Great, great stuff from Tony down in Florida this morning in his latest Winter Haven Notebook. He's got updates on the progress of some key Indians prospects. Video that he's shot this week of some of them in action. Lists of which players are practicing with each of the teams' minor league affiliates. And all kinds of other notes, news, and rumors about our beloved Indians as he watches them prep for the season down in sunny Florida.

Undrafted Stiller Now An Established Prospect

What a difference a year makes.

At this time last year, right-hander Erik Stiller was doing everything he could in spring training to stick with the organization and had no idea what his baseball future had in store for him. Being an undrafted free agent signing in June 2006, the Indians had little invested in him so Stiller had to work twice as hard as just about anyone to extend his stay in the Indians organization.

Stiller had a good camp last year, remained in extended spring training and waited for an opportunity, and finally got it when he was called up to Kinston at the end of May last year. Still er ended up having a very good season in Kinston, pitching the first few months out of the bullpen and the last month or so in the starting rotation going 3-6 with a 2.89 ERA with a 7.08 K/9 and 1.88 BB/9.

After his strong showing, the Indians sent him to their Fall Development Program for more instruction and then out to the Hawaii Winter League to get more innings and work in as a starter.

His hard work has paid off, and he is now firmly established as one of the Indians better pitching prospects in their farm system. As a result, camp has been a lot more fun and much less nerve-wracking compared to what he went through last year.

"I feel good and strong, and it has been a fun spring training so far," said Stiller after practice on Wednesday. "[I am a lot more] comfortable with what is happening here and

familiar with everything."

Stiller has spent a lot of time trying to improve his overall physical strength, and came to camp about ten pounds bigger this year even though he is listed as 6'5" and 200 pounds in the media guide but looks a lot bigger than that. Stiller throws a fastball that clocks in the low 90s and tops out at 94 MPH, and he also throws a cutter, curveball, and changeup.

Stiller's best secondary pitch is actually his changeup, but he rarely used it last year because he pitched out of the bullpen most of the season. He went to the Hawaii Winter League in the offseason to dust the cobwebs off it and to refine the pitch as well as get more work in as a starter.

Stiller knows he has really no control over where the Indians assign him, so he knows all he can control is how hard he works to improve in some of the areas where he has lacked consistency.

One of the biggest things he is working on is consistently getting his fastball down in the zone.

"I'm still focusing on fastball command down in the zone and working on my changeup," said Stiller. "Those came along pretty well in Hawaii and I feel pretty well about the progress out there. But I am still trying to feel comfortable with that, as it always helps to work on getting your fastball down.

With his height at 6'5" it helps him get on top of hitters and his ball moving on a downward plane, but his over the top delivery can leave very little room for error with his release point.

"I throw very over the top and so I do not get a ton of left and right movement on my fastball, my movement has to be downhill," said Stiller. "So, when you are coming up from the top trying to get it downhill it is all on the release point as far as where it ends up going. You don't have the same room for error as when you sling it from the side where the error can be left to right but the height difference is not changing much.

Mine comes straight over the top so the margin for error is pretty small."

Based on the routine he is on right now in camp, it looks like he will start the season in the bullpen. The only question is where. The Indians have accumulated so many starting pitchers in the upper levels of their farm system that many pitchers in Akron and Kinston will be pitching out of the bullpen when they otherwise would be a starter.

Right now, it really is a flip of the coin when trying to figure out if Stiller will start the season at Double-A Akron or advanced Single-A Kinston.

Finocchi Stays Positive, Looks To Return In June

McFarland Ready To Go

The Indians selected McFarland in the fourth round of the 2007 Draft out of high school. While he showed great potential late in his senior year at high school by showcasing a low 90s fastball that topped out at 94 MPH and the makings of a good breaking ball, he did not pitch an inning for the Indians last season.

The reason McFarland did not throw was because he complained of some elbow soreness when he signed, and the Indians felt it best to be extremely cautious with their new prized top draft pick. McFarland said the soreness was the result of throwing too many innings in high school, and called it a "less severe tendonitis."

"I didn't throw right away [when I signed]," said McFarland. "The Indians and I felt it best to take a conservative route to everything.

There was a little problem with soreness in the elbow, but that is all gone now.

I rehabbed from August all through instructs, and this whole offseason I built it back up to 100%."

