

Minor Happenings: Kinston Rolls to League Finals, Akron up 2-1

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Friday, September 08 2006 7:00 PM -

This week in his minor league recap, Lastoria brings us up to date on how the Indians affiliates are doing in the playoffs, wraps up the season for three other affiliates, and questions some recent roster decisions by the Indians.



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.

Kinston Dominates

Kinston wrapped up the regular season finishing 85-54 on the year, and their strong first half when they went 47-23 qualified them for the Carolina League playoffs. As the season progressed, Kinston lost most of their top offensive performers like Trevor Crowe, Ryan Goleski and Brian Barton to promotions to Akron . But, the two biggest reasons Kinston had an outstanding season still remain: Chuck Lofgren and Scott Lewis.

Lofgren and Lewis pitched at Kinston all season, and have become arguably the best 1-2 punch for a single team in all of baseball. The success they had during the regular season carried over into Kinston’s 2-0 sweep of Salem in the first round of the Carolina League playoffs this week. In Game 1, Lofgren led the way by throwing 4.2 no-hit innings before finally surrendering a hit, a swinging bunt that hit Lofgren’s glove, in the 5th with 2 outs. Lofgren only lasted a little longer as his pitch count was high (95), and departed in the 6th

pitching 5.1 innings and allowed only 2 hits and 2 runs and struckout 5. Kinston ended up winning the game 9-6, and were lead offensively by Argenis Reyes (2-5, 2B, 3 RBI), Nathan Panther (3-4, BB, RBI), and Jordan Brown (2-4, BB, 2B).

In Game 2, it was all about Scott Lewis. He pitched his best and longest game as a professional, going 6 shutout innings and allowing only 3 hits and 1 walk while striking out 6. He was his typical self as he painted corners and mixed his pitches and speeds to completely baffle Salem hitters. JD Martin came in to relieve Lewis in the 7th and preserve the shutout, pitching 3 innings only yielding 1 hit while striking out 5. Offensively, Stephen Head (2-4, HR, 2 RBI) and Jose Constanza (3-4, RBI, 2 steals) led the way.

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With the series win, Kinston is in the Mills Cup Championship Series for the third straight season and will face Frederick. The best-of-five series opens tonight (Saturday) at Grainger Stadium.

Akron In Control

Akron is currently up 2-1 in their best-of-five series with Altoona. After winning their first two games scoring a combined 24 runs and getting very good starting pitching, last night in Game Three the Aeros were unable to close out the series losing 4-1. Highly touted Pirates pitching prospect Landon Jacobsen shut down the Aeros, only allowing 1 run in 6 innings. The Aeros lone bright spot in the game was the continued resurgence of Trevor Crowe (more on that later), as he went 3-5 with a triple.

In Game 1, Adam Miller got the call and delivered 7 solid innings, scattering 7 hits while yielding 3 runs and striking out 5 in the Aeros 12-10 victory. The Aeros actually came close to one of the biggest collapses in minor league baseball history, as they entered the 9th inning up 12-3, but proceeded to give up 7 runs and commit 3 errors in the inning and actually had the tying runs on base before Jim Ed Warden was able to close the game out. Offensively, the Aeros were carried by Ivan Ochoa (2-3, HR, 3 RBI), Trevor Crowe (2-5, 2B), Pat Osborn (3-3, 2 RBI), and Ryan Mulhern (1-5, HR, 2 RBI).

In Game 2, the Aeros completely dominated the Curve in shutting them out 12-0. Starter Aaron Laffey quietly put together a very good season this year, going 12-4 with a 3.16 ERA in 29 combined appearances (23 starts) at Kinston and Akron. He was at his best in Game 2, allowing no runs in 6 innings of work and only surrendered 6 hits and no walks while striking out 9. The game was over in the 1st inning when the Aeros put up a franchise record 11 runs in the inning, with the big blows a 3-run HR by Jarod Sandberg and a Grand Slam HR by Brian Barton. Top offensive performers in the game were Trevor Crowe (3-4, 2B, 3B, BB, 1 steal), Barton (1-5, HR, 4 RBI), Sandberg (1-4, HR, 3 RBI), and Ryan Goleski (2-4, BB, RBI).

Game Four of the series is tonight, with Jensen Lewis taking the mound for the Aeros. In 29 combined appearances at Kinston and Akron, Lewis is 8-8 with a 3.96 ERA.

Final Regular Season Leaders

Kinston lefty Chuck Lofgren not only dominated the Carolina League and was tabbed the league's pitcher of the year, but his 17 wins tied him with Sacramento's Jason Windsor for most wins in all of the minors. Playoff stats don't count, but Lofgren unofficially broke the tie with his Game 1 win Wednesday night. Lofgren finished the year 17-5 with a 2.32 ERA, holding opposing hitters to a .217 average and struckout 125 in 139.2 IP.

