In the seventh round of the 2006 Draft, the Indians selected a highly regarded catching prospect by the name of Robbie Alcombrack out of Bear River High School in California. He's spent the season in Winter Haven, playing in the Gulf Coast league, where the games are played at noon in 90 degree heat, with no fans, and often no scoreboard. Our Tony Lastoria visited with Robbie on his recent trip to Winter Haven to talk about the grind of playing rookie level baseball.

While he has only been in the Cleveland Indians organization for a little over a year, for highly regarded catching prospect Robbie Alcombrack it seems like he has been in Winter Haven for a lifetime.

"Nice and hot down here for you, huh?" asked Alcombrack as we sat down for in interview behind the Triple-A field at the Indians spring training complex at Chain Of Lakes Park in Winter Haven, Florida.

Yes, hot indeed.

Such is the life in extended spring training and rookie level baseball, where the major leagues for most of these players seem no closer than a distant star.

"Yeah, and I played here last year. I'll be outta here soon hopefully," remarked Alcombrack.

Down in the Gulf Coast League (GCL) the games are played at noon almost every day. If you have ever been to Florida in July and August, you would know that the humidity and sweltering heat is almost unbearable.

The temperature averages over 90 degrees everyday, and perspiration runs wild from every pore, but the kids go out there and play even though it can be unbearable.

"Oh yeah, it's hot!" exclaimed Alcombrack. "I guess it is the shortage of lights

and there are a lot of Florida State League teams down here, so we can't use the stadiums as much as we like. We were the only team in the league last year who played in our stadium every game.

No matter what.

I don't know why that changed.

Twelve o'clock games are just something you have to tough out, it makes you push even harder to get out of here and get up there and be able to sleep in and play a nice night game."

No night games means no sleeping in for Alcombrack and his teammates. While the noon games free up your evenings, getting up at the crack of dawn to get ready to play baseball and workout can be tough to get used to.

"Breakfast usually starts at 7:00," said Alcombrack. "We will be here at 7:30 and do some cardio or loosen up, and then practice and do stretches at 8:30 or 9:00 depending on the scenario of the game.
Weights during the season they just try to get us in there twice a week.

Twice a week we will do about five to six exercises, and we are allowed to do extra if we want.

Cardio is always open, and they love it when we do cardio.

It is a big thing in the Indians organization.

Usually, just try to get cardio in 3-4 times a week early in the morning, and lift two times a week."

Yes, the GCL can be a rough experience for any minor leaguer, much less a player returning for a second season like Alcombrack. Alcombrack played in 32 games for the GCL Indians in 2006 and hit .198 with 0 HR and 9 RBI. This year, in his return season he hit .244 with 7 HR, 23 RBI and had an .833 OPS in 38 games.

In the GCL, there are no fans, no scoreboards, no press ... really not much of anything.

"The biggest difficulty down here is there are rarely scoreboards, and fans obviously," said Alcombrack. "When you play in front of fans you have that adrenaline, where down here you have to create your own.

Umpires are not as good as other levels I am sure.

You just kind of play the same guys where you play at home one day and away the next.

I remember last year in my Burlington experience just being on the road was so much nicer."

The Burlington experience Alcombrack talked about is the nine games he was there for at the end of 2006. He only played in three games (2-for-7, 0 HR, 0 RBI), but even though it was a short visit at the end of the season he still took a lot away from the time he was in Burlington.

"I played just nine games in Burlington," recalled Alcombrack. "I was scheduled to start the final game of the year against Danville and we got rained out.

I played my first game in Pulaski.

It was unbelievable as I thought I was in an All-Star All-American game again.

It was different because the fans did not want anything to do with cheering for Burlington because we were on the road.

We were in a tight spot for the playoffs and it was an awesome experience."

At the end of the year, the Indians left Burlington which left the new GCL team which was started up in 2006 as the only rookie-level team in the system. That meant, instead of starting the 2007 season in Burlington, Alcombrack once again had to start the year in the GCL.

"I would have loved to have gone to Burlington again," said Alcombrack. "Fort unately last year I had Kevin Higgins as a manager when I went up, and we are from the exact same area.

I would have loved to have been in Burlington again just because it feels more like professional baseball than playing down here.

But, you gotta do what you gotta do."

Alcombrack was selected in the seventh round of the 2006 Draft out of Bear River High School, California. Going into the draft, he was a pre-season Top 100 high school player according to *Baseball America*
, and was ranked as a top five catching prospect.

He signed quickly, which is a rarity for a high school kid with such lofty draft status and a full scholarship to Arizona State already in his back pocket.

