These daily reports live from Winter Haven that Tony's been doing have been fantastic. T is spending six or seven hours a day watching the action, snapping pictures, shooting video, and taking notes. Reading his daily accounts almost make it like being there, and he has another fantastic installment today. It's Tony, live from spring training ... it's The Winter Haven Notebook.

Sipp Right On Schedule

Indians left-handed pitching prospect Tony Sipp is right on schedule in his return from Tommy John surgery last July.

Sipp threw a bullpen session yesterday where he threw 60 pitches total, with one set of 30 pitches then a five minute break and then another set of 30 pitches. He threw all fastballs and changeups in the 60-pitch session.

Yesterday was a key day as he also pitched off flat ground and threw his first sliders since the surgery.

The idea of throwing the sliders on flat ground before using them off the mound is to get the feel for the pitch first and then transfer it over to the bullpen.

It will probably be another two weeks before Sipp starts throwing sliders in the bullpen.

"Right now I still have a long way to go to get comfortable with the slider," said Sipp at the end of practice. "Today it did not feel as comfortable, but it is my first time throwing it. They said I have five weeks to work on throwing it so it is no big rush right now."

Yes, right now the Indians have no plans of trying to push Sipp's rehab to rush him back. The timeline has always been to get him back into game action on a rehab assignment by late June or early July, and then have him pitch unrestricted by the end of July.

And, to date, he is still right on course.

The Indians selected Sipp in the 45th round of the 2004 Draft out of Clemson University, and the pick was a gamble by the Indians as Sipp had only pitched in 22 career college games and many felt he would be too costly to sign. But, the Indians found a diamond in the rough and he has impressed over his short minor league career posting a 2.75 ERA in 74 games (31 starts) and an excellent 11.66 K/9.

Sipp is a power-armed pitcher with big-time stuff fronted by a plus fastball and plus-plus slider that both grade out as out pitches at the major league level. His fastball has good movement and consistently sits in the 91-94 MPH range, although his quick arm action and excellent deception makes it look a lot faster. He also is still developing a changeup and has a good feel for it, and even after only over a year of using it the Indians feel it may end up being his best pitch.

The Indians love his potential as a late inning reliever down the road, and had invited him to major league camp last year as a non-roster player. He performed well, and it was believed he had established himself enough where he could become a bullpen option as soon as midseason, but that all changed once he was reassigned to minor league camp with two weeks to go in spring training last year. On the first day he reported to minor league camp, he pitched in a game and ended up hurting his arm.

"I hurt my arm in my first game when I got sent back down," said Sipp. "I had to actually walk off in the middle of the inning."

Sipp experienced discomfort in his left elbow in that start, and the Indians took the precautionary route and shut him down with a sore elbow. After a few days, Sipp was diagnosed with an ulnar collateral ligament sprain and it was serious enough where it shut him down for half the season where the Indians would re-evaluate him after the All Star break.

In July, after Sipp started his throwing program he had a setback in his recovery from the injury where he experienced some pain in the elbow again.
The Indians ended up sending him to Dr. James Andrews, and Sipp had to undergo Tommy John surgery.

"The downtime went really well until I re-injured it on July 7th," said Sipp. "I knew once I did it I had to have surgery a few days later.

I was almost ready.

I was throwing my final bullpen for me to actually get back into games and start competing again.

I re-injured it that last day, as they had said they were sending me to Akron or Buffalo the next day."

While Sipp is recovering well, unfortunately his 2008 season will be more about rebuilding arm strength and staying healthy, so his appearances and innings will be limited this year. Dreams of a major league debut seemed quite possible sometime in 2007 before he hurt his arm, but now those dreams appear to have been pushed back to sometime in 2009.

"It pushed me back," said Sipp. "But, as far as trying to predict where I could have been anything could of happened. Something worse could of happened if this injury hadn't.

It's all in how you look at it.

The way I look at it is I have a lot of downtime now.

Right now I am using it to learn about my body and getting used to the first steps of baseball all over again.

Just throwing, when your body needs to rest, and when you need to ramp it up.

It's just everything all over again."

Sipp has been down for about a year now, as he recently passed the one year anniversary when the injury first came about. Since then, it has been all rehab and tests the past 365 days, and very little throwing and no game action. However, throughout the entire rehab process Sipp has kept a positive mindset.

