As the Indians embark on their 60th attempt to win a World Series since their last title in 1948, they enter the 2008 season as strong as ever to make a run at a that elusive championship. While the Indians are involved in another pennant chase this year there will be times when the Indians will need to turn to their farm system. And today, Tony looks at the guys that they will likely look to.

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Last year, the Indians had some bouts with the injury bug. Pitchers like Cliff Lee, Jake Westbrook, and Aaron Fultz all missed considerable time early in the year due to injury. Position players Trot Nixon and David Dellucci missed a lot of time due to injury as well. On top of all that, others like Roberto Hernandez, Josh Barfield, Andy Marte and Jason Davis did not perform up to expectations.

The Indians filled the holes that these injuries and performance issues created by calling from their rich talent pool in the farm system with the likes of Fausto Carmona, Rafael Perez, Jensen Lewis, Asdrubal Cabrera, Franklin Gutierrez, Ben Francisco, and Aaron Laffey. All of those players made a considerable impact on the Indians' season last year, and it is safe to say without their contributions the Indians would not have made the playoffs last year and had another disappointing season much like 2006.

The likelihood of the Indians getting such a lift from the farm system for a second year in a row is an arduous task and a tough act to follow for the prospects in the Indians system. The

system has been thinned out some with the graduation of so many prospects the last few years, and most of the prospects that will help this year will be ones who helped last year. That said, there still are some new players in the system who could help make an impact in 2008 like those in 2007 did. A few of the players we saw last year, while others may be seen for the first time.

The hope is that the Indians will not need to turn to their farm system for help, but injuries and performance issues always crop up during a season for every team. Knowing that, the Indians need depth alternatives to turn to in Buffalo and Akron for short-term help when a regular is nicked up, or for long-term help in the unfortunate case where a regular is lost for a majority of the season.

This is not a list of the Top 10 Prospects in the system, as we covered that with the recent Top 50 Prospects+ series
a month back. This list is more focused on the prospects that are likely to see action in Cleveland sometime this year AND make some type of impact. Seeing that the Indians two biggest holes are in left field and the bullpen, most of the opportunities afforded to young players will likely be in these two areas. Here they are from most likely (#1) to least likely (#10):

(For a more in depth scouting report on each player, click on their linked name)

1. Jensen Lewis , RHP - Lewis is an aggressive reliever who consistently gets his fastball up there around 93-94 MPH, and he compliments it with a devastating changeup. He is an intelligent pitcher, has excellent command, and great composure on the mound. This is really a no-brainer having Lewis at #1. While he spent two months plus the entire postseason with the Indians last year, he still qualifies as a rookie and as a prospect because he has not passed the 50 innings pitched threshold. He was dominant in his short stint with the Indians last year, posting a 2.15 ERA, 1.23 WHIP, 3.40 BB/9 and 10.35 K/9 in 29.1 regular season innings. He was the final piece of the puzzle needed to round out the backend of the bullpen, and if he can avoid a sophomore slump like Fernando Cabrera had after a breakthrough late-season performance in 2005, having Lewis around in the bullpen for all of 2008 will mean big things for the Indians this year. Lewis is the one sure prospect - barring injury - that will open with the Indians this year.

2. Aaron Laffey , LHP - Laffey is one of the most confident pitchers in the system, as he trusts

his stuff and goes right after hitters. His 87-88 MPH fastball is not overpowering, but it he has excellent command of it and it has excellent movement with good sink, and he throws a good slurvy breaking ball and changeup. Laffey is another no-brainer, as he looks to be in line for considerable time this season in the starting rotation. Like Lewis, Laffey is still considered a rookie and prospect because he has not pitched 50 innings (just missed the cut at 49.1 IP). Laffey is in the mix to be the Indians fifth starter when the season starts, and even if he does not break camp as the fifth starter he figures to get plenty of action throughout the season. Laffey pitched well in his Indians debut last year going 4-2 with a 4.56 ERA in nine starts, and was very impressive in his one appearance in the postseason (4.2 IP, 0.00 ERA, 1 H, 1 BB, 3 K) when he shut down a Boston Red Sox offense that no one else on the pitching staff seemed capable of shutting down.

3. Ben Francisco , OF - Francisco will be in a holding pattern in Buffalo, going there for the fourth straight season, and will await an opportunity with the major league club. He hits for average (two minor league batting titles) and he has very good extra base hit ability. He is a versatile defender who can play all three outfield positions, and he has good speed that is helped by his very good instincts in the field and on the basepaths. Like Lewis and Laffey, Francisco is another big contributor in 2007 that the Indians will turn to again in the minors when a need arises this year. Francisco will likely be the first outfielder called upon in the event an injury befalls any of the four outfielders in Cleveland, and he has proven he can more than hold his own when called upon (.274 AVG, 3 HR, 12 RBI, .803 OPS in 62 AB in Cleveland last year). A good case could be made that he should be on the team already as the fourth outfielder, but the presence of Jason Michaels denies him of this role at least to start the season.

4. Adam Miller , RHP - Miller has been the Indians top prospect in what seems like forever. He is extremely confident, attacks hitters, and throws a blazing four-seam fastball that consistently clocks around 97 MPH and tops out at 100 MPH. He compliments his four-seamer with a good two-seam fastball, a nasty wipeout slider, and a changeup which has come a long way. Miller is the first-timer who is likely to debut and impact this team the most this season. While Miller will not break camp with the Indians in the bullpen or as a starter, if he maintains his health he could be in line for a callup by June. If the Indians continue to have issues with the fifth starter spot he could be called to fill that role, but it is more likely he will break in as a reliever sometime this season. The Indians are open to the idea of using him in the short-team out of the bullpen as a meaningful reliever (i.e. not collecting dust as the long man) this season

to get him to the big leagues, and his blazing fastball, command and toughness could dominate in such a role.

5. Jeff Stevens , RHP - Stevens had a breakthrough year last season in the minors, and in 61 combined games between High-A Kinston, Double-A Akron, the Arizona Fall League and Team USA, Stevens went 6-3 with 5 saves and a 2.45 ERA, and in 95.1 innings allowed only 63 hits and walked 26 while striking out 113. Formerly known as "the nobody that the Indians got for Brandon Phillips", Stevens moved to the bullpen last year and has carved his way through the Indians system where he is now on the verge of a major league opportunity sometime this season. He throws four quality pitches and commands them well, fronted by a Rafael Betancourt-like fastball that sits around 93 MPH and tops out at 95, and shows life and gets in on batters. Stevens is the pure reliever in the minors who looks to have the best shot at making the club at some point this year, and could be another Jensen Lewis who moves through the system quickly after moving to the bullpen.

6. Trevor Crowe , OF - Crowe has the ability to hit for average with some occasional pop, and he can play any outfield position and runs well. His biggest strength is his excellent plate discipline and pitch recognition skills. Even after a disappointing season last year where he hit .259 with 5 HR, 50 RBI, 28 SB and a .694 OPS in 133 at Double-A Akron, he still is in line for a potential spot in the Indians outfield sometime this year. His outstanding second half of the season last year (.310 AVG, .838 OPS) along with a very good showing in the Arizona Fall League (.286 AVG, .864 OPS) have many believing he is over the problems that plagued him mentally the first half of last season when he hit .212 up until July 1st. He is still earmarked for the left field job in 2009, and it is likely that the Indians will want to get an extended look at him in Cleveland sometime late this year, especially if his second half showing last year carries over into the start of this season. Crowe would bring some much needed speed and athleticism to the Indians lineup, and he also handles the bat well which is the perfect medicine for a strikeout prone lineup.

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