While he understands the importance of an education, he was ready to start playing baseball everyday.

"That's where I was going (Arizona State)," said Alcombrack. "I had everything set up and was ready to go.

But, I knew that I wanted to play baseball as I am not a huge person on school.

But, the good thing about the draft nowadays is that it is important for them to get you back and get your education.

I decided to come play and get a headstart.

I definitely did that (school money set aside by the Indians) because you never know what is going to happen as tomorrow could be my last day."

A year later, does Alcombrack feel he made the right choice signing with the Indians and not going to college?

"Absolutely," said Alcombrack. "There is nothing better than going out and playing baseball everyday. You come out and practice or play a game, go enjoy your time with your friends, and go enjoy my time with my wife and wake up and do it again."

Coming out of high school, he was so highly coveted by scouts because of his power potential at the plate to go along with his defensive abilities behind it.

"I'm a very good blocker as I usually keep everything in front of me," said Alcomrback. "I really know how to call a game and work well with a pitching staff. I have very good power potential as I have hit a lot of home runs and doubles throughout my career so far. Pro ball is a little different as it becomes more of a psychological game, especially in the hitting aspect which is something I am working on right now.

But, attribute-wise that is what I was told.

My defense, the way I carry a pitching staff and power I have."

One of the biggest adjustments any professional baseball player makes is the transition from a high school or college level player to a professional player. Organizations transition these players into like environments so the players are not too overwhelmed.

For example, the high school players typically will start in the rookie-level GCL league where the league primarily consists of high school players and young Latin players breaking into professional baseball, and the college players will go to Mahoning Valley (NY-Penn League) where the players there are more college drafted players from the recent drafts.

Alcombrack talked about the adjustment to professional baseball.

"The difference is going from a team of individuals playing to win as a group to a team of individuals playing to win for themselves," said Alcombrack. "That is one thing I like about this team here [in the GCL], is we are playing to win as a team.

We already set our goal.

We want to win the Gulf Coast League.

As much as other teams are struggling, or players on the team are struggling, we try to pick each other up.

This is a nice transition from high school because we have guys who are trying to attain the same goal."

Alcombrack had a scare earlier in the season when he was involved in a nasty collision at the plate as he was cut down by a runner sliding into homeplate. Initially, he was not sure what had happened and thought his knee was blown out, but the injury was only minor and he missed just a handful of games.

"There was a play at the plate, and I got lit up the line a little bit," said Alcombrack. "He wasn't trying to take me out or anything he kind of slid late.

He gave me a pretty bad stinger.

I thought it was my knee and I was done.

It was the worst pain, and I never had pain like that in my knee.

It ended up just going away, and I missed two games I believe."

One of the more exciting things for Alcombrack this year was the experience of his first spring training. Every player in the organization, from the farm system to the major leagues, was in camp from late-February to late March for five to six weeks getting prepared for their 2007 seasons. During camp, he got to hang out and talk with a few players higher up in the system and on the major league roster.

"Yeah, it was a good time," noted Alcombrack. "I talked to CC Sabathia because we are from the same neck of the woods.

The only thing I actually got to talk to him about, it was right after they were playing the Blue jays up there and he got in the hand real hard, so we were talking about his hand.

And we were actually talking about his episode of Cribs he had recently filmed.

So, I got to talk to a few of them.

Not too many.

I also talk to Trevor Crowe quite a bit.

We have the same agent, and I get to workout with him in the offseason.

He is just a real cool guy to me and treats me real well.

Dan Cevette also.

He really has been nice to me too."

As is the case with most players, Alcombrack keeps a close eye on what a lot of the guys at levels above him are doing, particularly in the catching ranks. Of course, it can become frustrating and distracting at times if you pay too much attention to what others are doing and not 100% on doing what you need to do to get to the next level.

"Yeah, absolutely," remarked Alcombrack when asked if he follows what other players in the system are doing. "You always have that desire to look and see what they are doing and wonder am I going to be called up. In the beginning of the season I was so worried that I needed to get called up.

That's why I really struggled in the beginning.

Finally, I really stepped up and put everything behind me and tried to focus on the present."

One of the places Alcombrack has a keen interest in is Lake County, which likely will be where he plays in 2008. He also could be a late season callup sometime this week there or to Mahoning Valley.

"That's my goal, to go up to Lake County and play for (Chris) Tremie again," said Alcombrack. "He was my manager last year, a great manager. I'd love to get up there and be with a lot of the guys I played with in the spring.

Even Mahoning Valley and play for Laker, that would be great."

With the GCL season ending today, Alcombrack could very well get his wish sometime this week.