Not to be outdone, fellow Kinston lefty Scott Lewis won the minor league ERA title (1.48) by a wide margin. Lewis finished the season 3-3 with a 1.48 ERA, held opposing hitters to a .203 avg, and struckout 123 batters in 115.2 IP. Of note, the wins total was down because of

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the strict pitch count he was on all year that mostly allowed him to get in only 4-5 innings per start.

Also, Kevin Kouzmanoff lost the minor league batting crown by .001 of a point, losing out to James Loney from Las Vegas who ended up winning the title with a .380 batting average. Kouzmanoff finished at .379, and is probably kicking himself as his 2 for 10 finish in his last two games prior to getting called up to Cleveland did him in. Even so, he finished the season hitting .379/.437/.656 with 22 HRs and 75 RBIs in just 94 games.

Something to Crowe About

It has been awhile, but Akron outfielder is finally back to his old self. Crowe hit a combined .200 in August and September (25 for 125), and finishing the season hitting a pathetic .081 (3 for 37) in his last 10 games. But the old Crowe may be back as he has been on fire in Akron's three playoff games, hitting .571 (8 for 14) with 2 2Bs and 2 3Bs. Crowe is back in the outfield full-time for the playoffs, which leads many to wonder if the end of year funk was a result of the position switch to 2B or because he came back from his ankle injury too soon. It probably was a combination of both, and the Indians still plan to play him at 2B in the Arizona Fall League this winter.

Where Art Though Ben Francisco?

In a puzzling move, the Indians did not callup the Buffalo outfielder to the big league team once the Bisons season ended Monday. Francisco is not on the 40-man roster, but even still he will have to be added this offseason anyway or he'll most definitely get gobbled up in the Rule 5 Draft. So, why not purchase his contract now and call him up to see what he can do in the final 20 games of the season for the big league club? Puzzling.

Francisco had a great year at Buffalo, hitting .278/.345/.454 with 17 HRs, 59 RBIs and stole 25 bases. His all around game makes him a perfect candidate for a 4th outfielder position in future seasons with the Indians, yet it looks like he'll probably get that shot elsewhere. From this corner, Francisco is a better all around player than the over-hyped Franklin Gutierrez. Francisco can play all three outfield positions like Gutierrez, and while he is not the heralded defender Gutierrez is, Francisco can hold his own. But the difference is that Francisco is a more polished hitter and player at this point, and may actually fit better with the Indians in the short term. He wouldn't be much worse than Jason Michaels, and would make a nice platoon option in LF with Choo if the Indians don't acquire a big name player this offseason at that position.

More Puzzling Roster Moves

When you are on the 40-man roster, proceed to hit .275/.342/.492 with 22 Hrs and 87 RBIs at Triple-A, the big league team is in the midst of a season going nowhere....yet you don't get called up, is this not a clear sign the writing is on the wall? That's the case for Jason Dubois. In another somewhat puzzling move, the Indians did not call him up from Buffalo when their season finished. Dubois most certainly will be traded or removed from the 40-man roster and

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picked up by another team this offseason.

Jason Stanford was left wondering his future with the organization after the Indians did not call him up from Buffalo. With the Indians need to find left-handed relief pitching next year, and with Stanford's brief major league experience and injury history, he seemed like a good candidate to move to the bullpen. Stanford missed some time this season for various injuries, but still managed to go 6-6 with a 4.01 ERA in 21 starts at Buffalo, pitching 112.1 innings. Apparently, Stanford did not take the news well that he was not being called up as he got into a clubhouse tussle with Jake Dittler after the season finale Monday. After being separated, he proceeded to punch the window out of a fire extinguisher case and cut his hand and had to be taken to a hospital for stitches. Whether the hand injury is the reason he was not called up, or the hand injury was the result of a blowup from being told he was not being called up is unknown.....but it looks like his days in the Indians organization are numbered.

Clubhouse Brawl II

Not only was there fighting when the season ended at Buffalo, but also at Akron. The reason for Stanford's outburst is pretty obvious, but it is still unknown what led to Akron reliever Bubbie Buzachero's beat down of 2B Eider Torres in the Aeros locker room after Sunday's game.

Buzachero left Torres a mess, most notably with a broken jaw that put Torres on the disabled list and will force him to miss the playoffs. His mouth has been wired shut, and will stay that way for 5-6 weeks. Torres was an Eastern League All-Star at 2B and a table-setter at the top of the lineup, so his loss could be huge in the playoffs. The Indians responded quickly by kicking Buzachero off the team, and put him on the restricted list. Not only are the Aeros now without their table-setter at the top of their lineup, but the loss of Buzachero leaves a void in the Aeros bullpen as he was a valuable setup man (8-3, 2.72 ERA, 4 saves in 49 appearances).

The Akron Beacon Journal quoted Akron manager Tim Bogar as saying Buzachero had "a lapse in judgement", and Farrell was quoted saying that Buzachero's incident was "unacceptable behavior that is considered unprofessional" and that his future in the organization is still up in the air. Given the Indians history in dealing with malcontents, Bubbie is gone.

