As we speak, Tony is en route to Kinston, North Carolina to visit the Cleveland Indians advanced Single-A affiliate the Kinston Indians. While he plans on speaking with several of the players during his visit, Tony was treated to an advance e-mail interview this past week with right-handed pitcher Erik Stiller ... a 6'5 prospect out of Princeton.

Note: Minor Happenings will post tomorrow (Friday) morning. It was delayed due to a late phone conversation today with Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins whom I spoke at length about several Tribe prospects, and I wanted to be sure to include what he had to say in this week's Happenings.

I'll be heading to Kinston, North Carolina this weekend to visit the Cleveland Indians advanced Single-A affiliate the Kinston Indians. While I plan on speaking with several of the players during my visit, I was treated to an advance e-mail interview this past week with right-handed pitcher Erik Stiller.

Stiller signed with the Indians as an undrafted free agent out of Princeton University last year, and is a raw talent with the size (6'5" 200 pounds) that can help him get on top of hitters. Princeton is not typically a hotbed for professional baseball talent in the draft, and Stiller's career record of 15-14 with a 3.60 ERA in 38 starts are not eye-popping numbers in college, but he got a big break in that several of the Indians front office personnel are former Princeton student-athlete alumni, namely General Manager Mark Shapiro and Director of Baseball Operations Mike Chernoff.

Chernoff and Stiller actually have a history together, as Chernoff was a middle infielder and team captain his senior year at Princeton in 2003, which was Stiller's freshman season.

After signing in June 2006, Stiller made his debut with the Indians last year at rookie-level

Burlington where he went 2-2 with a 6.45 ERA in four starts. The stay in Burlington was short, as he was moved up to short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley where he went 3-3 with a 3.23 ERA in nine appearances (eight starts).

This year, he did not make a full season club out of spring training, but eventually was activated and called up to advanced Single-A Kinston on May 27th. Stiller impressed early pitching out of the bullpen, and on the year is 3-3 with a 1.19 ERA in 19 relief appearances, and held opponents to a .225 batting average. He was recently moved into the starting rotation when left-hander Ryan Edell and right-hander Kevin Dixon were taken out of the rotation due to high workload, and in four starts he is 0-2 with a 5.19 ERA and opponents are hitting .257 off of him.

Q: What is your hometown? Were you an Indians fan growing up, and if not what was your favorite team? Favorite player?

Erik Stiller (ES): I grew up in Bryan, TX, which is about an hour and a half outside of Houston. I was a big Braves fan as a kid because I liked following Maddux, Smoltz, and Glavine, but switched allegiances to the Astros once I was old enough to start traveling to Houston with friends to watch games.

Q: Growing up as a kid, was baseball your first love?

ES: Baseball was always my favorite sport, but I was a little too impatient as a kid to be able to say that it was my first love. When I was playing, I loved it, but I was often just as happy to be out with friends playing basketball, soccer, capture the flag, etc.

Q: As you moved into high school and college, was there a moment when you realized baseball could potentially be something you could do professionally? When did you realize it?

ES: I played on summer teams in high school with several guys that went on to be drafted after their senior year, so the idea of playing professionally was definitely on my radar screen, but I knew that if I was going to get that chance, it would only come after several years of (much needed) development in college, so I didn't give it too much thought. Once in college, there was never really a specific moment when I realized that it was a legitimate possibility - I suppose I just always anticipated and hoped that it would happen, and so I worked towards that end.

Q: You played college ball in Princeton. What was that like?

ES: Playing at Princeton was awesome. I had an incredible group of teammates each year, and coaches who were committed to helping us develop as players, but also allowed us the freedom to enjoy all the other great aspects of the college experience. Because Princeton is a non-scholarship program, it doesn't usually have the depth to match up well against the big D1 programs (though '03-'05 saw 2 second round, 1 fourth round, 1 seventh round, a few other top 20 round draft picks, so I think we were more competitive than most people would have

expected), so our goal was always to win the Ivy League championship, get an automatic bid to the NCAA tourney, and go in as a 4-seed and give someone a run for their money. I was lucky enough to leave after four years having won three championships.

