Lake County catcher Matt McBride is one of the top young catching prospects in the minors, and is someone who should be on the radar of every Indians fan. McBride is a well rounded catcher in that he runs well, excels defensively, has good bat-to-ball ability, and has good power potential. In his recent visit to Lake County, Tony had a chance to sit down and talk to McBride about how things are going as he adjusts to the grind of professional baseball.

Fans of professional sports have a knack of gravitating to players who show good hustle and play hard. They respect a player who gives it his all and then some, even if the results are not always what they want. Here in Cleveland, the fans adore players such as Anderson Varejao on the Cavaliers, not because of his skill set, but because of the enthusiasm and hustle he shows on the court.

Lake County catcher Matt McBride is a lot like that, except he has a skill set which could make him a frontline catcher someday. You won't get any showboating from McBride. He is the Barry Sanders of baseball, where like Sanders used to gently give the football to the referee when he scored a touchdown, McBride immediately puts his head down and runs hard to first base even after he knows he connected for a home run.

This is McBride's second season in the organization as he was taken in the second round (75th overall) of the 2006 Draft out of Lehigh University. McBride signed quickly, and was assigned to short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley where he showcased the talent that had scouts excited about him going into the draft as he finished the year hitting .272 with with 4 HRs, 31 RBIs, 5 stolen bases and a .757 OPS in 52 games.

McBride provides a rare combination of defense and offense at the catching position, and he was so impressive that *Baseball America*

tabbed him the third best prospect in the NY-Penn League last year.

This year, McBride is having a good season at Lake County as he is hitting .278 with 8 HR, 58 RBI and a .769 OPS in 94 games. He was selected as an All-Star this year, and recently was ranked by
Baseball America
as the fifth best catching prospect in all the minors.

But, even with all the success he has enjoyed so far in just over a year in the Indians organization, he is still adjusting to the grind of playing every day.

"This is my first full professional season," said McBride. "Even though you play a lot in college, it is nothing like going through all of spring training and playing a 140 game minor league schedule.

You definitely have to stay focused and go day by day."

One of the biggest things McBride is adjusting to is life as a professional catcher, which he states there is a considerable difference between college and the professional ranks. Unlike in college, he has the help of many former catchers on the Lake County coaching staff to assist him with his development.

"In college, I went to Lehigh University and I enjoyed it there, but we did not have a catching coach," said McBride. "I have definitely learned a lot here from our manager (Chris Tremie) who used to be a catcher and even our hitting coach is a catcher."

One of the biggest differences between catching in college and professional ball is that in the professional ranks game calling falls mostly on the shoulders of the catcher, whereas in college pitches are called from the dugout.

"That one is big, calling games," noted McBride. "You go out

there in college and for the most part our pitching coach called games, so now it has been an adjustment to go out each day and call them.

You try to pitch to the pitcher's biggest strengths, and you know each team.

We play a bunch of these teams so much, so you get to know a lot of the hitter's tendencies and their strengths.

As the year goes on it becomes easier because you know what to expect from the hitter and your pitcher because you know them better.

I would have to say calling games has been the biggest adjustment, because in college I really did not have to do it that much and now it is one of the biggest things I am trying to work on.

I'm sure you can get better at it, but I am still working at it hard."

Going into this season, the catching position was a strength in the Indians organization. Not only do the Indians have arguably the best tandem of catchers in the majors with Victor Martinez and Kelly Shoppach, but they also had four very good prospects in the minors in Wyatt Toregas (Akron), Max Ramirez (Kinston), McBride (Lake County), and Robbie Alcombrack (GCL).

With Ramirez being traded to the Rangers a few weeks back for Kenny Lofton, the door is open for McBride to potentially make a late season appearance in Kinston. If Lake County fails to make the playoffs, McBride could very well be added to the Kinston roster the last week of the season and play in the playoffs.

And, almost certainly he will start in Kinston in 2008.

But, McBride doesn't want to get ahead of himself.

"I hope to get to [Kinston]," said McBride. "Really though, I'm not focused on where they put me and I am just trying to finish off this year right now.

We have a pretty good team here (Lake County), so hopefully we make the playoffs.

I just keep playing each day and play hard and try to win.

In the offseason I'll work hard, and see where I end up after spring training."

When camp broke this spring, the Indians decided to load up the Lake County pitching staff with youth. The staff's inexperience showed early in the year as the results were not pretty. But, in the second half of the season those young, inexperienced pitchers have settled in and started to perform well. Along with those young pitchers settling in, so has McBride.

"The first half some of the guys struggled," recalled McBride. "Some of the pitchers are a little younger, and I think now they have settled in more.

Also, for me, this is the first time I am catching a full season and I am more settled in back there behind the plate.

I think the whole team is more relaxed, and the pitching has been more consistent day by day."

While the starting pitching struggled for most of the first half, with the arrival of the second half the starting pitching has been much better. Two of the biggest highlights of the second half were no-hitters thrown by the Lake County staff on June 24th and July 3rd, something that was a completely new experience for McBride.

"I caught both of them," noted McBride. "It was a great experience, as I had never caught a no-hitter before.

I was definitely very nervous there at the end of the game and I was like 'man, I

really hope I don't overthink this.'

It was just awesome to be a part of.

And, in the second game I thought it would be a little easier, but I was just as nervous in the end.

I noticed we had a no-hitter going in the 5th inning, but was not thinking about it or expecting it to happen.

Then the 6th, 7th, 8th....then by the 9th ininng I was like 'wow, we have a really good shot at this.'

I had some butterflies out there while I was catching."

Coming into the 2006 Draft, McBride's biggest strength was his catch-and-throw ability. His throws to second timed at 1.85 to second base, which is considered above average. But, for most of this season McBride struggled with throwing runners out, although that has improved considerably of late.

McBride had some problems with his mechanics, and after some work, he appears to be getting better every week with his throwing.

"[Tremie] has really been working with me on my release to get rid of the ball quicker, and to forget about the throw down to second," said McBride. "It definitely has been improving.

It is great to have our manager and hitting coach as former catchers.

It is great to come in between innings and have them say 'hey, you rushed that one a little bit in warmups'.

I thrown one down every inning, so if I have a question about something they can tell me whether I am rushing, or standing up when I throw.

So, it is a big help having them here."

In addition to his throwing, McBride is also working on being more attentive on the basepaths. While he is big and strong (6'2" 215 pounds), McBride is also

athletic and has above average speed for a catcher.

"I'm trying when I get on base to be smart and aware on the basepaths," said McBride. "That is really big. If I get a few stolen bases here and there, that is a plus.

I'm really just trying to have quality at bats, get on base, and not do anything stupid on the basepaths."

Bottom line, being able to hit is what is going to punch his ticket to the major leagues. McBride is a very patient hitter with good power potential, and has a very good eye and bat-to-ball ability. He has performed well this year offensively, although he still thinks he has much room for improvement.

"I'm just trying to use the whole field more," says McBride. "I have a tendency to pull the ball and a lot of times I get out front and pull the ball foul. I'm just trying to have a little better approach each at bat and not getting myself in a hole by chasing some balls inside and pulling them foul.

I need to try and take those balls and just have a little better quality at bat each time."

With the season about three weeks from wrapping up, McBride likes how things have gone his first full season as a professional, but he is not completely satisfied.

"Yeah. There are certain parts of the game I could do a little bit better at," said McBride. "I just try and go out each day and

play the hardest I can."

This is just the type of player McBride is, and his hustle and talent is something fans will quickly catch onto as he moves up the Indians minor league ladder, and hopefully to the big leagues in a few years.