Much to the dismay of Indians fans, Brandon Phillips has gone on to become a star in Cincinnati after the very controversial trade that saw the Indians deal him to the Queen City just before the start of the 2006 season. In exchange, the Indians recieved a pitching prospect named Jeff Stevens, who was light years away from being major league ready at the time of the deal. Stevens has since emerged into one of the Indians top pitching prospects. And our Tony Lastoria had a chance to talk with him this past weekend.

Prior to last year, the Indians had a lot of problems with developing relievers in their minor league system. While players at nearly every position had established themselves at the major league level, for various reasons the Indians went into last season without having developed an impact reliever in the five years since "The Plan" was consummated in June 2002.

That all changed quickly after several young relievers put up great seasons last year for the Indians at the big league and minor league level.

Most fans know the impact that left-hander Rafael Perez and right-hander Jensen Lewis had for the Indians last season. The emergence of Perez and Lewis were two big reasons the Indians bullpen solidified itself and the Indians were able to make the playoffs.

But, in addition to those two, several other relievers established themselves last year. What was once an organizational weakness now appears to be a strength.

One reliever in particular who broke through last year was right-hander Jeff Stevens.

Stevens was moved from the starting rotation to the bullpen last year, and the move jumpstarted his career. He started off in advanced Single-A Kinston with a bang, where

through May 10th he had pitched 25 innings and only had a 0.72 ERA, 0.48 WHIP and we averaging more than a strikeout an inning.

He was dominating and just blowing hitters away, and finished the year 6-3 with a 2.81 ERA, 1.00 WHIP, and 11.02 K/9 in 49 combined appearances at Kinston and Double-A Akron.

"I just went out there and it was going really well at the time for me," recalled Stevens in an interview last weekend. "I think knowing you are going in for one inning and you can pitch however you want because chances are you are not going to face those hitters again that night. You don't have to hold anything back against them and can show them any pitch you want whenever and not really worry about facing them a second time through."

Stevens throws four quality pitches and commands them well. His fastball has some life to it, where now that he is in the bullpen his velocity has increased from about 91-92 MPH to 93-94 MPH. His secondary stuff is very good, lead by a breaking ball that has improved a lot and been described as having the drop and movement of a "whiffle ball".

He is a strike-thrower and goes right after hitters, and has the makings of a good backend reliever.

"My velocity jumped up a little bit in the bullpen," said Stevens. "When I was a starter up in Lake County I would get up to 91-92 MPH.

In the bullpen I think it just went up because like I said you don't have to hold back.

You can go out and give max effort and give everything you got for those 15, 20 or 25 pitches you are going to throw."

Stevens has certainly found his calling as a reliever. While he has been a starter for most of his professional career, he has had some experience in college and in the pros pitching out of the bullpen.

"In college I threw a little bit of mid-week relief," said Stevens. "In college they throw you as much as they want.

My sophomore year I would close on Friday's and start on Sunday's.

I had some relief work, and when I was in Dayton with the Reds before I got traded I was kind of off and on in the bullpen.

But mostly I have been a starter.

This past year was the first time I was a full time reliever all year."

The permanent change from a starter to a reliever is something Stevens accepts and is excited about. As a reliever, he now has a chance to pitch any night and is more involved game to game rather than just starting every fifth day when he pitched out of the starting rotation.

"I like it," says Stevens. "It is nice knowing you have a chance to pitch every night. There are certain nights when you know you are not going to pitch after throwing two days in a row. For the most part you have to be ready to pitch every single night."

More importantly, the change to the bullpen added helium to his prospect status and expedited his rise in the system to where he is a legit relief option for the Indians now. He was invited to big league camp as a non-roster player, and while he only threw a couple innings in spring training games before being sent down in mid-March, his time in big league camp allowed the Indians coaching staff to get a good look at him for possible use down the road.

"I did not throw as much as I would have liked to there," said Stevens. "Being up in big league camp the biggest advantage for me was Carl Willis and Eric Wedge have heard about me pitching but never seen me before.

For me, it was only two and two thirds innings [pitched in actual games], but it gave me a chance to show them at least what kind of pitcher I was and what I can do.

They saw me throw bullpens and they saw me throw live batting practice, so they have an idea how I pitch and what I am all about."

Things have not always looked so good for Stevens. Before his breakout year last year, Stevens unfortunately had the distinction of being the player that fans will forever remember as the guy the Indians received in return from the Cincinnati Reds for second baseman Brandon Phillips before the start of the 2006 season.

Since Brandon Phillips has established himself as a perennial All-Star and 30/30 player, the Brandon Phillips Debacle is often brought up by fans in on-line message forums or over the airwaves on call-in talkshows.

Indians GM Mark Shapiro is often raked over the coals for the decision to trade Phillips, and at times the nastiness has indirectly carried over into dragging Stevens through the mud as well.

For the Indians to request Stevens be on the short list of players to choose from as compensation for Phillips, they obviously saw something they liked in him. The Reds also hated losing Stevens as they really liked him.

Stevens was drafted by Cincinnati in the 6th round of the 2005 Draft out of Loyola Marymount University, and was not formally sent to the Indians until June 13, 2006 since he was just drafted in June of 2005 and drafted players cannot be traded for a year.

Even though it has been two years since the trade, Stevens knows there is nothing he can do

but go out and pitch.

"My friends always give me a hard time at home [about the trade]," said Stevens. "An example is if Phillips hits two home runs one night I'll get a couple text messages from my friends.

I mean, you gotta take it how it is.

I did not choose to get traded, it is just the way the business works. My answer to that always is I will always go wherever I can and do the best I can."

Stevens will likely open the season at Akron because of so many pitchers from big league camp being assigned to Buffalo. The two pitchers who most likely will push him to Akron are Tom Mastny and Scott Elarton as both expected to pitch out of the Buffalo bullpen to start the season.

"They told me probably Buffalo, but it depends who comes down and goes where and who makes the major league team," said Stevens. "I'll go wherever, Akron or Buffalo. I don't mind."

No matter where he starts the season, he has a good chance to end the season in Cleveland.

Notes

I was on my way back to northeast Ohio on Monday so was unable to report this, but the following players were released on Monday morning: Luis Valdez, Dan Frega, Scott Sumner, David Uribes, Mike Eisenberg, Alan Brech, Kyle Collina, and Kyle Harper. There were possibly a few more, and if I find out I will post them on my blog at http://indianstopprospects.blogspot.com/ . Also, as a reminder, James Brettl and Cody Bunkelman were released about a week ago.

I'll also have a photo gallery up sometime in the next few days chock full of photos from my week+ stay in Winter Havem, plus I will include tons of new video footage. And, next week I will be doing full in-depth team previews for Buffalo, Akron, Kinston, and Lake County.