Indians prospect Chris Gimenez burst onto the scene after being a 19th round pick in the 2004 draft of the Indians out of the University of Nevada, and appeared destined to be on the fast track to Cleveland. Then came a bout with a staph infection that nearly cost him his leg. Following that was a freak thumb injury that cost him a season. Then ... a position change. However, Gimenez has fought through it all, and had a huge year for the Indians at Kinston and Akron this season. And our Tony Lastoria had a chance to sit down and talk with him about it.

Indians do-everything prospect Chris Gimenez may be one of the nicest guys you will ever meet. Yes, just about any young man in the minors is great to talk to because they appreciate the attention, but when talking to some players their shyness or introverted personality can show at times.

Not Gimenez.

He is not only a nice guy, but an engaging personality who will talk your ear off (not that it is a bad thing).

In addition to having an incredible personality, Gimenez is also a physically imposing specimen.

The guy is ripped and built like a linebacker in the NFL, and arguably may be the strongest player in the Indians system.

In a lot of ways, his overall look and build is a lot like Cleveland Indians designated hitter Travis Hafner.

That's how big and strong he looks.

Sometimes though, the bigger you are, the harder you fall. But, what knocked Gimenez down was not a string of poor performance, but a string of serious injuries in 2005 and 2006.

Gimenez was selected in the 19th round of the 2004 First Year Player Draft out of the University of Nevada. After being drafted, Gimenez debuted at short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley

that year and put up outstanding numbers and hit .300 with 10 HR, 38 RBI and a .946 OPS in 71 games. He also set several team records in the process, ranking in the top ten in several season categories and most notably second in home runs (10), first in on-base percentage (.419), and first in slugging percentage (.527).

After his brilliant season in Mahoning Valley, Gimenez made his full-season debut with Single-A Lake County in 2005. But, shortly into his campaign at Lake County, Gimenez's life and career took a dramatic turn when he suffered a rare type of staph infection. Gimenez made a slide into second base legging out a double, and scraped up his knee in the process which is not unusual for a player to do when sliding.

"Actually, it was really weird how it happened," said Gimenez about the staph infection. "I had hit a ball and was running to second base and slid into it. You get the normal raspberry on your knee, just like you have a thousand times before.

I played the rest of the game and went home that night, and woke up the next morning which was a Sunday game at 12:30 and we had a 12:00 stretch, so we did not take batting practice or any of that stuff.

So basically I went out and stretched, and I was warming up with one of my good buddies Brian Finegan, and I noticed that my knee was tight.

I was like 'what the heck is going on' and it kept getting worse and worse and I was like 'what the heck did I do to me knee?'

Well then it got to the point where I felt it was serious so I had to go find our trainer, and went and sat in the dugout and I happened to look down and my knee was a beach ball."

After the slide into second base, Gimenez threw dirt on the raspberry to stop the bleeding. While not the smartest thing to do, it is something he had done as a high school player to stop cuts and scrapes from bleeding since you can be removed from a game if you have blood on your jersey.

"Apparently there was something in the dirt that had gotten into my knee and was not cleaned out completely," said Gimenez. "I remember when I was in high school I have permanent marks [on my body] that are dirt stained because they wouldn't let you play if you had blood on your uniform. So I would slide headfirst and scrape my arms up and then I would just grab dirt and shove it in there so it wouldn't bleed anymore so I could play.

For all the times I have done that on a high school field where God knows what kind of chemicals, spit and whatever is in there it just happened to happen that I slide in the wrong spot at the right time I guess."

When Gimenez and his trainer looked at his beach ball sized knee, they knew something was wrong. But the question was ... what?

"They didn't know what it was, as they thought it was a burst bursa sac at first," said Gimenez. "There is a fluid sac in there, and sometimes you will slide real hard and it will burst that sac and [leak the fluid], and it is fine as you just need to get it drained and you are good to go. That's what they originally thought it was. Well, I tried to play the game and I felt like peg-leg out there because it was so swollen that I couldn't even bend my knee.

I hit a groundball and just walked straight to the dugout, I didn't even go to first base.

Sarby (Mike Sarbaugh) our manager had taken me out, and then I went into the training room and they said it might be an infection."

Things got worse from there, and after his knee did not respond to ice treatment later that day they knew it was a staph infection.

"We iced it for 45 minutes, and this is something that I will never forget because after we iced it for 45 minutes we took the ice off and it was like it had been in a microwave," said Gimenez. "I guess that is what happens when you have staph infections, is they create heat. For ice being on your body for 45 minutes you would think it would be stone cold and it was like I had just gotten right out of a hot tub. So that is when the trainer knew I might have a staph infection.

I had always heard of people getting staph infections and having things cut off, so it kind of freaked me out a little bit.

He explained to me that we would go see a doctor when I got back [to Lake County].

The worst part is we had a ten hour bus trip back and a day off.

[When we got back] I went to the hospital and they took some un-Godly amount of fluid that is not supposed to come out of my knee.

They had it tested, and when they got the culture test back they said it was a rare type of staff infection so I needed to be admitted to the hospital quickly."

