Off to Kinston, NC for the final leg of his trek to visit each of the Indians six minor league affiliates ... Tony checks in once again with "Minor Happenings" for us here at TCF. Normally a Thursday night post, Tony held it off 'till this morning so he could speak with Tribe Farm Director Ross Atkins to get some additional items for this weeks column. And as Tony's readers know by now, you'll find no better coverage of the Indians young stars anywhere else.

"Minor Happenings" covers the important developments and news in the Indians farm system. Information in this report is collected from the various news outlets that cover each team, some national news, from private sources connected to the Indians organization, as well as from club officials from the team itself.

In case you missed them, I wrote a few player features on Aaron Laffey , Ryan Mulhern , and Brian Barton
in the past week.

Also, I recapped my
visit to Buffalo
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This weekend, I will be in Kinston, North Carolina to see the Indians advanced Single-A affiliate in action, and plan on capturing a lot of video and pictures during my stay, as well as talk to several players and coaches for future articles to post on the site once I get back. If anyone has a specific player they would like a player feature done on, let me know by e-mailing me at tlastoria@theclevelandfan.com
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As an appetizer to the main course this weekend, I also did a
Q&A with Erik Stiller
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TheClevelandFan.com Minor League Player Of The Week

(for games from August 16 to August 22)

Ryan Goleski (Outfielder - Akron)
.444 AVG (8-18), 1 R, 1 2B, 1 HR, 5 RBI, 1 BB

It was a quiet week in the system due to a lot of rainouts, but Akron outfielder Ryan Goleski emerged as the top player for the week after he hit .444 with 1 HR and 5 RBI. It has been a disappointing year for Goleski, who was selected in the Rule 5 Draft this past offseason after an outstanding season last year.

Goleski appeared to be "hungover" after he was returned to the Indians at the end of spring training, and it showed in his numbers as he hit .246 with a .597 OPS in April and also hit .250/.652 in May.

He has turned it on of late, and in August he is hitting .328 with 2 HR and 12 RBI.

Honorable Mentions:

Jeremy Sowers (LHP - Buffalo): 2-0, 2.75 ERA, 13.1 IP, 11 H, 4 ER, 4 BB, 8 K
Jordan Brown (1B - Akron): .474 AVG (9-19), 4 R, 1 HR, 1 RBI, 4 BB
Frank Herrmann (RHP - Kinston): 1-0, 0.00 ERA, 8 IP, 5 H, 0 ER, 0 BB, 4 K
Kelvin De La Cruz (LHP - Mahoning Valley): 1-0, 0.88 ERA, 10.2 IP, 5 H, 1 ER, 6 BB, 8 K

Previous Winners:

8/9 to 8/15: Nick Weglarz (OF - Lake County)
8/2 to 8/8: Josh Rodriguez (SS - Kinston)
7/20 to 8/1: Jeremy Sowers (LHP - Buffalo)
7/12 to 7/19: Todd Martin (1B - Mahoning Valley)
7/5 to 7/11: Todd Martin (1B - Mahoning Valley)
6/28 to 7/4: Rodney Choy Foo (IF - Akron)
6/21 to 6/27: Reid Santos (LHP - Akron)
6/15 to 6/20: John Van Every (Outfielder - Buffalo)
6/8 to 6/14: Chris Gimenez (Utility - Kinston)
6/1 to 6/7: Aaron Laffey (LHP - Buffalo)
5/24 to 5/31: Josh Rodriguez (SS - Kinston)
5/17 to 5/23: Shawn Nottingham (LHP - Akron)

5/10 to 5/16: Matt Whitney (1B - Lake County)
5/3 to 5/9: Chuck Lofgren (LHP - Akron)
4/26 to 5/2: Adam Miller (RHP - Buffalo)
4/19 to 4/25: Shawn Nottingham (LHP - Akron)
4/12 to 4/18: Jason Stanford (LHP - Buffalo)
4/5 to 4/11: Matt McBride (C - Lake County)

Director's Cuts

Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins was in Denver, Colorado this week for the Farm Director Meetings. He provided some insight this week for a few players up and down the system:

On Asdrubal Cabrera: "Asbrubal did that on his own (getting called up to Cleveland). He has been amazingly consistent in every facet of the game.

