As much of an Indians fanatic as I am, I wasn't about to watch Scott Kazmir pitch at 3 a.m. on a tape delayed broadcast of Monday's Cactus League game between the Angels and Indians. On a related note, I'm eternally grateful to the guy who invented DVR. There has been a lot of buzz about the southpaw who is trying to rectify his career after a severe velocity drop, among other things, sent him to the Atlantic League's Sugar Land Skeeters in 2012.

After seeing Kazmir firsthand, I believe there's cause for optimism with Kazmir. I'm not a scout, so my opinion should probably be taken with a grain of salt, but, guess what? Most people who write baseball articles are not scouts either. They're people like me who watch a lot of baseball.

First, some background on Kazmir, who, once upon a time, was a very good pitcher in the Major Leagues. From 2005-2008, Kazmir won 45 games, had a 3.51 ERA and struck out 9.68 batters per nine innings. From 2009-2011, as Kazmir's velocity dropped into the mid-80s, the high walk rate he used to be able to work around because of swing-and-miss stuff started to catch up with him. He pitched only 299 innings and posted a 5.41 ERA.

Rather than sulk and fall into oblivion, Kazmir focused on regaining lost velocity and cleaning up his delivery. In and of itself, that makes Kazmir easy to root for. Baseball-Reference lists Kazmir's career earnings at $30.897M, so nobody would have faulted him for claiming arm trouble and calling it quits.

Kazmir first started turning heads in the Puerto Rican Winter League when the radar gun started showing more nines than eights. Reports had Kazmir topping out at 93-94 mph in Puerto Rico, velocity figures he had not reached with regularity since 2007. With a handful of teams

interested in his services, Kazmir and his agent picked a place where he had a great chance to make the starting rotation - the Cleveland Indians.

Kazmir has continued to turn heads in Goodyear this spring. In eight scoreless innings, Kazmir has struck out eight, has walked just one, and has allowed five base hits.

As somebody who is not a big believer in Spring Training stats, for any number of reasons, I was eager to get a chance to see Scott Kazmir on the mound. That opportunity presented itself with Tuesday morning's tape delayed broadcast of Monday's Angels/Indians game. I walked away impressed with Kazmir.

The knock you'll see on Kazmir's start from various scribes is that he was erratic, missing catcher Lou Marson's target by the width of the plate on a handful of occasions and missing up and out of the zone with the fastball. It's important to remember that Kazmir has never been, and will never be, the poster child for command and control. Even in his Major League glory days, Kazmir still walked over four batters per nine innings.

Although Kazmir has posted a career rate of 49.6 percent of pitches thrown in the strike zone, which is above the league annual average of around 45 percent, Kazmir is well below average in percentage of pitches outside the strike zone swung at by a hitter. In other words, when Kazmir misses, he misses badly. In terms of those pitches in the strike zone, Kazmir possesses a lower than average contact rate of 84.5 percent. The annual league average is somewhere around 88 percent.

Kazmir had his share of swings and misses in Tuesday's start, but that wasn't what impressed me. What impressed me the most was the number of foul balls that the Angels had because they were late on the fastball. This was Kazmir's third appearance of the spring with the Major League team (he had one appearance in a minor league "B" game). The most important thing for Kazmir is to continue to build up his arm and improve on his fastball command. In other words, the Angels hitters knew what was coming and were still late on it.

To my somewhat untrained eye, one of the strengths of Kazmir's arsenal is deception. Fastballs in the low-90s are not out of the ordinary for Major League hitters. It's not like Kazmir is up there touching triple digits. He's throwing at a rate that Major League hitters should be able to time

and square up. But, the Angels were consistently late and Kazmir allowed very few hard hit balls.

Kazmir did mix in a handful of sliders, a few two-seamers or cutters, and a changeup or two, but he predominantly threw the four-seam fastball. The slider had mixed results, snapping off a couple of beauties, but some also hung up and out of the zone. One cutter/two-seamer in particular completely sawed off Josh Hamilton and turned his bat into kindling wood on a soft line drive back to Kazmir.

There's a reason that Kazmir is the favorite for the fifth spot in the rotation and it's not because there is a lack of viable candidates. Kazmir is in the driver's seat, in part, because the Indians are going to take things slow with Carlos Carrasco in his return from Tommy John surgery and with Trevor Bauer, who may need more seasoning in Triple-A and there are also contract benefits to starting him in Columbus. But, Kazmir has pitched well this spring and is passing manager Terry Francona's eye test.

He also passed mine. Now, I realize that it's just one start and if Kazmir gives up six runs in three innings in his next start, the skeptics will find their voices again. But, for a guy who was pitching on a team whose logo is a mosquito in 2012, he's come a long way to get back to the Major Leagues and definitely deserves a chance to see what he can do.

His health will always be a question mark. His breaking pitches are not yet refined and they may prove to be an issue for him. But, you can't question the guy's heart and desire. Keep in mind that the Indians aren't asking Kazmir to be a Cy Young candidate. They're not asking him to win 20 games. Fifth starters league-wide are below average starting pitchers. If Kazmir can even return to being a league average starting pitcher, that's a major upgrade for the Indians in that fifth spot.

For now, we'll continue to watch the progress of Kazmir, especially as the tension on his arm increases as he throws more breaking balls and increases his pitch count with each outing. But, as of now, there's no doubt that Kazmir is on track to make a comeback to the Major Leagues.