Q: Was there a defining moment when you took off and scouts began to notice you?

ES: I'm not sure that there was ever a defining moment when scouts began to notice me. I had a great junior year, and have pretty good size for a pitcher (6'5"), so maybe that got me on some radar screens, but to be honest, I never got a lot of attention from scouts, and only ever spoke with one or two during my college career. I think it's just hard to get scouts out to Ivy League games sometimes, so I had to rely on my coach to get my name out there by making phone calls to scouts and front office guys (e.g. Mike Chernoff in the Indians front office who was the captain of our team at Princeton my freshman year) that he knew around the league.

Q: You graduated, correct? What was your degree if I may ask?

ES: I did graduate last summer with a degree in Economics a week before heading to Burlington to start playing ball.

Q: Now, going to an Ivy League school and all, I have to ask ... what is the lure of toiling around in the minors making peanuts when you have a good education and can potentially make much more money now?

ES: Money can give you the opportunity to do a lot of good things, but ask anyone of my friends who's out in the "real world" working an 8-5 (though plenty of them are also working 8-8 or more) and making a lot more money than me, and they'll tell you exactly why I'd rather be doing this. I get paid to hang out on a baseball field and throw a ball around every day. I'm not exactly padding my savings these days, but I love what I'm doing and feel extremely blessed for that. Plus, at the end of the day, if all goes well, there's a chance to get to the big leagues, which would make this whole minor league experience look like a pretty decent investment from a financial standpoint.

Q: You signed as an undrafted free agent with the Indians shortly after the June 2006 draft. Were you disappointed not being drafted, or did you expect that as a possibility going in?

ES: I was definitely disappointed to not be drafted. I had hoped for that day for such a long time, and really expected that it would happen (maybe not in the early rounds, but a 50 round draft made me feel like I had a good shot). BUT, as I told myself all along, all I was looking for was a chance - the chance to play, and the chance to improve towards whatever my full potential really is. Thankfully, about half way through the draft, Mike Chernoff (who I mentioned above) called me to say that, while the Indians weren't going to have room to draft me, they would be willing to offer me a contract after the draft if no other teams picked me because they

were going to have an extra minor league team that year (the first year for the GCL team, and the last for Burlington). So the disappointment lasted about a day, and excitement took over from there.

Q: Did teams contact you in advance saying they were interested in you? Who were your biggest suitors going into the draft and after it?

ES: The Indians and the White Sox were really the only two teams that contacted me at all, and like I said, I only had one or two brief conversations with any scouts prior to the draft. I wasn't sure which, if any, other teams even had my name on their board, so I was relying on my coach and another Princeton alum who has done some work in baseball to get my name out there.

Q: What was the post-draft process like? Can you briefly explain what an undrafted free agent goes through when trying to latch onto a team since most fans have no idea how the process works?

ES: I'm not sure on this, but my situation might have been different from most non-drafted free agents, as I already knew before the draft was over that the Indians had a spot for me. The only real difference for someone like me (a college senior with no bargaining leverage) between being drafted or not is that I could have waited around to see if any other teams were interested. I had already committed to the Indians before any other teams even called though, so it was a pretty simple process. From there it was just a matter of signing the contract (a standard contract with non-negotiable terms), so I met with the scout for my area and shipped out a few days later.

Q: What made you sign with the Indians?

ES: Lack of options... kidding (sort of). But I was glad that the Indians were my only real option, as I had heard great things about the quality of the organization, and about their interest and skill in developing their own talent.

Q: You started off in Burlington last year, how was your experience there? That was the last season the Indians played in Burlington.

ES: I was only in Burlington for about a month, but had a great time there. That team had several guys that were in situations similar to mine - late round or non-drafted college senior-signs, all working to find some way to impress despite the odds working against us. It was a good first taste of professional baseball life. Thanks to one incredible innings in my second to last game there, my stats are pretty underwhelming, but I was lucky enough to get moved up for the rest of the season and get a fresh start.