His offensive production is the one thing that has taken him over the top.

His defensive skills have always been there and he is an excellent baserunner.

With the offensive production he has really turned into a leader for us this year.

He didn't seem to be phased by the transition to Buffalo, and currently doesn't seem to be overwhelmed by the transition to the major leagues.

It has been very encouraging, and
a lot of hardwork by our fielding and hitting

coordinators this year. It really is a great sign. We felt comfortable he could come to the major leagues from Double-A. We felt comfortable with that for several months, so the transition to Triple-A was not necessarily a threshold for him
. I
tell you, he is special.

What's most special about him is the subtlies of his game, base-running whether it is picking up the throw before his turn around third or sliding in hard to break up the double play.

He is very consistent defensively."

On Ben Francisco: "He has been very consistent hitting the fastball, whether it be in the major leagues or Triple-A, he can hit anyone's fastball. They can't get it by him, they can't elevate it past him.

He has a knack for it.

He has handled the up and down well, and is someone who has a lot of major league value in the future.

He is capable of helping a major league team, but there are some things he still needs to iron out.

We'd like to see his defense become more consistent, which is something that is more easily accomplished in the minor leagues.

He is a hard working individual, he cares deeply, but he just seems to be a little bit more passionate about hitting than he does about playing defense which is natural and it's not something you punish him for.

It is just something we would like to challenge him to be the best he possibly can to even the playing field there."

On Jeremy Sowers: "I'll tell you what, he was up to 93 MPH the other night. That is very encouraging.

He is much more comfortable on the mound right now.

We'll see if he is fixed when he gets to the major leagues again.

He is staying behind his pitches, which is more mental than fundamental at this point, because confidence before success or success before confidence which one is it?

Right now he is having a little bit more success, and beating some people with his fastball which is building his confidence."

On Cliff Lee: "He had two great performances. He is down there (Buffalo) and creatively trying to do things that will better his game at the higher level.

He is pitching in ways that he wouldn't necessarily pitch in the major leagues, and now we'll start to see things start to come together for Cliff.

He is going to start to attack hitters as if they were a major league hitter, I think we'll see plenty of consistency out of him.

He has handled the transition well.

From a clubhouse standpoint, you couldn't ask for more.

Picking up everyone's clubhouse dues, buying steak dinners, he is first class along those lines."

On Josh Rodriguez: "He is driving the ball, and has some thunder in there (the bat). He is playing shortstop now, and in the future could stay at shortstop or land at second.

At worst, he could be a super utility player for us.

He is a great athlete with a knack for hitting, and in his first full season of professional baseball is driving the ball out of the park in a pitchers
park in Kinston.

I am very encouraged by Josh.

With Josh, he has the ability to be an everyday shortstop.

At a minimum we know he has the athleticism and the bat to one day help a major league team as a super utility player."

On Shin-Soo Choo: " He looks great offensively. He obviously had been down for awhile and needs to get his timing and rhythm back.

He looks very athletic and that he worked very hard during the six weeks or so that he was down in Winter Haven.

The elbow is not 100%, but he is working back towards that.

But he is playing in the outfield so he is doing fine."

Sweet and Sowers

Buffalo left-hander Jeremy Sowers may have found himself again. Earlier in the year, Sowers struggled with his confidence and command in Cleveland and in 12 starts was 1-6 with a 6.93 ERA. He was sent down to
Buffalo in early June with the

It's Miller Time!

As predicted here last week, Buffalo right-hander Adam Miller was activated this past week. Since being activated, Miller has seen action in the Buffalo bullpen by making two appearances and throwing two innings, did not allow a hit or run, and

racked up three strikeouts. His appearance out of the bullpen on August 19th was his first game action since July 19, and all reports are that he looks good.
He had been on the disabled list since July 25 with right elbow inflammation, and the Indians seem to be in the clear with Miller as he is healthy and the injury is not as serious as some feared it would be back in July.

It has been a rough year for Miller as he has endured two long stints on the disabled list for an injury to his right elbow and middle finger on his right hand. He is still the prize of the system, and could go into 2008 battling for the fifth starter spot in Cleveland with Jeremy Sowers and Aaron Laffey. Or, it is possible this offseason that with so many other starting pitching options at their disposal for the fifth starter spot, that the Indians may peg Miller for a much needed bullpen spot.