"It's definitely like Groundhog's Day," said Sipp. "But, it's about the little things you do. Like me throwing the slider today. If you don't get pumped up for little things, then you are going to be miserable.

Every little thing I do and every new exercise they bump in there it helps me out because it's all I got right now."

Sipp has the right outlook, and his makeup as a person and pitcher is one of the reasons the Indians have always been so high on him. Barring any setbacks, it appears all of Sipp's hard work and his lengthy rehab will pay off in about three months when he gets clearance to start a rehab assignment and play in some games.

"I have been feeling good, things have been going well, and it is just a matter of seeing when they want to let me go and release me to do activity," said Sipp. "Until then I'll just be sitting here with my hands in my pocket."

(Watch Sipp's bullpen session here and here .)

Notebook

- Akron and Buffalo were in action at Winter Haven yesterday. The Buffalo lineup was littered with several players from the major league squad sent down to get some at bats as Andy Marte (3B) and Jamey Carroll (LF) played the entire game.

Also, non-roster pitchers Matt Ginter and Rick Bauer pitched.

In the Akron game, they had what looked like will be their regular everyday lineup to start the season: Chris Gimenez (C), Michael Aubrey (1B), Brian Finegan (2B), Josh Rodriguez (SS), Wes Hodges (3B), John Drennen (LF), Jose Constanza (CF), and Lucas Montero (RF).

Montero is likely not with Akron to start the season, as the right field spot will go to Cirilo Cumberbatch who was off yesterday.

- Looks like this will be the starting rotation in Buffalo: Adam Miller, Jeremy Sowers, Aaron Laffey, Brian Slocum, and one of Jeff Harris, Matt Ginter or Rick Bauer.

Also, it looks like this will be the Akron rotation:

Chuck Lofgren, Scott Lewis, Shawn Nottingham, J.D. Martin, and one of David Huff, Kevin Dixon, or Ryan Edell.

Having Lofgren and Lewis return to Akron is a direct result of the depth the Indians have in front of them at Buffalo.

Still, they should see meaningful innings at Buffalo this season.

- Like Lofgren and Lewis, it looks like Michael Aubrey and Ryan Goleski will be pushed back to Akron because of the depth at first base and outfield at Buffalo. Aubrey is all but certain to start the year in Akron as the regular first baseman, and because of the outfield situation in Buffalo where Trevor Crowe, Ben Francisco, and Brad Snyder will be the regulars, Goleski will once again be the odd man out and have to start the year in Akron.

- Outfielder Jose Constanza left the Akron game late yesterday with an apparent injury to his right hip or rib cage area. No word on the extent of the injury or how serious it is, but he had to be walked off the field in the middle of the inning.

- Infielder Jared Goedert was back in action yesterday, and played third base for Akron.

- There had been some talk that Shawn Nottingham would be moved to the bullpen this year, but right now the plan is to keep him as a starter.

- Here are some videos of several players in action during camp (click on the hyperlink to view

the video): Delvi Cid , Abner Abreu (hitting) , Ryan Mulhern , Jason Denham , Carlos Rivero ,

Wyatt Toregas
,
Todd Martin
,
Bubbie Buzachero
,
John Gaub
,
Mark Rodrigues
,
Chris Niesel
,
Matt Meyer
, and
Stephen Head
.

- Players are stuck in the dog days of spring training right now. Everyday they get to the field first thing in the morning, are out stretching by 8:30am and run the same drills, take batting practice, shag fly balls, and play games until about 3:00-4:00pm every day.

It does not leave a lot of free time to do other stuff outside of baseball as the players are usually pretty exhausted from their workouts or games and also from being out in the sun all day. Players tend to go back to the hotel and sit around and relax, go out and find some dinner, go catch a movie, read books, or play video games.

Anything to take their minds off baseball for a few hours.

I'll be back down at the fields again today all day, my seventh day in a row of watching these guys for six to seven hours from 8:30am to 4:00pm everyday. I'm the only one watching these guys everyday, and this is the only place where you will get a firsthand look and report of what was seen rather than some of the other news sites and newspapers that only regurgitate what has been forwarded to them in a report.

I'm here for three more days, and when I return home late next week I will likely post a "Winter Haven Photo Gallery" that will be chock full of many of the pictures I have taken of players in camp. Also, as I have mentioned previously, if there are specific players you would like to get a firsthand report on or just some pictures, let me know and I will make it a point to search them out to watch them and maybe snap a picture or two.