International scouting has become a much bigger deal in baseball over the last decade, and in 16 year old Jason Smit, the Indians feel they may have struck gold in the Outback ...signing this talented middle infielder out of Australia. Smit is playing with the Indians rookie team in the Gulf Coast League in Winterhaven, and our Tony Lastoria had a chance to sit down and talk with him while down there last week.

The Indians dipped into the outback last year to nab 16-year old Jason Smit, a promising, young prospect out of Australia. When he signed with the Indians in July, Smit was widely considered a top ten International prospect.

At 16-years old, there is a lot of projection involved with any prospect at that age, so there is no telling what may happen with Smit over the course of the next few years as his body continues to mature. Still, the chance at grabbing a player with a lot of upside offensively that can be a middle of the diamond player was intriguing for the Indians and their scouts to pass up.

“Jason is a middle-of-the-diamond player with offensive upside who has been playing at the international level since he was 14 years old,” said Indians Scouting Director John Mirabelli in a press release last year after Smit was signed. “Jason has great instincts for the game and a very advanced approach for a player his age.”

The Indians tried Smit out back in extended spring training in 2006, liked what they saw, and worked with Smit’s agent to get him signed.

“I was at the academy in Australia,” recalled Smit. “We were having talks to a lot of teams and it kind of just happened. I actually came over last extended spring training to tryout with the Indians and for a bunch of other teams. I liked Cleveland and ended up signing with them.”

As noted by Mirabelli above, the Indians really liked Smit’s potential with his bat

and throwing arm. While the Indians view him as a middle infielder, he has the potential to play virtually anywhere on the infield.

“I was signed as a shortstop and been moved around a bit to third and second,” said Smit. “Just trying to figure out where I am going to be at this stage. I'm not too sure quite yet, so I am just playing everyday going spot to spot. I've always liked shortstop, but I don't mind. Whatever helps me try climbing up the ladder is fine. I don't really care where I am playing as long as I am getting an opportunity to swing the bat I am happy.”

Smit is playing his first season of professional baseball in the Gulf Coast League (GCL) with the Indians short-season rookie level team the GCL Indians, located in Winter Haven, Florida. With just a few days left in the season in the GCL, Smit (now 17-years old) is hitting .214 with 1 HR and 15 RBI in 117 at bats. Smit is one of the younger players in the league, as most of the players range from 18-20 years old.

“It's alright, it has been a long few months,” said Smit in his Australian accent when asked how his season is going. “It was nice to get the season going and I am pretty excited by it. I got here February 17th. It's been a long time.”

On the surface, the numbers he has put up are not very good. But, he is very young, and there are a lot of things going on behind the scenes he is doing to continually try and improve his game.

“I'm doing alright (at the plate),” said Smit. “I’m battling through it as it has been a long season so far, and we are kind of getting to the end part. I’m just working with the coaches a lot to try and get better as a hitter, like learning more about different pitches and how to pick them up.”

Smit has been in Winter Haven for the past six months. For Smit and his extended spring training brethren, that might as well be a long prison sentence. After the major league and full season minor league clubs break camp at the end of March, the short-season league players for Mahoning Valley and the GCL hang around in extended spring training for two and a half months scrimmaging each other, doing drills and working out. Then, once Mahoning Valley’s season starts up in late June, it is just the GCL players in Winter Haven and the complex pretty much becomes a ghost town while the GCL Indians play through their season.

“It is very difficult seeing everyone leave,” said Smit when asked about his first extended spring training. “It is an extension of spring training and knowing your season is not going to be for another few months. Its okay, and the more experienced you get the better it is going to be. We train in the morning. There are basically two teams, the rookie ball team and Mahoning Valley and we basically are together. All it is, is we play different teams by splitting into two teams and one day one team will play, like say Houston, and the other will train, and it switches back and forth.”

Not only has it been tough to keep focused mentally for six months in Winter Haven, but Smit also has to deal with adjusting to the American culture. Smit is a native Australian, but has been to the Unites Stated before and there is no language barrier, which he said helps.

“It’s not too bad,” said Smit. “It is pretty much the exact same as home with the people and stuff, and the language is the same which is always good. So there is nothing really that different. I didn't have to change to much with what is around, so it wasn't too bad of a change.”

Of course, being 17-years old and in a new country several thousand miles away from his family has to be rough, right?

“It's been difficult,” said Smit. “My parents and brother came over a couple weeks ago (early July) for a good month. I had them come over to make it a bit easier because it has been hard being away so long. With friends and stuff like that it is difficult, but it is alright as long as you keep in regular contact.”

Which raises another question. At 16-years of age Smit signed a professional contract and is now playing ball at 17-years old, but just about every kid in the United States is still attending high school at those ages.

“I'm 17 now, and I graduated last year in October,” said Smit. “We graduate earlier than American kids, I think we start a year earlier. I made sure I finished high school and graduated and then came here.”

Being so young, Smit gets a lot of the typical playful heckling in the clubhouse, especially in spring training when all the players were in camp. But, one player took him under his wing and tried to help prepare Smit for what lies ahead for him as he continues to live his dream to hopefully someday become a major leaguer.

“One guy actually took me under his wing, Alan Zinter, who is 38,” said Smit. “He was just trying to make the big league squad again (in spring training). He took me under his wing massively, and I learned so much from him. I think he quit because there was no place for him. He was huge though. He talked about different ways to get through the season, and just so much stuff on how to play the game mentally, and stuff like that it was a massive hand. He was a really good guy to get along with and stuff, and it was a bunch of things that he helped me with.”

With the GCL season wrapping up this Monday on August 27th, Smit plans to go home and be with his family. But, the Instructional League isn’t too far off from the end of the season, so his vacation from Winter Haven may not last long.

”I'm gonna go back home,” said Smit. “I am not too sure yet about Instructs. I'm guessing I will probably come, but we'll go home before that and have a good break before we come back again.”