I'm starting to side with the temporary move to the bullpen for Miller in Cleveland next year.

Sensational Stevens

Akron right-handed reliever Jeff Stevens is doing his best to salvage what has otherwise been Indians General Manager Mark Shapiro's worst trade ever. At the end of spring training last year, Shapiro shipped out infielder Brandon Phillips to

Laffey Honored, Called Up

In somewhat of a surprise move, the Indians decided to callup Aaron Laffey to be the fifth starter. Veteran Cliff Lee was considered a favorite to get the nod, with Jeremy Sowers also in consideration. The callup of Laffey is a clear sign how impressed the Indians have been with Laffey this year, and also how much Lee has fallen in the organization.

Lee's days as an Indian appear all but numbered, and he may be someone the Indians shop this offseason when they go looking for a bat or reliever.

Laffey made two starts for Cleveland earlier this month, and pitched well in his Indians debut. He went back down to Buffalo two weeks ago, but just continued to roll.

In his two starts since returning to Buffalo, Laffey went 2-0 with a 1.93 ERA and in 14 innings allowed 12 hits and struckout 13 batters.

His performance at Buffalo the past week won him International League Pitcher of the Week honors for the period of August 13th to the 19th.

With the award, Laffey is the fourth Buffalo player to take home Player of the Week honors.

Right-hander Sean Smith won the award in May, third baseman Andy Marte won it in June, and outfielder Jason Cooper won it in earlier this month.

Since June 2, in 13 starts for Buffalo, Laffey is 9-0 with a 1.92 ERA, and he is the first Buffalo

starting pitcher in history to win nine consecutive decisions. If you include relievers, he is only the third pitcher in history to win nine consecutive games - the first since Jack Cressend in 2004. On the year, Laffey is now 13-4 with a 2.88 ERA in 22 combined starts in Akron and Buffalo.

Carolina Award Sweep

Kinston first baseman Matt Whitney and right-handed starting pitcher Frank Herrmann combined to sweep the Carolina League weekly awards this past week. Whitney was the Player of the Week after he hit .417 (10-24) with four home runs,

seven RBI, nine runs scored and a slugging percentage of 1.042 for the week. On the year, Whitney is hitting .302 with 30 HR and 107 RBI.

Herrmann was the Pitcher of the Week after he won both his starts in throwing 15 innings and giving up just one earned run while striking out ten batters. On the year Herrmann is 10-5 with a 4.10 ERA. With the win the other night, Herrmann picked up his 10th win of the season making him the fourth Kinston pitcher this season to get to double digit victories.

Ryan Edell (11), Kevin Dixon (10), and Jim Deters (10) are the other pitchers with double digit wins for Kinston, and it is the first time Kinston has had four ten game winners in a season since 1988.

Herrmann and Whitney are the fourth and fifth Kinston players to take home Carolina League Player of the Week honors this season.

Shortstop Josh Rodriguez won the award last week, catcher and utility player Chris Gimenez won it in May, and left-hander David Huff won the award in April.

Batting Races

Buffalo outfielder Ben Francisco is second in the International League in hitting with a .321 average, just one point behind the league leader. Francisco is attempting to achieve what no Buffalo player has done since Mark Ryal did it in 1990.

Francisco has won a league batting in the past, as he led the NY-Penn League in hitting in 2002 when he played for Mahoning Valley.

On the season, he is hitting .321 with 9 HR, 44 RBI, 21 stolen bases, and an .861 OPS.

Akron first baseman Jordan Brown is first in the Eastern League in hitting with a .331 batting average, and owns a healthy 17-point lead on former teammate Brian Barton who is second in the league with a .314 batting average. Brown won the Carolina League MVP last year when he played for Kinston, and should get strong consideration for the league MVP award this year in the Eastern League. On the year, he is hitting .331 with 10 HR, 68 RBI, and an .899 OPS.

Mahoning Valley first baseman Todd Martin has struggled of late, but he is still ranked second in the NY-Penn League in hitting with a .360 average, and is 14 points behind the leader. On the season he is hitting .360 with 8 HR, 40 RBI, and a .956 OPS.