As Gimenez was laid up in Lutheran Hospital in Cleveland for almost two weeks, the infection got worse and worse where it eventually started spreading up his leg and into his groin area. W hen this happened, the situation became critical and life-threatening.

If the infection spread to the groin area it would give it a clear path to the heart, and could result in death.

So, the doctors gave Gimenez the news and informed him that if the infection did not start to subside overnight, that the next day he would have to have his leg amputated.

Thankfully, Gimenez's body started responding to the medicine that was being pumped into his body, and literally minutes before doctors were about to send him into surgery to remove his

leg, the staph infection started to subside.

"When I was in the hospital, my infection had spread from my leg to my groin area," said Gimenez. "We did not know, actually, the severity of it until the red streaks started spreading to the groin area and that is when the doctors were like 'okay, this is a problem because if it goes there it goes straight to your heart and you are dead.' My doctor came in and said if the infection did not stop or go down in the next few hours there is a pretty good chance they would have to amputate the leg.

So I am lying in bed all night and did not sleep a wink just thinking 'I'm not going to be able to walk again, I can't play golf or play baseball, my girlfriend is going to break up with me because I have one leg, my dad is going to have to buy one of those vans with the wheelchair coming out of it.'

Just all these things were running around in my head.

It was just kind of a huge mess, but thankfully I did not have to get it cut off."

After the two week ordeal that Gimenez went through emotionally and physically with the staph infection in 2005, the thumb injury he suffered in 2006 seems like nothing and pales in comparison.

Still, yet again a situation at second base resulted in Gimenez getting another freak injury that pretty much cost him another season of development. While sliding to breakup a double play, his thumb had gotten lodged under the second base bag as he slid through the base, and he ended up tearing all the ligaments in his thumb.

He ended up being sidelined for almost half the season as a result, although he is now 100% recovered from the injury.

"They decided they wanted me to catch, so I went back to Lake County," recalled Gimenez. "About a month into the season, Fernando Pacheco had hit a groundball with me on first and a runner on third so I went to breakup the double-play. I slid into second base and I went to roll into the guy, and my thumb got caught underneath the bag.

I kept going and my thumb stayed there and I tore just about every ligament in my thumb on my throwing hand.

I'm just a pretty balls out guy, and if I get a chance to do something crazy, I'm all for taking guys out.

Luckily I had one little strand of ligament left so they did not want to do surgery as there was a possibility it could heal.

So we waited two weeks.

I was in a cast, and we left it in a cast for a month with no surgery.

I was out for over two months, and then came back from it and did really well.

So, it was kind of a freak deal."

Fast forward to 2007, Gimenez finally made it through a season healthy, and his offensive abilities that he showed in Mahoning Valley in 2004 showed this year in Kinston and Akron. Wit hout any setbacks this year, Gimenez sort of resurrected himself as a top hitting prospect in the system with excellent power potential, hitting .264 with 26 HR, 66 RBI and a .899 OPS in 113 combined games in Kinston and Akron.

He was also a mid-season Carolina League All-Star after he hit .288 with 15 HR, 37 RBI and had a 1.031 OPS the first half of the season.

In addition to the hitting, however, Gimenez also has become very versatile as a player where he can play catcher, first base, third base, and the outfield. That sort of versatility will make Gimenez very valuable down the road when he looks to make the Indians roster as a bench player out of the minors. Hitting will always be the X-factor for him, but being able to play multiple positions is a plus.

"Actually, I really enjoy it," said Gimenez when asked about playing everywhere on the diamond. "That is the most exciting part, as it is kind a new challenge every day. You are not just stuck going to left field and taking 25 fly balls.

It is kind of refreshing knowing that you are not always going out to the same patch of grass or dirt everyday.

I need work everywhere, but at times I think catching and other times third base are my best positions.

I played third base for a month this year and I thought I did very well considering the fact I had not played there in two years.

I think if I was to stick to a position I can do well since you are getting all your reps there."

If Gimenez had a primary position at the moment, it would have to be catcher. That is the position he played the most this year, and is the position he was converted to back in 2005.

It is still a work in progress for him as he never really played much catcher in high school or college, but he is coming along well with the transition to a new and very challenging position.

"I caught a little bit in high school," said Gimenez. "I caught my sophomore and junior year in high school, and didn't play my senior year because I was hurt.

I learned the basics of it in high school, and I never really caught in college aside from catching

bullpens as a freshman.

I was an outfielder, and never really got back to catching until I got into pro ball.

I worked with Armando Camacaro (veteran catcher in the Indians farm system), and he has helped with the mechanics and other things.

And, when you are catching you are more into the game than you are in when you play, say, left field."

Earlier this year, after a very good showing the first few months of the season in Kinston, Gimenez was promoted to Double-A Akron on June 29th. Gimenez got off to a blistering start in Akron, homering and doubling in his first game and also winning the Eastern League Player of the Week Award for the week of 7/16.

But, after that hot start, Gimenez cooled quickly.

Gimenez ended up being sent back to Kinston on August 6th, and the fizzling performance his last few weeks in Akron was a result of him pressing and trying to do too much.

