Aeros fans have been spoiled with a lot of success recently, as the Aeros have won the Eastern League Championship 2 of the past 3 seasons, winning it last year and also in 2003. A few players that made up the championship squad last season like Jeremy Sowers, Eddie Mujica, and Ben Francisco have moved on to Buffalo. Also, manager Torey Lovullo has moved to Buffalo to take over manager duties while Tim Bogar takes over as the new Akron skipper. But, aside from the manager change and a few player changes, the team that won the championship last season should at least start the 2006 season mostly intact.

Like Buffalo, Akron will house several of the Indians top prospects in the system, which shows how top-heavy the Indians are right now with players on the major league doorstep. This is a major shift, as many of the top prospects in the system the past few years have been in the lower levels of the system.

In all, Akron will boast as many as eight Baseball America Top 30 Prospects (nine when JD Martin returns), of which two of the top four players in the Indians system will be showcased (Adam Miller and Brad Snyder). In addition to those top prospects, the rest of the roster will be peppered with several other talented players who have been on that Top 30 list in previous years, or were close to being added this year. With this impressive collection of talent, summer nights at Canal Park should continue to be a lot of fun this year.

One note, is I have recently learned that Ochoa will in fact not start in Buffalo, but instead will return to Akron. Jose Flores will start the season as the everyday SS for Buffalo, and Brandon Pinckney will return to Kinston.

Since the makeup of the Akron bullpen still has several question marks, and for the most part is full of organizational filler, the Akron bullpen will not be featured in this preview except for Tony Sipp. Here are the minor league affiliates, and the

projected lineup and starting rotation at Akron (the lineup setup is my educated guess):

Minor League Affiliates:

Buffalo Bisons (AAA)
Akron Aeros (AA)
Kinston Indians (High A)
Lake County Captains (Low A)
Mahoning Valley Scrappers (Short Season A)
Burlington Indians (Rookie)

Projected Lineup:
1. Eider Torres 2B
2. Brad Snyder RF
3. Kevin Kouzmanoff 3B
4. Ryan Mulhern LF
5. Michael Aubrey 1B
6. John Van Every DH
7. Nathan Panther CF
8. Ivan Ochoa SS
9. Javi Hererra C

Projected Starting Rotation:

Adam Miller
Rafael Perez
Nick Pesco
Sean Smith
Ron “Bear” Bay

LF: Ryan Mulhern

Mulhern was drafted in the 11th round of the 2003 Draft from the University of South Alabama, and had the biggest breakout season of any Tribe prospect in 2005. After hitting only 12 HRs and knocking in 72 RBIs in a combined 159 games at Mahoning Valley and Lake County in 2003 and 2004, Mulhern earned a promotion to Kinston in 2005 and responded by hitting .315 with 32 HRs and 94 RBIs in a combined 112 games at Kinston and Akron. Prior to his breakout

performance in 2005 he was not a highly regarded prospect in the system, but now comes in 26th in the system. Mulhern will split time in LF and 1B for the Aeros to give the Indians flexibility in the future to get his powerful bat into the lineup. While Aubrey starts the year in extended Spring Training and Kinston, Mulhern will see more time at 1B. While Mulhern is at 1B, Van Every and the speedy Todd Donovan will get regular playing time in LF.

CF: Nathan Panther

Panther was taken out of the 15th round from Muscatine Community College in the 2002 Draft, and is one of the better outfield prospects in the system you never hear about. After a very nice season at Lake County in 2003 where he hit .285 with 13 HRs, 52 RBIs and 38 stolen bases, he struggled in Kinston and Akron the last two years. Last year, in 124 games with Kinston and Akron, Panther hit .251 with 13 HRs, 47 RBIs and had 12 stolen bases. Most noticeably, his stolen base numbers have decreased considerably as he had 38 in 2003, but has totaled only 23 over the last two seasons. Panther can play any of the three outfield positions, but since Mulhern and Snyder project as corner outfielders, Panther will mainly patrol CF for Akron.

RF: Brad Snyder

The Indians drafted Snyder in the 1st round of the 2003 Draft from Ball State University, and currently projects as the Opening Day right-fielder for the Indians in 2007. Currently ranked 4th on the Indians prospect list, Snyder might be one of the most consistent prospects in the system. In 2004, at Lake County and Kinston, Snyder combined to hit .300 with 16 HRs and 75 RBIs, and also had 15 stolen bases. Last year at Kinston and Akron, Snyder combined to hit .278 with 22 HRs and 82 RBIs, and also had 17 stolen bases. Snyder is a well-rounded player in that he is an above average hitter, defender and runner, and his wide range of skills and makeup are similar to Grady Sizemore's. Snyder's last step in the development process will be to improve his two strike approach since he strikes out a lot (158 times in 513 at bats in 2005). Due to the crowded outfield in Buffalo, and the need to work on his approach at the plate with two-strikes, Snyder will start the year in Akron, but is on the fast track to be promoted to Buffalo if a spot in the starting outfield opens up.