Wright Is Wrong

Kinston right-hander Steven Wright has had a season to forget. The 2006 second round draft pick has had several starts this year where he has been bombed, most recently a 1.1 inning 11 run performance last Friday.
Wright has very good makeup and a fastball that hovers in the low 90s, but the best pitch in his arsenal is a slider that grades as a plus pitch.

He is a starter right now, but many feel he will eventually end up in the bullpen.

He has shown a penchant to rack up strikeouts, as he has 105 strikeouts in 103 innings pitched, and only has allowed 35 walks, so there appears to be something there to work with.

In 25 combined starts in Lake County and Kinston, Wright is now 5-9 with a 6.10 ERA.

Scrappin' Starters

The Mahoning Valley bats have been pretty silent of late, much like the parent club in Cleveland, but the starting pitching has been excellent the past month. Scrapper starting pitchers had a streak of 19 consecutive scoreless innings where they allowed only five hits snapped on Wednesday night.

On Sunday left-hander Heath Taylor threw 5.1 two-hit shutout innings, on Monday night right-hander Joanniel Montero threw six no-hit shutout innings, and then on Tuesday night left-hander Kelvin De La Cruz threw 5.2 shutout innings allowing only three hits.

Handicapping The Playoff Races

The minor league regular season for a few leagues end this weekend, and for most they are about two weeks from wrapping up. Here is a quick rundown for each affiliate and their chances at making the playoffs:

Buffalo (AAA): Buffalo is 69-61 on the year, and with only 12 games remaining they have a tough road to hoe as they are six games out of first in the International League's North Division.

Their best chance is to make the playoffs as a wildcard, where they sit 2.5 games in back of Richmond.

Akron (AA): Akron is 71-56 on the year, and with 14 games remaining are 2.5 games out of first in the Eastern League's Southern Division. Akron does lead the wildcard by 2.5 games over Bowie.

Kinston (A+): Kinston is 34-25 in the second half, 79-49 overall, and have a 3.5 game lead in the Carolina League's Southern Division. Kinston has already clinched a post-season berth with their first half division title, but a second half division title would give them an all-home first round playoff series.

Kinston has 11 games remaining in the season.

Lake County (A-): Lake County is 28-28 in the second half, 59-67 overall, and 4.5 games out of first place in the South Atlantic League's Northern Division. There is no wildcard since the first half division winner is not going to win the second half title.

Mahoning Valley (SA): Mahoning Valley is 31-28 on the year, and 4.5 games out of first in the NY-Penn League's Pinckney Division. Mahoning Valley is also 4.5 games out in the wildcard chase with 16 games left.

GCL Indians (R): The GCL Indians are 28-29 on the year, and 12 games out of first place in the Gulf Coast League's North Division. They will not qualify for the playoffs as only four games remain, with the last game this coming Monday.

Affiliate Notebook

Buffalo Notes: Right-hander Sean Smith has been a rock in the rotation all year, leading the team in starts (21), innings pitched (133.1), and strikeouts (90). His nine wins are tied for the team lead with Aaron Laffey. ... Outfielder Jason Cooper has 175 career RBI as a Buffalo Bison, which ranks him seventh in the franchise's Modern Era.

In addition, he is ninth in the Modern Era in games played (297), sixth in doubles (61), eighth in home runs (44) and tied for eighth in triples (14). ... Left-hander Jason Stanford struckout four batters on Wednesday night, pushing his Buffalo career total to 281, good for second place in the franchise's Modern Era.

He is only nine behind Rick Reed (290) for the top spot, and he is the only player to play in Buffalo for parts of seven seasons. ... Left-handed reliever Rich Rundles was called back up to Buffalo this week when Buffalo left-hander Juan Lara was unable to make the trip to Ottawa because he misplaced his passport.

Lara was assigned to Akron.

On Wednesday, Lara was sent back to Buffalo and Rundles to Akron. ... First baseman Ryan Mulhern is hitting .306 with 16 HR, 74 RBI and an .868 OPS.

