To just about every Cleveland Indians fan, Kyle Harper is an unknown pitching prospect toiling around in rookie-ball in the Gulf Coast League. Harper was a much more heralded football player coming out of high school, but chose a baseball career path and went to Fresno State as a walk-on. Since then, however, Harper has endured two Tommy John surgeries and is now on the road to recovery. Tony had a chance to sit down and talk to Harper a few weeks ago while down in Winter Haven to get an update on his progress.

To just about every Cleveland Indians fan, Kyle Harper is an unknown pitching prospect toiling around in rookie-ball. The right-handed throwing Harper (6'5" 220 lbs) was much more heralded coming out of high school as a football player where he was an all-area quarterback and linebacker. But, Harper chose a baseball career path and went to Fresno State as a walk-on.

In his freshman year at Fresno State in 2004, Harper blew out his elbow. He had to have Tommy John surgery and later transferred to Orange Coast Junior College.

Tommy John surgery is required when the ulnar collateral ligament (UCL) - also now known as the "Tommy John ligament" - becomes stretched, frayed or torn from the stress of the throwing motion a pitcher uses.

The ligament in the medial elbow is replaced with another ligament from elsewhere in the body, such as the forearm, hamstring, knee or foot.

After the ligament is removed from the other area of the body, the ligament is woven into pre-drilled tunnels in the ulna and humerus bones that are part of the elbow joint.

After a long recovery, Harper returned in the fall of 2005 and jumped back into the draft prospect scene. Finally healthy, his fastball velocity jumped to where it consistently clocked in at 92-94 MPH. Some reports even state he touched 95-97 MPH at times on the gun.

"I'm at 88-93 MPH right now," said Harper. "Before my first surgery I was throwing 83-85 MPH. Then a year and

a half after the first surgery I was throwing nothing below 90-92 MPH and then it just kept going up and up and up."

One of the more interesting dynamics of Tommy John surgery is pitchers typically return from the surgery throwing harder than they ever did before. It is not uncommon for a pitcher to pick up four to six MPH on his fastball after the surgery.

But, the surgery itself is not the reason for the increased velocity, it is the rigorous rehab a pitcher puts himself through in strengthening the arm that causes the bump in velocity.

The added velocity to Harper's fastball had scouts buzzing about him, but shortly after his return from the first surgery he was sidelined again with another injury to his UCL which required a smaller surgery.

"I went back and started playing football, which probably didn't help all that much," said Harper. "And then I decided to play baseball again, and I was a third-baseman even in college. So I was throwing the ball not warming up and throwing across the mound, and I decided to start pitching again. I was throwing really well all fall and during the season, but then I went down with another torn UCL.

They had me shut it down for awhile and then try to come back again.

They took another MRI and they said it was partially torn so they went in and fixed it."

So, a second Tommy John surgery?

"No, they didn't do the whole surgery again," noted Harper. "It was just UCL reconstruction where they put it back together and move one of my nerves with it."

Harper signed a letter of intent to go to Long Beach State once he recovered from the second surgery to his elbow, but ended up being selected in the 17th round of the 2006 Draft by the Indians. He signed a 2007 contract and did not play for the Indians in 2006 as he was still recovering from the injury.

While he was drafted as an injured pitcher, shortly after signing Indians Director of Scouting John Mirabelli was quick to mention he thought drafting Harper "was worth the risk because of what he could become".

This year Harper is making his professional debut with the rookie-level Gulf Coast League (GCL) Indians. He is still recovering from the injury and is on a strict throwing program which will likely last the rest of the season.

"I throw just once every six days and then a bullpen inbetween," said Harper. "I just bumped it up to two innings, and they said they probably will just keep me at that the rest of the year.

The bullpen session is usually two days after I throw, so I go game, then take two days off, then throw a bullpen session, then take two days off, then repeat it over again.

I'm just trying to get my strength back really.

I am also trying to come more over the top as I used to be more sidearm than I am now.

It is just natural that I keep dropping down and it is hard to keep my arm on top."

Tearing the UCL in your pitching elbow and having to undergo Tommy John surgery is becoming very common, and is not nearly the career threatening injury it once was. Back in 1974, Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher Tommy John was the first professional athlete to successfully undergo the UCL construction surgery, and hence the surgery was named after him. At the time, the success rate for a complete recovery was 1%, but today is around 90%.

The procedure takes about an hour to complete, and after six months a pitcher can usually start a throwing program and full rehabilitation takes about a year.

"I didn't think it was bad at all," recalls Harper. "It is just a long road with a lot of rehab. I mean after the surgery you are fine, and the first couple days after there was no pain or anything.

My buddy Tony Sipp (Harper's roommate) just had it and he had no pain or anything after it.

It is a pretty easy going surgery compared to the shoulder, labrum and stuff."

Having to stick around in extended spring training when the big league club and minor league full-season clubs break camp at the end of March can leave a lot of players feeling lonely, left out, and questioning their future. Some stick around in extended spring training because they are rehabbing injuries, others because they wait for the short-season leagues in the GCL and NY-Penn League (Mahoning Valley) start in June, and stick around pondering their future wondering if this is the end of the road.

"It gets real quiet when camp breaks," said Harper. "It wasn't that bad for me as I knew I was saying. If I was trying to make a team I probably would have been a little worse. I came into spring training and I thought I was going to be ready for the season, but I strained the elbow in spring training so I got shut down for six weeks.

It was actually pretty cool as I got to rehab with guys like Cliff Lee and a bunch of other guys like Brian Slocum, Sipp and JD [Martin].

A lot of guys close to the big leagues."

So, when camp breaks, what do the players do in extended spring training for two months while

they prepare for the start of short-season leagues in late June?

"Just basically intersquads," said Harper. "Just playing each other. Mostly guys are newer, so they have to learn bunt plays, signs and picks.

All that kind of stuff.

Mostly keep our arms in shape and throw two to three innings in what they call sim games."

With the 2007 season winding down and set to close in the next two weeks for the GCL team, Harper expects to be shut down when the season ends and then report to the Instructional League in the fall.

"I probably will be shutdown for awhile," said Harper. "Then, I probably will start earlier than everybody else to get my arm more in shape because I think it takes me a little longer now after the two surgeries."

With Tommy John surgery behind him, hopefully Harper can stay healthy and come to camp in 2008 strong and ready to show that promise that Mirabelli spoke so high of after the draft last year.