McFarland is good to go, and is participating in his first spring training camp. On Monday, he pitched a few innings in a Mahoning Valley scrimmage against a USA free agent team (WFast) and is scheduled to throw again on Saturday.

This being his first experience pitching in games, the main focus for McFarland right now is adjusting to the professional game where as a starter he follows a normal five day routine. Whe n camp breaks, he is expected to stick around in extended spring training to continue this adjustment before he makes his professional debut later in the summer for Mahoning Valley or the Gulf Coast League Indians.

"I think going to extended spring training would be a great thing," said McFarland. "I need to develop a five day routine.

It is up to me basically in how I do."

In addition to his fastball and slider, McFarland also throws a changeup. His fastball is usually more of a two-seamer so he gets more drop on the pitch, and the pitch he tends to rely on the most when he needs a strike is his slider.

He will continue refining these pitches over the course of the season, and also work on several other areas of his game.

"I am just trying to work on commanding the zone," said McFarland. "Also, commanding my fastball in and out, my mechanics, and repeating my delivery."

(Here is a video in camp of McFarland in action)

Notebook

- Here is a listing of players practicing in each camp. This is not an all-inclusive list as I may have missed a few players, especially for Lake County.

Also, it should be noted that some players are playing up a level or two because some minor leaguers are still with the big league club.

For example, Aaron Herr and Danny Sandoval are still with the Indians but most likely will be the starting left side of the Buffalo infield, so while they are out Wes Hodges and Josh Rodriguez have been playing up a level.

Buffalo (AAA): Adam Miller (RHP), Sean Smith (RHP), Bubbie Buzachero (RHP), Ryan Goleski (OF), Ryan Mulhern (1B), Jose Constanza (OF), Nick Pesco (RHP), Scott Roehl (RHP), J.D. Martin (RHP), Michael Aubrey (1B), Danny Chaves (2B), Wes Hodges (3B), Stephen Head (OF), Jordan Brown (1B), Scott Lewis (LHP), Randy Newsom (RHP), Josh Rodriguez (SS), Nathan Panther (OF), Reid Santos (LHP), Trevor Crowe (OF), Jason Cooper (OF), Wyatt Toregas (C), Brandon Pinckney (SS), Brian Slocum (RHP), T.J. Burton (RHP).

Akron (AA): Lucas Montero (OF), Brian Finegan (SS/2B), Osiel Flores (C), Luis Valdez (RHP), Carlos Rivero (SS), John Drennen (OF), Shawn Nottingham (LHP), Mike Butia (OF), Todd Martin (1B), Jason Denham (OF), Erik Stiller (RHP), Matt Meyer (LHP), Sung-Wei Tseng (RHP), Kevin Dixon (RHP), Kyle Collina (RHP), Jim Deters (RHP), Chris Niesel (RHP), Neil Wagner (RHP), Chuck Lofgren (LHP), David Huff (LHP), Jorge Riera (RHP), Niuman Romero (IF), Chris De La Cruz (IF).

Kinston (A+): Dan Frega (RHP), Scott Sumner (RHP), Steven Wright (RHP), Austin Creps (RHP), Heath Taylor (LHP), Josh Judy (RHP), Paolo Espino (RHP), Jeanmar Gomez (RHP), Hector Rondon (RHP), Jonathan Holt (RHP), Josh Tomlin (RHP), Mike Eisenberg (RHP), Nick Weglarz (OF), Roman Pena (OF), Cirilo Cumberbatch (OF), Jerad Head (C), Doug Pickens (C), Matt Willard (SS), Dustin Realini (1B), Jansey Infante (IF), Joanniel Montero (RHP), Jared Goedert (2B), Beau Mills (1B), David Uribes (IF), Adam Davis (2B), Mark Thompson (SS), Michael Valadez (C), Ramon Hernandez (OF), Luis Perdomo (RHP), Carlton Smith (RHP).

Lake County (A-): Adam White (OF), Robbie Alcombrack (C), Isaias Velasquez (IF), Corteze Armstrong (OF), Karexon Sanchez (IF), Alex Castillo (C), Jay Nilsson (C), Rafael Vera (IF), Daryl King (OF), Cristo Arnal (IF), Jeff Hehr (3B), Ronald Rivas (SS), Chris Nash (1B), Matt Brown (OF), Jason Smit (IF), Bo Greenwell (OF), Brock Simpson (OF), Justin Jenkins (OF), Brian Juhl (C).