Akron Notes: Buffalo outfielder Brian Barton was on his way to back to Akron last week, but while in transit back to Akron an injury to infielder Luis Rivas resulted in Barton being immediately recalled to Buffalo. Akron activated player/coach Shaun Larkin instead. ... First baseman Michael Aubrey has been activated from the disabled list, and player coach Shaun Larkin was put back on the disabled/inactive list. ... First baseman Jordan Brown is hitting .331 with 10 HR, 68 RBI, and an .899 OPS. ... Outfielder Trevor Crowe is hitting .254 with 5 HR, 46 RBI, 26 stolen bases, and a .688 OPS. ... Left-hander Chuck Lofgren is 11-6 with a 4.34 ERA, and has 118 strikeouts in 134.2 innings pitched. ... Left-hander Scott Lewis is 5-9 with a 3.72 ERA, and has 104 strikeouts in 118.2 innings pitched.

Kinston Notes: Last Thursday, first baseman Matt Whitney left the game late with tightness in his abdomen caused from a swing earlier in the game. The injury was not serious, and missed a handful of games, but is back in action.

Currently, he is hitting .302 with 30 HR, 107 RBI and a .920 OPS in 118 combined games in Lake County and Kinston. ... Third baseman/first baseman Beau Mills was called up to Kinston on Wednesday, and infielder Dustin Realini was sent to Lake County despite his .407 average in eight games. ... Right-hander Kevin Dixon is on the disabled list with an oblique strain. ... Third baseman Wes Hodges is hitting .289 with 14 HR, 66 RBI and an .848 OPS. ... Shortstop Joshua Rodriguez is hitting .256 with 19 HR, 76 RBI and a .790 OPS. ... Right-hander Sung-Wei Tseng is 6-8 with a 4.14 ERA, and has 86 strikeouts in 130.1 innings pitched.

Lake County Notes: Former Lake County outfielder Mike Conroy retired from baseball last year, but is now attending college as a 24-year old freshman at the University of Connecticut.

When Conroy signed with the Indians out of high school, like many high school players, Conroy had a college scholarship to any school of his choosing added to his contract.

Conroy put that to immediate use upon retiring, and walked on to the football team trying to

make the team as a wide receiver. ... On Friday, 19-year old left-hander Ryan Morris was outstanding in holding the opposition hitless and scoreless for five innings.

Morris also had five strikeouts, and was pulled because of his pitch count.

Morris was drafted in the fourth round of the 2006 Draft out of high school and on the year is 3-1 with a 3.75 in 11 combined appearances at Lake County and the GCL. ... Right-fielder Roman Pena ended a homerless drought that went back to June 7th when he hit a grand slam on Tuesday night. ... Outfielder Nick Weglarz is hitting .271 with 21 HR, 74 RBI and has an .881 OPS. ... Catcher Matt McBride is hitting .282 with 8 HR, 61 RBI, and has a .783 OPS.

McBride could be on the move to Kinston soon to get some late-season playoff experience.

Mahoning Valley Notes: Right-hander Dan Frega was named the NY-Penn League Pitcher of the Week on Monday. On the year, Frega is 5-2 with a 3.64 ERA. ... First baseman Todd Martin has followed up a blazing July with a simmering August.

In his last 15 games he has only one extra base hit - a double. ... Before returning home on Tuesday night, The Scrappers had been on the road for 12 days and had not played a home game since August 8th.

The 12-day road trip was the longest in franchise history. ... First baseman Todd Martin's last home run was on July 29th, which is the last time Mahoning Valley homered as a team, a stretch of 20 games (yuck!). ... First baseman Chris Nash and right-handed pitcher Josh Judy were called up to Mahoning Valley from the Gulf Coast League.

Nash hit .321 with 3 HR and 21 RBI, while Judy was 1-2 with a 0.63 ERA. ... Left-hander Kelvin De La Cruz is 5-2 with a 2.88 ERA in 12 combined starts with Mahoning Valley and the GCL Indians.

GCL Notes: The GCL Indians season wraps up this weekend, as their last game is on Monday. ... They will not be making the playoffs in the Gulf Coast League, but several players will be on the move when the season ends. Chris Nash and Josh Judy already were moved up, and others like Robbie Alcombrack should be on the move.

Alcombrack may be in line for a callup to Lake County when/if McBride moves up to Kinston (as expected). ... Not Indians related, but worth mentioning, is there will be no winter ball season in Puerto Rico this year for the first time in 70 years.

Low attendance and financial problems forced the cancellation of the season. ... Also, the Dominican Summer League Indians will not be making the playoffs.

They are 27-40 on the season, and their season ends today (Friday).