1B: Michael Aubrey

Aubrey was taken in the 1st round of the 2003 Draft from Tulane University, and was once one of the hottest commodities in the Indians system. There is no question Aubrey can hit, as in his brief minor league career, Aubrey has hit .314 with 24 HRs and 121 RBIs in only 596 at bats. And, while he brings gold glove caliber defense, the question remains if he can stay healthy. In three seasons with the Indians, Aubrey has only played in 164 games, being bothered with leg injuries and now a lingering back issue. In 2004, Aubrey managed to hit a combined .310 with 15 HRs and 82 RBIs in 98 games with Kinston and Akron. Last year, his chronic back issues limited him to only 28 games, in which he hit .283 with 4 HRs and 20 RBIs. Aubrey once was the 2nd ranked prospect in the organization in 2005, but has dropped to #10 in 2006. He has been cleared to play, and will actually begin the season in extended Spring Training and then start in Kinston for a few games before he moves to Akron. The Indians want to keep him healthy by staying in warm weather, and when he returns to Akron will likely split time at 1B and DH to help keep him healthy.

2B: Eider Torres

At 17-years old, the Indians signed Torres out of Venezuela in 2000. In 2003, Torres hit .248 with 1 HR, 39 RBIs and 39 stolen bases for Kinston, and repeated his stop at Kinston in 2004 showing great progress as he hit .303 with 3 HRs, 46 RBIs, and 48 stolen bases. In 2005, he was moved up to Akron and hit .285 with 6 HRs, 57 RBIs and 33 stolen bases. Due to the crowded roster in Buffalo, Torres will likely repeat in Akron for at least the first half of the season. Indians Farm Director John Farrell was recently quoted as saying Torres could become a super utility player because of his flexibility to play many positions and even some outfield, so he could figure into the Tribe's plans in such a role as early as 2007 if he impresses this season.

SS: Ivan Ochoa

Ochoa was signed out of Venezuela (same home as Omar Vizquel) in 2000, and is arguably still regarded as the best defensive infielder in the system. Ochoa bounced back from two injury plagued seasons in 2003 and 2004 to have a healthy and decent year in 2005 at Akron, hitting .265 with 2 HRs, 30 RBIs, and 16 stolen bases. He is considered major league ready with his defense, but with his offense a big question mark he projects as a backup infielder in the majors. With the veteran Jose Flores at SS in Buffalo, the 23-year old Ochoa will return to Akron for a 2nd season, but could move up to Buffalo at some point in the season.

3B: Kevin Kouzmanoff

Taken in the 6th round of the 2003 Draft from the University of Arkansas-Little Rock, Kouzmanoff came practically out of nowhere in 2004 to have one of the best individual seasons in the system. Since then, Kouzmanoff has shot up the Indians prospect lists as he currently is ranked 23rd in the system, and is regarded as one of the top two third baseman in the system (Andy Marte is the other). In 2004, he hit .330 with 16 HRs and 87 RBIs at Lake County, and was solid defensively at 3B. Last year, injuries plagued Kouzmanoff, but when he played he was fantastic as he hit .339 with 12 HRs and 58 RBIs in only 68 games for Kinston. With Marte ahead of him, and quality young third basemen so hard to find, he could be a valuable trading chip in the future.

C: Javi Herrera

The Indians took catchers in back to back rounds in the 2003 as they drafted Herrera in the 2nd round from the University of Tennessee, Ryan Garko in the 3rd round from Stanford. Early on, Garko has more than proven to be the much better prospect. Unlike Garko, Herrera is viewed more as a defensive catcher and may be best suited as a backup catcher at the major league level. Herrera hit a combined .254 with 10 HRs and 46 RBIs for Lake County and Kinston in 2004, and followed that up by hitting .226 with 6 HRs and 36 RBIs at Akron last year. Even with his offensive short-comings, Herrera could move up to Buffalo quickly if Einar Diaz does not accept his assignment. In the event that happens, Armando Camacaro or Dave Wallace would replace Herrera as the regular starter in Akron.

DH: John Van Every

The Indians are deep in the outfield at Buffalo and Akron, so most likely whoever does not start in the outfield will play a lot of DH. To start the season, Van Every should get the lion's share of playing time at DH. Taken in the 29th round of the 2000 Draft from Itawamba Community College, was another one of those "out of nowhere" players as he had a sensational season at Kinston in 2004. In the three years prior to 2004, Van Every never had more than 6 HRs and 33 RBIs, but in 2004 he broke out to the tune of a .275 average with 21 HRs and 71 RBIs for Kinston. His big surge in power continued in 2005 at Akron, where he hit .244 with 27 HRs and 64 RBIs. Shaun Larkin also should figure into the DH mix, as well as

Aubrey to keep him healthy.

