lows. Like with year end conversations I had this month with [Scouting Director John Mirabelli](#) and [Amateur Scouting Director Brad Grant](#), I once again opted for the Q&A format in order to provide Atkins' raw quotes and full context.

Before moving onto the Q&A, as a quick reminder the annual Tony Awards start up this weekend, and first up will be the Hitter of the Year.

Onto the Q&A...

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You had two teams Lake County and Columbus win league championships. On an individual basis several of your top guys had very good seasons with only a few disappointments, and you also had several players maybe not on the radar to start the season jump onto it. As far as development goes, do you think this is one of the better years for the Indians' system in some time?

Ross Atkins (RA): You know what, I certainly think it ranks up there with the last four to five years. We haven't sat back and objectively evaluated every aspect of the year from a player development standpoint, but there certainly was a lot of positivity with the contributions of the young players who transitioned this year like Carlos Santana, Jeanmar Gomez, Carlos Carrasco, Josh Tomlin, and Michael Brantley really starting to hold his own now in the major leagues. Those are the most exciting aspects, and then the stories that were all throughout the minor leagues with Jared Goedert, Josh Rodriguez, Jason Kipnis and Lonnie Chisenhall all having great years, and Alex White's and Matt Packer's performances. There is a lot to get excited about. Now whether or not that is a better year for us we really can't evaluate until these guys start to contribute at the major league level.

There were a lot of great performances by several of your top players, but were there any players maybe not on the radar or overlooked by the fans and media whose standing may have jumped?

RA: I think the guys that come to mind are Bryce Stowell and Jared Goedert. Those are the guys that were not [publicly] talked about a lot in the offseason and really did some incredible things, though they were certainly on our radar. Stowell is a guy we were extremely excited about in the amateur draft, and Goedert is a guy who had an incredible year in 2007 and had a hard time recovering from a shoulder injury. I think another guy that really jumps out is Matt Packer because of where he went in the draft and then where his start was and where his finish was. He is a legitimate starting prospect for us. Another guy is Chun Chen with the year he had.

Speaking of Goedert, what is his plan? Even after a very good performance at the plate this year at Double-A Akron and Triple-A Columbus and with a need at third base in Cleveland he did not get the call to the bigs because of some issues defensively. Is a position change to first base or the outfield in the works, or will he continue to be used at third base?

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RA: No, third base is very much an option for him. He has missed two years of development really, well at least a solid year having only played parts of 2008 and 2009 and playing injured. I think there is still develop there.

The Arizona Fall League kicks up in a little less than two weeks, and one of the more interesting things to follow will be Cord Phelps. While he has only played second base in his three years in the system, you are sending him out to the Fall League to play third base. Is a position switch in the works, or is this just an experiment to maybe add some versatility to his game?

RA: What it is...is us making sure we are making the most out of our developmental opportunities and adding a skill to his skill set. It is not about making him a third baseman, but we are hopefully easing or expediting his transition to the major leagues. He is very solid defender as he ranges well and moves well. He can make all the routine plays and the occasional exceptional one, and he has made huge strides with his pivot. He is one of the more consistent human beings that we have in our system which allows him to have a lot of consistency in his play defensively and offensively. He had an incredible year.

What about the likes of Bryce Stowell and Nick Hagadone. You already have committed to Stowell in the bullpen and seem about ready to do the same with Hagadone. They are two high profile arms with powerful stuff. Why abandon them as starters and what goes into such a decision?

RA: Stowell is definitely a reliever in our eyes because he has a chance to be someone at the end of a game striking guys out and getting outs on his own. The power and the breaking ball is a strikeout weapon and is something we see that bodes well for him to be at the end of the bullpen. It's not to say that he could not start, but we just see him being in a better role in that capacity. There is a lot that goes into that, but it is mostly putting guys in a position that we feel they will have the most success. With Hagadone that is not a foregone conclusion as that was a workload issue this year. So that's all that is as we just had to manage his workload.

Left-hander Matt Packer may have been the story of the season from a pitching perspective. He made an exceptional rise from being just a late round draft pick last year and considered by many on the outside as just an organizational player to where he is now a legit pitching prospect. What changed in order for him to have so much success this year?