Buffalo Wrap-up

Buffalo finished 73-68 on the year, good for third place in the International League's North Division. Of note, the Bisons were consistently average all season as they only had one five game win streak and one five game losing streak all season. The Bisons finished 7th out of 14 teams in hitting (.259), and were 3rd in ERA (3.44). The Bisons also finished 12th in the league in errors with 139, their worst defensive season since 1998.

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It was a season of constant change for the Bisons, thanks in large part to the disappointing season for the parent club. In all, 23 Bisons were called up at one time or another this season to Cleveland, and a total of 50 players were used on the roster throughout the season. The Bisons also had 12 last at-bat losses on the road, and were just 6-12 in extra-innings for the most franchise losses in extra inning games in a season since 1990. Also, fans frustrated with the 1-run losses in Cleveland the past two years should look away: Buffalo was 14-24 in one-run games this year, the worst record for the Bisons in 1-run games in their modern era. All-in-all, it was a disappointing season for what was a very talented team going into the season.

Next year, players like Brian Barton, Brad Snyder, Eider Torres, Adam Miller, Trevor Crowe and Ryan Goleski from Akron should all get considerable time in Buffalo, with all likely to start there except maybe Crowe. Notable final statistics that were not mentioned above: OF Franklin Gutierrez (.278/.373/.433, 27 2Bs, 0 3Bs, 9 HRs, 38 RBIs, 13 SBs); SS Asdrubal Cabrera (.263/.295/.337, 11 2Bs, 0 3Bs, 1 HR, 14 RBIs, 5 SBs); SP Jeremy Guthrie (9-5, 3.14 ERA, 123.1 IP, 88 Ks, 1.23 WHIP); SP Brian Slocum (6-3, 3.35 ERA, 94.0 IP, 91 Ks, 1.22 WHIP).

Lake County Wrap-up

Lake County finished the season with an overall record of 64-74. The full-season Class-A league seasons are broken into two seasons, and the Captains went 29-41 in the first half and then 35-33 the second half. Lake County finished 12th out of 16 teams in batting (.245), and were 6th in ERA (3.60).

The Captains actually put up a decent season considering the severe lack of talent on the roster throughout the season. Hopefully, as some of the 2005 and 2006 draft class moves up from the short season levels next year, the Captains will be re-loaded with a crop of much better talent than the retreads that filled the roster in 2006. Two performances stood out: Max Ramirez (C) .307/.435/.465, 6 2Bs, 1 3B, 4 HRs, 26 RBIs in 37 games (30:27 BB to K ratio); James Deters (SP) 12-9, 3.11 ERA, 167.2 IP, 106 Ks, 1.23 WHIP.

Mahoning Valley Wrap-up

Mahoning Valley finished the season just missing the NY-Penn League playoffs. The Scrappers ended the season 40-36, 3 games out of 1st place in the Pinckney Division and 2 games out of the wildcard. Mahoning finished 6th out of 14 teams in hitting (.245), and 9th in ERA (3.39).

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The Scrappers were led offensively by OF Jason Denham (.302, 0 HRs, 14 RBIs), C Matt McBride (.272, 4 HRs, 31 RBIs), SS Josh Rodriguez (.268, 4 HRs, 24 RBIs), and 3B Jared Goedert (.269, 3 HRs, 27 RBIs). On the pitching front, the Scrappers main contributors were SP Josh Tomlin (8-2, 2.09 ERA), SP Luis Valdez (7-5, 2.62 ERA), and closer Neil Wagner (0-1, 17 saves, 1.39 ERA). McBride, Rodriguez, Goedert and Tomlin were 2006 draft picks, and most likely will open 2007 at Lake County . Wagner is a hard-throwing righty who could be the Captains closer next year as well.

Parting Shots

The only players currently on the Indians 40-man roster who have not been called up: SP Jason Stanford, SP Jake Dittler, 1B Michael Aubrey, IF Lou Merloni, OF Jason Dubois, and OF Brad Snyder.

Dittler and Snyder are not ready for a callup and Aubrey is hurt....Akron 2B Eider Torres finished with 44 stolen bases, which broke the franchise record set by Damian Jackson (40) in 1995....

Mahoning Valley middle infielder Josh Rodriguez won the league's Offensive Player of the Week Award, hitting

.417 (10-24) with 3 2Bs, 1 3B, 3 HRs, and 7 RBIs....When Eider Torres was placed on the disabled list this week and Bubbie Buzachero was kicked off the team, Akron manager Tim Bogar elected to callup Lake County catcher Max Ramirez to provide an extra bat off the bench....Only two injuries of note: Akron SS Ivan Ochoa is still recovering from a right hamstring strain and is not 100%, and OF Ryan Goleski has a sore wrist after getting hit with a pitch last week.