Today is Opening Day for Minor League Baseball, and with it brings another exciting season of following the Indians affiliates as a team as well as the individual development of the players. While following the big league club takes precedence for most fans, following the highs and lows of prospects as they work their way toward their dream of being a major league baseball player is something we do better than anyone else here at the site. Tony previews the AAA Buffalo Bisons.

As a reminder, Lake County and Akron were previewed earlier this week and Kinston will be previewed tomorrow (their season opener is not until tomorrow). Also, I had planned on the first Minor Happenings of the season going up today, but due to limited news since my final Winter Haven report on Saturday, the first Minor Happenings will post next Thursday to recap the first week of the season as usual.

Today is Opening Day for Minor League Baseball, and with it brings another exciting season of following the Indians affiliates as a team as well as the individual development of the players. While following the big league club takes precedence for most fans, following the highs and lows of prospects as they work their way toward their dream of being a major league baseball player is another fun way to pass the summer.

Last year, Buffalo finished a disappointing 75-67 and just missed the playoffs the final week of the season. It was the second straight year that Buffalo missed the playoffs after making the playoffs in 2004 and 2005. The Bisons won the International League Championship in 2004, and from 2004 to 2005 had the

league's best record over that two-year span.

A lot of Buffalo's problems stemmed from a rash of injuries and also the parent club taking many of their best players throughout the season. Such is the life of a Triple-A franchise, as they are there first and foremost for the major league club to provide depth and players to use at a moments notice. With so much turnover on the roster and so many injuries, the Bisons just never could get on a roll and stay consistent all season.

With the start of this season, Buffalo looks like it will have one of its strongest and most experienced teams in a long time. Prospect fans will be disappointed in the overall makeup of the roster as it is littered with many minor league veterans near 30 years old who are still hanging around trying to get another shot at the major leagues, or their first shot. Pitchers like Matt Ginter, Rick Bauer, Scott Elarton, Rich Rundles, and Jeff Harris, and position players like Aaron Herr, Danny Sandoval, Andy Gonzalez, Jason Tyner and Yamid Haad are all players who were cast away by other organizations who have settled in Buffalo looking for a chance to continue their baseball careers and get to the big leagues. In addition, there are several veterans in the Indians minor league system still hanging on like pitcher Brian Slocum, outfielder Jason Cooper, and first baseman Ryan Mulhern.

The depth of the Indians major league team will also be on display as four major league quality players in left-handed pitcher Aaron Laffey, left-handed pitcher Jeremy Sowers, right-handed pitcher Tom Mastny, and second baseman Josh Barfield will all be integral pieces of the team in Buffalo at the outset of the season.

But, while there are a lot of minor league veterans and major league players on the roster, there are still some very good prospects to follow. Newcomers include first baseman Jordan Brown, catcher Wyatt Toregas, and left-hander Reid Santos, and the holdovers from last season include outfielder Ben Francisco, right-hander Adam Miller, right-hander Sean Smith, and outfielder Brad Snyder. Plus, many top prospects such as outfielder Trevor Crowe, first baseman Michael Aubrey, left-handed starter Chuck Lofgren, and right-handed reliever Jeff Stevens who have been roadblocked in Akron because of the veterans in Buffalo should see significant time in Buffalo this year.

Overall, outside of a few issues with some top prospects unfairly having to start the season in Akron, the Buffalo team has a good mix of prospects and veterans.

With the Indians move of their Triple-A affiliate to Columbus in 2009 all but official, the Bisons should be a strong playoff contender in what looks like a farewell season.

Minor League Affiliates

Buffalo Bisons (AAA)
Akron Aeros (AA)
Kinston Indians (High A)
Lake County Captains (Low A)
Mahoning Valley Scrappers (Short Season A)
GCL Indians (Rookie)

Buffalo Bisons Coaching Staff

Manager: Torey Lovullo
3rd season as Buffalo manager, 8th season in Indians organization

Hitting Coach: Dave Meyers
2nd season as Buffalo hitting coach, 2nd season in Indians organization

Pitching Coach: Scott Radinsky
2nd season as Buffalo pitching coach, 4th season in Indians organization

Roster & Rotation

Pitchers (12):

Rick Bauer
Scott Elarton
Matt Ginter
Jeff Harris
Aaron Laffey

Tom Mastny
Adam Miller**
Eddie Mujica
Rich Rundles
Reid Santos
Brian Slocum
Sean Smith
Jeremy Sowers