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RA: You know what, I think in 2008 he had an incredible amateur year and then in 2009 was not as good as his velocity fell off so he slid in the draft. There was a subtle delivery adjustment that he made on his own as he transitioned into pro ball, and the velocity came back. The feel for pitching has always been there, so I think what he is benefitting so much from is having made that adjustment coming into pro ball. It's all him as we did not help him with that. We encouraged him and helped him along the way, but the adjustment was made by him. He absolutely will be in the starting mix next year, and likely starting in Akron.

While Packer was the story of the year on the mound, second baseman Jason Kipnis was the story of the year at the plate. In his first full season he performed well over two of the hardest levels in the minors at High-A and Double-A and didn't miss a beat in a late season call to Triple-A Columbus for the playoffs. What did you think of his season?

RA: Especially in that ballpark [in Akron] and what he did there, it is really impressive for a first year full season player. Just speaking offensively, he has incredible athleticism, there is power, there is fluidity, and there is an ease to his game and swing. He has a good approach at the plate and is really not giving at all against left-handers as he is great against left-handers and obviously great against right-handers. He is really the whole package offensively. Defensively, with the transition he made to second base every single evaluator to a man said they were amazed at how easy it was for him and how natural it looked for him competing at second base.

You couldn't have asked for anything more from right-handed pitcher Alex White in his first pro season, no?

RA: When we acquired him as an amateur we heard incredible things about his professionalism and from the start he has taken those expectations and surpassed what we expected with his professionalism. The ability is there as well, so we could not be more encouraged about his chance to be a middle of the rotation type starter or even better.

First baseman Beau Mills had his second consecutive disappointing season at Double-A Akron. Are there any concerns with him, and have you been able to work through and identify some things that may have contributed to his struggles the past two years?

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RA: You know what? Beau is more disappointed than anyone. He is one of the best competitors that we have, an incredible worker, and a guy that all of our players look up to just how he goes about his business, his life and being a good teammate. It was a very tough year for him. We pushed him hard to make adjustments that we think will ultimately help him in the long run, and that's not easy to do at the Double-A level. We are expecting a much better year from him next year, and I know he is as well. As you know, once the season gets off to a rough start it is very difficult to turn things around while you are making a very strong adjustment, which the adjustment was within his approach. He did make some strides defensively, and he continues to put himself in good physical shape, so we are optimistic for him next year.

Outfielder Abner Abreu also struggled this year at High-A Kinston. What does he have to do going forward?

RA: Similar to Beau Mills he got off to a rough start and then he had some things going on personally that I think were difficult for him. He is also still in a transition to the United States. He is an exceptional human being and takes things very personally, and he took his performance personally. Now he is learning how to separate his performance from his personal [side], and that is what we are here for. The ability [is still there] and has not left.

Another guy who really came on strong this year was catcher Chun Chen. He showed promise with the bat in rookie ball in 2008, but struggled last year at Mahoning Valley only to explode onto the scene with a great offensive performance this year between Low-A Lake County and High-A Kinston. How did it all come together so suddenly this year?

RA: What was happening with him was he was trying to transition from his [Asian] approach that had a lot more movement with a big high leg kick and struggling with whether he would make a transition to a more American approach to hitting. He had more of an [Asian] approach and now has more of an American approach. Last year he was in between the two. We don't think one is better than the other, he just got stuck between the two approaches. Now he has more of a traditional setup without a leg kick and a shorter path to the ball with less hand movement and everything is playing. The power is playing and the bat-to-ball is playing. He did much better than we expected [with the defense]. We weren't expecting him to make as many advances in his communication with pitchers as he did, and we weren't expecting him to be as comfortable catching as frequently as we asked him to do it. He really was impressive. The strides he made with receiving, blocking, and throwing were all measurable and all something that you could see he made strides in each of them. There is very little doubt that he will stay in that role.

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Another catcher who had a great year is Roberto Perez at Low-A Lake County. He is still working through his issues at the plate though showed an ability to draw walks, but his defense is top notch. What kind of future does Perez look to have?

