The minor league season has ended, and with that our minor league guru Tony Lastoria is putting the finishing touches on what was a very successful year for the farm system. In a year-end chat with Indians Director of Player Development Ross Atkins, Tony touches on a few topics that fans may not know much about, such as the Latin American setup, how they decide when to move a player up, the scouting vs. stats philosophy and more.

Ross Atkins first year as the Director of Player Development just finished up, as he was named to the post in October 2006 after former director John Farrell left to join the Boston Red Sox organization as their pitching coach. The minor league season wrapped up a few weeks ago, but for Atkins the season lasts pretty much 365 days a year as he will be following the young prospects in his system over the course of the next several months while they play in the Instructional League and also in fall/winter leagues.

Atkins is a former pitcher in the Indians system, where he played for five seasons from 1995-1999. He reached as high as Double-A Akron, and in his five year minor league career was 37-32 with a 4.13 ERA in 141 games. When his playing career ended, he immediately began working in the Indians minor league system in 2000 as a pitching coach, and also served as a translator and English instructor for Danys Baez during his transition from Cuba to the United States during his first pro season.

After the 2000 season, Atkins was named as the Assistant Director of Player Development under former Director of Player Development John Farrell from 2001-2003. From there, Atkins spent three years from 2004-2006 as the Indians Director of Latin Operations where he oversaw all aspects of the Indians operations in Latin America.

Atkins recently returned from Florida where he was down in Winter Haven to get a firsthand look at the players currently participating in the Instructional League. For information on the Instructional League and what it is, our very own
Dennis Nosco wrote about it earlier today
and will be checking back in over the course of the next few months with information on the Instructional League and Rule 5 Draft.

With Atkins back in Cleveland, I had a chance to sit down and talk to him on the phone briefly about some of the things from a player development perspective that most fans, as well as I, are unsure about. Here is a short question and answer from the conversation:

Q: Do you side more on the scouting angle where you rely on the eyes of scouts, or do you use the currently en vogue computer analysis methods more? Mix? With the hiring of Keith Woolner (formerly of Baseball Prospectus) as "Manager of Baseball Research and Analysis" does this mean the organization is getting more serious about statistical analysis, especially as it relates to player development?

Ross Atkins (RA): Obviously, we use a mixture. You can't say that one is heavier than the other. Actually what you are doing is everything you can to gather all of the information and weight it appropriately depending on the situation. It is all circumstantial and situational. There are also medical factors and mental factors, so there is so much more than just scouting and objective data. You weight it all appropriately and try to make the best decision you can.

The more consistent you make the decisions the same way, hopefully the better off you will be.

With Woolner, it takes our objective analysis to another level.

Q: What type of guidelines are in place for how you decide a player should be moved up or down? Does a player need to play somewhere for a certain length of time or have a certain number of at bats before they are moved up even if they are performing very well?

RA: The guidelines are always based on what is best for the player, never what is good for a team. What is best for the player and his development, and is he currently being challenged. When he is no longer being challenged is when we feel it is appropriate for them to advance. Now, that is not a rule as there are always exceptions to that, but that is the guideline we use.

Q: Going into spring training each year, do you have an idea going in where most of the players will be assigned? Or, is this something that is actually sorted out during camp? What goes into deciding where a player is to be assigned when camp breaks?

RA: We have a very good idea before spring training starts where guys will be heading. The offseason can change that, and certainly games or strides they make in the offseason can change that.

But spring training typically does not change that, other than injury.

So performance in spring training does not change those things as far as prospects are concerned.

Q: What is the setup like out in Latin America? Is it just one actual complex players are grouped at somewhere centralized, or is it a collection of several different small academies in various spots throughout the country?

RA: We have an academy in the Dominican Republic and we have a presence in Venezuela. The Dominican Republic academy houses up to 60 players, and we typically keep about 35 depending on the time of the year.

We are shuttling players in and out of there for tryouts.

We do the same thing in Venezuela, but we don't have an affiliated team.

We do not house that many players, as we can only house 35 total and we typically have 10-15.

(Note: Atkins also commented that when he was the Director of Latin Operations he lived there at least one month all year, and the other time he lived in Miami, FL and would visit the academies as much as three times a month.)

Q: Former Farm Director John Farrell preached a pitch-to-contact philosophy, is this something you still mandate? Has it evolved at all, or have you taken it in a new direction or approach?

RA: Our pitching coordinator and hitting gurus have not changed. Our hitting coordinator is new, but our fielding coordinator was the hitting coordinator.

So, our hitting and pitching philosophies have not changed at all with the transition from Farrell to myself.

Q: With the success of several young players with the major league club who started this year in the minor league system, does this give you a sense of fulfillment that you and your staff on the player development side of things did a good job this year?

RA: This is something more for someone like John Farrell to hang his hat on, as he was the farm director for the past five years. Nothing I came in and did made Asdrubal Cabrera, Aaron Laffey or Jensen Lewis' path any easier. I think it is the hardwork that has been in place over the past 15 years starting with Mark Shapiro, then Neil Huntington, and then John Farrell.

I happen to have my name on the title right now, but I am benefiting from the last 15 years of hardwork.

I do feel some fulfillment because I have been here for 12 years, but if it were to go to one person it can't.

Q: This year, the Lake County squad had a heavy influence of Latin players, which was much higher than previous years if I recall correctly. Is this a change in philosophy by you to push some of these young kids, or a byproduct of what you are comfortable with at the lower levels considering your experience with these players when you oversaw them as Director of Latin Operations?

RA: It is always based on who are the highest upside players with the ability to compete at that level, and who has the best chance to become a major leaguer. It depends every year based on the draft and what is coming out of Latin America and what was in Winter Haven and Mahoning Valley the year prior.

Q: Last, who are some of the players that have gained the attention of the organization this year that maybe were not on the radar screen before this season? In other words the dark horses, the come from nowhere guys, or guys who were expected to be good who are playing at an exceptional level now that we should start paying attention to?

RA: Some really promising years were from the guys in Cleveland. Obviously those guys had quicker paths than anticipated, and Aaron Laffey, Jensen Lewis, and Asdrubal Cabrera are the most exciting and forefront.

Looking at the lower levels, a guy like Jared Goedert we did not expect that kind of production out of, and Jordan Brown was not out of nowhere by any chance.

Matt Whitney would be one of those guys because of all the injuries and adversity he has been through.

Matt Whitney, Jared Goedert, Hector Rondon, and Carlos Rivero had very encouraging years.

Atkins also mentioned that while the player development portion of the Indians new spring training complex is expected to be open in Summer 2008, the Indians will still have a Gulf Coast League (GCL) team in Winter Haven for the 2008 season, and in 2009 the GCL team will move to the Arizona complex where we will move to the Arizona League. Also, when asked if there was a shift in the way the organization handles giving young players opportunities at the major league level this year, Atkins maintains there has been no change although directed me to General Manager Mark Shapiro for more insight on the topic.

Thanks to Ross Atkins and his staff for all the help this year. The Indians minor league season will kick back up again next spring, and TheClevelandFan.com and SportstimeOhio.com will be all over it.

Be sure to check out the this week's final edition of Minor Happenings which posts Thursday

and will give out numerous year-end awards. Also, we wrapup the minor league coverage with two final player articles on right-handed pitcher Frank Herrmann and catcher Chris Gimenez which will post sometime between now and Sunday. Thanks again for reading.