"Honestly, I think it was me trying to do too much and getting out of my gameplan a little bit," said Gimenez. "It is kind of like in Kinston where you play teams so many times, and they start to get the book on you. And you have to make adjustments, and I was just getting out of my gameplan.

I would have probably walked a million times because they barely threw me any strikes, but I would just swing at them because I was struggling and pressing and trying to do a little more than I should have been doing.

It kind of just snowballed on me, and hopefully next year I will get a chance to go back up there (Akron) and prove myself and turn things around."

According to Gimenez, one of the more noticeable differences in going from advanced Single-A to Double-A is obviously the pitching. Pitchers have better command of their pitches to where they really will throw almost anything in any count. Also, the game is just a bit quicker and the players much sharper.

"It really is different," noted Gimenez. "The game is still the same as it is still baseball, but it is definitely a little quicker. G uys are a little sharper in Double-A than they are in [Single-A].

Defensively, it seems like the [outfield] gaps shrink as you go up.

The biggest difference for me is guys not throwing a straight fastball as everybody has a cutter or sinker where at Kinston you really only run into one or two guys who have that but really no one can control it.

Up there [in Akron] they will throw you a 3-0 slider, and up there they can throw two pitches for strikes.

That was the biggest thing for me, is in advantage counts you look for a fastball at Kinston where there you may have to sit offspeed because that is probably what you are going to get.

The strike zone shrinks a little bit and guys tighten up their game."

Gimenez has taken note of how once you get to Double-A, anything can happen. With guys like Aaron Laffey, Jensen Lewis and Asdrubal Cabrera starting this year in Akron and now major components of the Cleveland Indians roster, a lot of players now view Akron as a springboard to the majors.

While Triple-A Buffalo is the highest stop on the minor league ladder, it also is more of a holding ground for leftovers from the major league team.

Double-A Akron is arguably the last true stop and major hurdle in the system for players to get past to get to the big show.

"That's the thing, you never know," said Gimenez. "In our organization you are really one step away when you get to Akron.

They do mostly take guys from Buffalo, but Akron is always a very prospect oriented team.

The best thing about it is you are facing a lot of guys with big league time or working their way back up."

One of the players Gimenez had a chance to play with at Akron this year that found their way to Cleveland was shortstop Asdrubal Cabrera. Gimenez was impressed with Cabrera's abilities in the field and at the plate, but even more so with Cabrera's confidence and the way he carried himself.

"It was amazing playing next to him," said Gimenez, who mostly played third base at Akron next to Cabrera. "He would say things to help me out. We'd play a fielding game everyday during batting practice, and if you made an error during batting practice you would lose because he is not going to make one.

Honestly, that helped me out a ton just getting better working on groundballs with my footwork and making perfect throws.

He is very intense when he does it, and has a good head on his shoulders."

Over the course of the season, Gimenez worked on many things at the plate to try and improve as a hitter. One of the things he worked on all year was trying to get himself to consistently swing down and through the ball to create backspin on the ball so it carries more.

"For me the biggest thing is I have a tendency to get the bat in the right position and then as soon as I get there I don't follow my swing path as I will cut it off and rotate my shoulders instead of staying down through the ball," said Gimenez. "So, I pull off on a lot of stuff because of it and I don't get that true backspin like I was getting at the beginning of the year. I was backspinning balls like crazy to right-center and left-center field.

For me, that is where I need to stay as for me to be successful I need to stay in the middle of the field.

I get a lot of topspin on my balls, so I need to get there and stay down through the ball as that is what creates that friction off the bat and backspin.

Really, just working on throwing the barrel at the ball because I tend to use my shoulders more than my hands.

As soon as I started using my hands balls just started jumping everywhere."

Gimenez credits a lot of his success this year and the improvements he has made as a hitter to Kinston Hitting Coach Jon Nunnally. As I mentioned in a previous article , the players in Kinston really respect Nunnally and the rapport he has with them is amazing, especially considering this is only his second year as a coach with the Indians.

Nunnally's upfront style has certainly won the players over.

"Nunnally has done an amazing job," said Gimenez. "He is by far the best hitting coach I have ever had in my life, bar none.

He says things that just sticks with you.

Best part is he is honest where he won't let you get away with things where other guys will say 'yeah, that was a good swing', where he will say 'no, that was not a good swing' or 'you can do better than that.'

He really keeps you on your toes, and to me you need that from a hitting coach because you don't need guys telling you it was a good swing when in reality it wasn't.

Then you start training yourself thinking it was a good swing so you are going to swing like that every time when in reality you are doing it wrong.

Learning what I have learned from him this year has helped me a ton."

With the season over, Gimenez is able to get some much needed rest before he gets started playing in the Arizona Fall League this October. Looking back on the season though, Gimenez knows he made some noise and will force the Indians to make a roster decision on him this offseason since he is eligible for the Rule 5 Draft.

With his versatility and power, a team may just take a shot at drafting him if the Indians leave him unprotected.

But, considering Gimenez's makeup, power and versatility, chances are he will be sticking in the Indians system for awhile.