Q: You finished in Mahoning Valley, what was it like there?

ES: Mahoning was great also. The facilities were much nicer, which made the games seem that much more exciting, and, again, I had a great group of teammates. Off the field, rather than

living in an apartment as I had in Burlington, I lived with a host family, who was great to offer my roommate and me lots of food and help of any kind on top of a free place to stay.

Q: Have you made any friends in the organization? Are there guys you met last year or this year whom you keep in regular contact with that you may or may not be playing with presently?

ES: I've made a lot of friends over the past season and a half, from each of the three teams I've been on, that I hope to keep in touch with for a long time to come. Maybe it's just the nature of the job - playing, living, eating, and traveling with the same 25 guys day in and day out for extended periods of time - that forces everyone to find good friends, or maybe I've just been lucky.

Q: In the offseason, what were some of the things you personally worked on to get better at going into 2007? What were some of the things the organization challenged you to improve on in the offseason (and spring training)?

ES: I spent a lot of this offseason trying to improve my overall physical strength in order to add a little velocity to my fastball. I also made a few mechanical adjustments that I thought would help to that end without taking away from my command within the strikezone. The organization didn't really offer any personalized challenges for the offseason, but gave me the general encouragement to continue working on my fastball command and changeup. During Spring Training, though, they suggested that I work on establishing and being more aggressive with my fastball, noting that the pitchers that do well and advance in this organization are the ones who establish their fastball, however fast and with however much movement, and rely on it as their primary out pitch.

Q: Give a quick scouting report of yourself. What is your fastball velocity, what pitches do you throw, what is your best pitch, what are your biggest strengths and weaknesses and what are some of the things you are working on?

ES: My fastball velocity has improved some this year, but is still fairly typical for a right-handed pitcher. I have topped out at 94mph on the year (as opposed to 91 last year), but usually sit right around 90, with some variance depending on whether I'm throwing a 2-seam or 4-seam fastball. I also throw a cutter, a curve, and a changeup. My biggest strength throughout college was my changeup, and I think the same was true last season, but since moving to the bullpen for most of this season, I haven't used it as much, and have relied more on commanding my fastball and mixing in the other pitches to keep people off balance. I have some more mechanical adjustments that I'd like to work on this offseason in hopes of continuing to refine the command of all my pitches, but for now I'm just working on getting outs and finishing the season on a strong note.

Q: This year, you did not break camp with a full season team. Was that disappointing? How did you handle that? What do you do for the two and a half months from the beginning of April when big league camp and full season minor league teams break away and when short-season leagues finally start up in mid-June?

ES: I was definitely disappointed to not break camp with a team, but used the disappointment as motivation to work towards getting a shot to move onto one of the rosters. Thankfully I had several good friends who were in the same situation, so we were able to help each other stay positive and motivated. Extended Spring Training is basically just like Spring Training, minus the excitement. We wake up early, throw, lift, and do drills, and then play early afternoon games - either against each other or against other EST teams (Tigers, Astros, or Braves). There are no fans at the games, none of the stats go into any official records, and it's probably true that everyone there wishes they were somewhere else. BUT, it's still a chance to play, and they always say that as long as you have a jersey you have a chance. So we made the most of it, and I think it actually ended up being a good experience on the whole.

Q: What was it like to finally get going and get the call to Kinston back in June?

ES: Getting the call to Kinston was a breath of fresh air. I had been in EST for almost 7 weeks, and was really ready to get out of there. I had been pitching pretty well, and thought that if some spots opened up at Lake County I might be able to sneak into one of them, and so I was pretty surprised when they told me I'd be heading to North Carolina again. I'm not sure if the original plan was to have me stay here the whole season or just come to help out for a bit (we played 6 games in the first 4 days I was here) before heading down to Lake County, but I'm glad they gave me the chance to stay here. I consider myself pretty lucky to have gotten that chance at all, so I'm trying to make the most of it.