



The elite Arizona Fall League has come and gone, and my favorite offseason league is once again in the past. The AFL pulls together some of the top prospects from all around baseball, and with the mid-August signing deadline, plenty of 1st round picks made their professional debuts in the desert. The Indians didn't send any prospects who will rank in the top-100 in all of baseball to Arizona this year, but did send an interesting group of guys that I was anxious to see perform against some of the top talent in minor league baseball.

The Indians prospects were sent down to the desert to compete for the Phoenix Desert Dogs along with players from Oakland, Toronto, Cincinnati and the New York Yankees.

Each team is permitted to designate one of the pitchers they send as a starter. For the Indians, the designated starter was Akron lefty T.J. McFarland. McFarland made two starts in Kinston last year before being promoted to AA Akron in April. On the season, he went 9-10 with a 3.75 ERA. He struck out 115 and walked 51 in his 149 1/3 innings of work. Most importantly, the groundball specialist posted an impressive 2.49 GO/AO ratio. McFarland isn't a big strikeout guy, but finds success pitching to contact because of his impressive sinker and ability to command it within the strike zone. Arizona has always been known as a hitter's environment,

and I thought there was a chance for a guy like McFarland to struggle down there. Those fears proved to be unfounded, as T.J. went 3-0 with a 3.18 ERA in his 8 appearances for the Desert Dogs. McFarland threw 28 1/3 innings, striking out 22 and walking 13. His GO/AO ratio was 2.11, and he gave up more than 2 ER in just one of his starts. Overall, it was an impressive showing for the 22-year old McFarland, who has solid MOR potential at the big-league level.



As far as hitters go, the guy I was most excited to see perform in the AFL was Big, Bad Jesus Aguilar. When I last saw Aguilar hit in the dry Arizona air, he launched a couple of home runs in minor league spring training games last year that still haven't landed. That was against the Reds low-A squad though, so the better pitching of the AFL would challenge him a little more. Or so I thought. Aguilar put up an impressive .339/.458/.610 line in his 59 at bats, popping 3 HR and driving in 9. He did strike out 18 times against 11 walks, but as long as the extra-base power comes along with it, that's a ratio I can live with. Aguilar hit 23 HR last year in 462 AB between Lake County and Kinston, and really established himself as a guy to keep an eye on. One thing the Indians are short on is power, and Aguilar is one of the few legit power prospects in the organization. A 1.069 OPS against pitching from AA and AAA is a nice sign that the power is real, and will continue to mature in the next couple of years. Aguilar is just 21 and should open 2012 in Carolina, with a good chance to be in Akron by the all-star break.

Those that have read my articles here for a while probably know that when I play baseball, I catch. That being said, I have a soft spot in my heart for all catchers, but especially guys who dedicate themselves to the position defensively. It's the toughest position on the diamond, and one of the toughest in sports. I tell you this to help explain my affinity for the light-hitting defensive superstar Roberto Perez. Perez caught for Kinston last year, and was the best defensive catcher in the Carolina League. He's fundamentally sound, controls the other teams running game, and handles pitchers extremely well. Every pitcher in the Indians org I've talked to that's thrown to Perez raves about his defense. The Indians sent him down to Arizona this year to see if that would jump-start his offense, as he hit just .225/.365/.310 with 2 HR and 30 RBI in 284 AB for Kinston in 2011. Some power materialized in the desert for the backstop, as he hit 4 HR in just 53 AB. The rest of his stat line though was pretty typical, as he hit .226/.382/.472. The .854 OPS is impressive, but the .226 AVG is not. One offensive skill Perez has consistently shown is patience at the plate, as he's never posted an OBP of below .360. That continued in Arizona, as Perez walked 13 times against 10 strikeouts. His upside is probably that of a defense-oriented backup catcher, but he's still one of my favorite guys in the organization.

As I noted earlier, each organization sending players to the AFL is only allowed to designate one as a starter. Naturally then, there are



plenty of relievers sent down to the desert. The most high-profile RP that the Indians sent was Akron closer Cory Burns. Burns posted a 2.11 ERA and nailed down 35 saves for the Aeros last season, striking out 70 and walking just 15 in 59 2/3 innings pitched. Those numbers probably have you picturing a big, imposing fireballer who blows hitters away with his fastball, but Burns is anything but. The 6'1, 180lb righthander gets it done more with deception than with overpowering stuff, as his fastball only touches the low-90's. Burns has a sidwinding, deceptive delivery that he uses to hide the ball from hitters, which helps him rack up the strikeouts. Burns threw 11 innings of relief for the Desert Dogs this year, giving up 6 earned runs (4.91 ERA), striking out 12 and walking 3. A decent performance, but really too small of a

sample size to draw any meaningful conclusions.

Another reliever who gets it done more with deception than pure stuff is former Kinston closer Preston Guilmet. Guilmet tied Burns with 35 saves last year, putting up a 2.16 ERA with 60 K and 11 BB in 58 1/3 IP for the K-Tribe. Like Burns, Guilmet's fastball rarely gets into the 90's. Also like Burns, he has a deceptive delivery that hides the ball well from the hitter, coming straight over the top with a little hitch in his windup. The arm angle helps make his splitter a true swing and miss offering. Guilmet threw 14 innings in the desert this fall, and got roughed up to the tune of a 6.43 ERA. He had 12 K's and 11 BB, pitching against some pretty tough hitters. Guilmet did settle down after some early struggles, closing out his AFL campaign with 5 straight scoreless outings, spanning 6 1/3 innings.

The final reliever sent to Arizona had a quietly solid season in 2011. Tyler Sturdevant split his time primarily between Kinston (41 IP) and Akron (30 IP), while making a brief stopover in AAA Columbus as well for 3 2/3 innings. Between all three levels, he went a combined 7-3 with a 2.65 ERA with 82 K and just 19 BB. Sturdevant, who turns 26 on December 20, had a solid campaign in Arizona this fall. He didn't record a decision out of the bullpen, but did throw 12 innings, giving up just 4 ER while striking out 13 and walking 4. Look for Sturdevant to be part of a crowded Columbus bullpen in 2012, with an outside shot at pitching in Cleveland at some point during the season.

An example of a guy who didn't have a very good campaign in Arizona is outfielder Chad Huffman. Huffman put up an uninspiring .246/.351/.415 season for AAA Columbus last year, and followed that up with an extremely disappointing .214/.313/.343 line in 70 AB for the Desert Dogs. Huffman hit 6 doubles, one HR and drove in 11. For an experienced guy in a hitter's league, that's a pretty poor stat line. Huffman reinforced my view that he's little more than organizational depth, lurking in Columbus in case of a series of injuries to the guys above him.

Two outfielders who are higher on the organizational depth chart got a few at bats in Arizona, but nothing that really lets us draw any kind of conclusions. LF Tim Fedroff had four hits, including a pair of doubles, in just 11 at bats for Phoenix in the beginning of October. Later in the season, RF/CF Carlos Moncrief went 4-23 with a 2B. Neither player really had enough playing time to make their campaign worthwhile.

We're closing in on Christmas, which means crowded shopping malls, meaningless Browns games and plenty of snow in Cleveland. But there's light at the end of the tunnel, as it also

means that we're less than two months until pitchers and catchers report to Arizona for Spring Training. The Tribe should be a young, exciting team this year, and with guys like McFarland and Aguilar on the horizon, help is on the way in case options at the big league level happen to falter.

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