RA: Perez is a guy who I know doesn't jump off the charts offensively, but what he did defensively was incredible. He just shut down the running game for [Lake County] during the playoffs and was really remarkable. What he has done defensively is really encouraging for us. There is no question he has major league ability as a catcher.

Right-handed pitcher Jason Knapp is one of your best young pitching prospects. He made a remarkable recovery from offseason shoulder surgery and was able to spend the last month of the season at Low-A Lake County. Did you like what you saw out of him this year?

RA: Yeah, he was unbelievable. The most encouraging thing about Jason this year was his discipline of getting back to pitching form and getting himself back in a position to compete on the baseball field. What he did in his therapy and how he approached it is something we would normally expect out of 35-year old big leaguer. His discipline and consistency was really inspirational for a lot of guys around him. His [velocity was down in his last start] because of fatigue just because of so much of the rehab, the ramping up, and getting him back into the fold. At some point all of our players go through a little bit of fatigue at different points, so we expected that to happen.

We picked up left-handed pitcher Giovanni Soto from the Detroit Tigers at the end of July for infielder Jhonny Peralta. What are your thoughts on his one month-plus in the organization at Low-A Lake County?

RA: He has an unbelievable arm and a really impressive feel to pitch for someone that young, and has a lot of things that we can do to help him. He is very much a core prospect for us. There are things that we see that he can improve upon, and there is already ability now obviously with that cut fastball as guys just don't see it. There is an easy 88-90 MPH fastball, a good feel for a changeup, and we just feel like there are things that we can help him with his delivery.

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Right-handed pitcher Trey Haley is often considered an enigma. He is incredibly talented with raw abilities and even you have said may have the best arm in the system, but he returned to Low-A Lake County this year and his numbers did not improve and he appeared to regress. Going forward, is there something he needs to hone in on to get over that development hump?

RA: At this point he needs to be more accountable for his development. That's really what it comes down to. He needs to be more accountable for things he is asking himself to do, things we are asking him to do, and seeing them through. It's consistency in how he prepares and then committing to how he is going to compete and not just competing. Not just "I am going to give 100%", it is commitment to how he is going to compete and then all the while maintaining the same level of emotional intensity.

Third baseman Giovanny Urshela is a guy your scouting staff was really high on going into the year, and he did not disappoint with his performance defensively this season for short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley. Did you like what you saw out of him this year there?

RA: Mostly what jumps out is his defensive domination. He is one of the best defensive players we have seen this year with how easy third base came to him. Third base is very easy for him as he makes every single play, and he makes exceptional plays pretty much every night as every night is a highlight reel. That's not by chance or because he is getting chances to make highlight plays, it is just that he is putting himself in a position to do so. Also, really, for as young as he is we didn't expect him to have much offense. Not that he was a world beater, but he did end up being one of the better bats in that lineup.

Carlos Moncrief spent the entire season making the conversion from the mound to the outfield, and after a slow start he really finished strong at short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley. How did the transition go?

RA: He will [continue to] be a great player development project. He has raw ability, and it will be whether we can help him refine his skills. He has a lot of athleticism, and it will be whether or not we can help him with the finer aspects of the game. He has a ton of raw ability with arm strength, power, athleticism, and is an average runner.

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The rookie level Arizona team was the youngest team in the league this year. As a result, not many players stood out statistically. That having been said, is there anyone interesting that is maybe a guy to watch next year and beyond?

RA: I think with the arms it would be Felix Sterling. [As for hitters], this year's draft class are probably the guys that jump out most with Alex Lavisky, Tony Wolters and Levon Washington, but those guys weren't really a core part of the team. As for the other guys, I would say Jorge Martinez and Nick Bartolone are the better stories this year. The guy with the most projection actually may be third baseman Juan Romero if we can help him with his strikeouts and create a little more discipline. He is an Abreu-type player as he has that type of ability, but it will be whether or not we can help him with getting a hold of his bat-to-ball and cutting down on those strikeouts because he has a great swing.

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