- The GCL pitching staff looks like it will mostly be comprised of the following pitchers who were all working out together yesterday: Chris Jones (LHP), T.J. McFarland (LHP), Joey Mahalic (RHP), P.J. Zocchi (RHP), Danny Salazar (RHP), Franklin Soto (RHP), Mark Rodrigues (LHP), Sandy Mendes (RHP), Anillins Martinez (RHP), Wilfredo Ramirez (LHP), Jose Urena (LHP), Alexander Perez (RHP), and Jose Jimenez (RHP).

- It rained early yesterday morning, which resulted in all the games with the Detroit farm teams being cancelled. Also, all morning minor league practices were cancelled except for the pitchers going out to stretch and get some throwing in, and several pitchers like Chuck Lofgren, Reid Santos, Paolo Espino, Kelvin De La Cruz and others had bullpen sessions.

Later in the afternoon, the Indians held several intrasquad games.

In the Buffalo and Akron game, right-hander Adam Miller made his spring debut and pitched two scoreless innings while giving up one hit and striking out one.

Some other highlights on the day had outfielder Trevor Crowe going 2-for-4 with two RBI for Buffalo and right-hander Jeanmar Gomez threw four shutout innings and allowed only two hits

while striking out four for Kinston.

- There was some excitement and buzz around camp yesterday on the Triple-A field about two hours before the Indians game against Tampa. All of the Indians top brass in scouting were on hand as Director of Scouting John Mirabelli, Director of Latin Operations Lino Diaz, guest catching instructor Einar Diaz, minor league catching coordinator Tim Laker and others were all on hand as they worked out 17-year old free agent catcher Orlando Petit.

Petit is working out for several teams, and worked out for the Indians for about 20 minutes yesterday in taking about five minutes worth of cuts in the cages and then another 10-15 minutes in the outfield throwing long toss.

Petit looked very old for his age and had good size, and he hit left-handed.

- Second baseman Jared Goedert has been out of action the past few days. Today, I saw him working out with a trainer, so it appears he is being limited with an unknown injury.

I'll try to confirm what and how serious it is (does not appear to be), but it is possible his chronic left shoulder problems may have resurfaced some in camp.

Goedert looks strong and is one of the best hitters in the system.

- Also on the injury front, Chris Nash, Jason Smit, and Matt Brown sat out of action on Wednesday with various injuries. Brown is expected to get clearance to return to action in the next day or so from an undisclosed injury, and Nash is mending well from a strained muscle in his right upper rib cage area. Smit is expected to be out another week or so with a bad shoulder.

He hurt it throwing and heard a pop, but the injury was not as bad as originally thought when it happened.

- I caught left-hander Tony Sipp in the middle of his rehab routine. He is progressing well from his return from Tommy John surgery and slated for a late June or early July return.

Check out this
video of him
doing some rigorous exercises to build up the strength in his arm, which went on for 20 minutes or so.

- Watched some more of young Latin third baseman Abner Abreu on Wednesday morning. He definitely has a lot of room for growth physically and as a player, but he already looks like he could be a star in the making.

He displays some real soft hands and good range at third base, and has held his own at the plate.

Here is a video of
him taking infield
.

- Beau Mills is expected to split time at first base and third base at Kinston this year. He will rotate between the two positions by playing about a week straight at first base then about a week straight at third base and keep revolving with the same rotation.

The Indians still are not ruling out third base for Mills, and hope that by the end of this season they can settle on a position for him.

- Several players had to sit through a two hour presentation by baseball on steroid use Sunday night.

- J.D. Martin may end up being converted into a reliever.

- I have a ton of great pictures I have taken over the last week, and will be posting them soon. I plan to do an update with just pictures over the weekend.

If there is a player you specifically would like to see pictures of, e-mail me at
tlastoria@gmail.com
and I will see what I can do.

Chances are I already have them, and would be more than happy to forward them to you.

I have already done this for a ton of family members of players, so don't be afraid to ask.

Today, regular games should pick back up again as the weather should be a lot better. The Triple-A and Double-A squads will be in Winter Haven while the Single-A squads will hit the road and play the Houston farm teams in Kissimmee.

I'll be down there all day again today with another full report tomorrow with news and notes as well as more player interviews.