SP: Adam Miller (Right-handed)

The Indians drafted Miller in the 1st round of the 2003 Draft out of high school, and is one of the prized pitching prospects in the organization. Ranked #1 in the system the past two years, Jeremy Sowers may be closer to being major league ready, but Miller without question has #1 starter ability. In 2004, combined at Lake County and Kinston, Miller was 10-6 with a 2.95 ERA in 27 starts, and also compiled 152 strikeouts in 134.1 innings of work. Even more impressive, he only had 40 walks in those 134.1 innings for an impressive strikeout to walk ratio of about 4:1 Miller had a setback in 2005, as he was sidelined early in Spring Training with an elbow issue, and it forced him to miss roughly three months of the season. When he returned, the rust showed. In 15 starts with Mahoning Valley and Kinston last season, Miller went 2-4 with a 4.88 ERA. While he normally throws in the 95-98 MPH range (has topped at 101 MPH), his velocity was down most of the year where he was throwing 91-93 MPH, as noted by only notching 51 strikeouts in 70.1 IP. All reports indicate Miller is 100% healthy, so 2006 is a big season for him to once again crank up the excitement meter for fans and front office personnel like he did prior to his injury.

SP: Rafael Perez (Left-handed)

Perez is another player signed as a free agent out of the Dominican Republic (2002), and is currently ranked as the Indians 13th best prospect. In 2003, when he pitched for Burlington, he was the Appalachian League pitcher-of-the-year, but did not have the same success when moving up a notch in 2004 at Lake County going 7-6 with a 4.85 ERA in 22 starts. Last year, at Kinston and Akron he was very impressive by going 12-8 with a 2.62 ERA. He is still growing into his body, which should increase the velocity on an already powerful 92-94 MPH live fastball with great action. His slider is rated as the best in the entire system, which may nail it home what many scouts feel will be an eventual permanent move to the bullpen. He was recently added to the 40-man roster in the offseason, so could be a left-handed pitching option in the Indians bullpen late this year if he progresses well this season.

SP: Nick Pesco (Right-handed)

The Indians selected Pesco in the 25th round of the 2002 Draft as a

draft-and-follow from Cosumnes River College. As a draft-and-follow player, it allowed the Indians to maintain exclusive signing rights to him until a week before the following draft (2003) if Pesco were to attend junior college. Eventually, Pesco was signed, and since he has become one of the top pitching prospects in the system, and has the best rated changeup in the system. Pesco was ranked as the Indians 9th best prospect in 2005 after an outstanding season in 2004. In 25 appearances with Lake County (21), Kinston (3) and Akron (1), he went 8-9 with a 3.67 ERA. In 2006, Pesco comes in as the Indians 16th ranked prospect, coming off a 2005 season at Kinston where he went 11-10 with a 3.82 ERA.

SP: Sean Smith (Right-handed)

Like Nick Pesco, Smith was selected by the Indians in the 2001 Draft as a draft-and-follow in the 16th round from Sacramento City College. For almost all of 2003 and 2004 Smith spent his time with Lake County, going 11-4 with a 3.71 ERA in 2003, and then 7-2 with a 3.39 ERA in 2004. He battled some injuries and only pitched 70 innings in 2004, as compared to the 121.1 innings he logged in 2003. In 2005, Smith was moved up to Kinston and had a good season going 5-8 with a 3.60 ERA; however, although opposing batters only hit .237 off him, Smith walked 71 batters in his 142.1 innings of work. An average fastball that tops out at 90 MPH and trouble throwing strikes consistently could be a death sentence for Smith, keeping him from moving much higher in the system.

SP: Ron “Bear” Bay (Right-handed)

Bay was acquired at the end of Spring Training in 2005 in a trade with the Chicago Cubs for Cliff Bartosh. Still only 22-years old, Bay is a solid prospect with a low 90s fastball that tops out around 94 MPH. In 2004, Bay went 11-9 with a 3.10 ERA in 28 starts for the Cubs Low A affiliate Lansing. Last year, as an Indian, in a combined 23 starts at Kinston and Akron, Bay went 9-8 with a 3.86 ERA with 125 strikeouts in 130.2 IP. His ability to fill the strike zone also showed, as he only walked 25 batters. Bay should be a fixture at Akron in the middle of the rotation pretty much all season.

RP: Tony Sipp (Left-handed)

While the Akron bullpen could be made up with many different pitchers by the names of Mariano Gomez, Bubbie Buzachero, Scott Roehl, Jim Ed Warden, Tom Mastny, and others…..Sipp is clearly the most noteworthy pitcher in the bullpen.

Sipp was taken in the 45th round of the 2004 Draft from Okaloosa-Walton College, and was projected to go much higher in the draft, but plummeted due to signability concerns. The Indians gambled, and eventually signed him to a hefty $130,000 deal, which is high for such a late pick. Ranked as the Indians 14th best prospect, Sipp is an aggressive pitcher with a live arm. In 2004 at Mahoning Valley, he was impressive as he went 3-1 with a 3.16 ERA with an outstanding 74 strikeouts in only 42.2 innings pitched. Last year, while pitching for Lake County and Kinston, Sipp went a combined 6-3 with a 2.40 ERA and 130 strikeouts in 116.1 IP. In his minor league career, he has an impressive 11.55 K/9 innings ratio, and is equally hard to hit with only 6.46 hits/9 innings. He possesses a low 90s fastball that tops out around 93-94 MPH, and a plus slider, which makes him a prime candidate to move into the Indians bullpen as a late inning lefty. The Indians plan to push him through the system this year, so he could debut sometime this season, but worst case looks to start the season in the Indians bullpen in 2007.

Up Next: Kinston and Lake County previews.