Catchers (2):
Yamid Haad
Wyatt Toregas

Infielders (6):
Josh Barfield
Jordan Brown
Andy Gonzalez
Aaron Herr
Ryan Mulhern
Danny Sandoval

Outfielders (4):
Jason Cooper
Ben Francisco
Brad Snyder
Jason Tyner

Rotation:
Aaron Laffey
Jeremy Sowers
Adam Miller**
Sean Smith
Brian Slocum

** - Matt Ginter is currently in the rotation where he will make one or two starts while Adam Miller is still inactive working on his innings progression to get up to a normal pitch count. Miller missed about two weeks of spring training because of a blister on his middle finger, so will not be ready to make his first start for a week or two.

Players to Watch

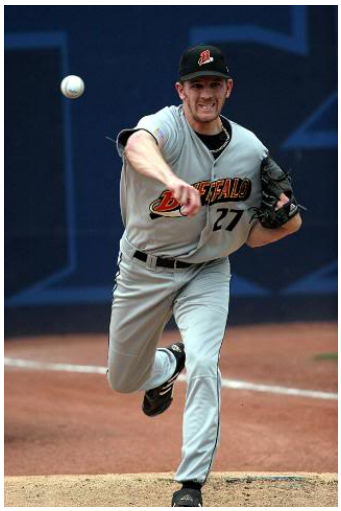
Jordan Brown - First Baseman
Age: 24 Height: 6'0" Weight: 205 Bats: Left Throws: Left

2007 Akron	.333	127	483	85
Career	.307	271	1031	171

Adam Miller - Right-handed Pitcher

Age: 23 Height: 6'4" Weight: 200 Bats: Right Throws: Right

	[redacted]	IP		
2007 Buffal	5	4	4.82	19
Career	32	24	3.61	98



Miller was drafted out of high school (TX) in the

1st round of the 2003 Draft, and had a commitment to play for the University of Arizona before signing with the Indians. Miller is an extremely confident pitcher, and aggressively attacks every hitter. His four-seam plus-plus fastball consistently clocks in at around 96-97 MPH and it has topped out as high as 101 MPH, and he also throws a two-seam fastball that bottoms out well and allows him to better change speeds on his fastball. His best pitch is his plus-plus devastating power slider that he throws in the upper 80s that has excellent tilt and shows great late break. He also throws a changeup, which has become a very good weapon for him and shows good depth. When he is on with the pitch, the development of Miller's changeup has made his fastball and slider almost un-hittable. Miller made a fine adjustment to pitching at the Triple-A level last year, but struggled with injuries. He was scratched from a scheduled start in May with a slight strain on the last digit of the middle finger on his pitching hand, and the Indians put him on

the disabled list and he was out of action for 45 days more as a precautionary move. After returning to the rotation in late June from the finger injury, Miller was shutdown for a month because of inflammation in his pitching elbow. He returned in late August and finished the year in the bullpen. Aside from the aforementioned delay in him making his first start, Miller is 100% healthy and ready to go in 2008. Miller is a legit starting pitching alternative the Indians can turn to if a need arises this season, and could even break in with the Indians as a reliever in the bullpen.

Aaron Laffey- Left-handed Pitcher
Age: 22 Height: 6'0" Weight: 185
Bats: Left Throws: Left

		IP		
2007 Akr/B	17	6	3.34	31
Career				

42	24	3.38	113

The Indians drafted Laffey in the 16th round of the 2003 Draft out of high school (Cumberland, MD), and he had committed to playing college baseball with Virginia Tech before signing with the Indians in July of 2003. Laffey is a pitcher who oozes confidence on the mound, and has a fastball that consistently clocks in around 87-89 MPH and has excellent movement. The fastball is has very good, heavy sink, he commands it well, and he compliments it with an above average slider and a good

changeup. His backdoor slurvy breaking ball is about as good as they get, and was something that came along well for him last year. Last year, Laffey struggled in his first three Buffalo starts going 0-3 with an 8.64 ERA, but suddenly things all came together as he put up one of the most dominating months ever seen from a starting pitcher in the Indians farm system. In six June starts, Laffey went 6-0 with a 0.87 ERA and set a Buffalo Bisons record by winning six games in one month. From June 2nd on, in 13 starts Laffey was 9-0 with a 1.92 ERA, and became the first Buffalo starting pitcher in history to win nine consecutive decisions. Laffey transformed into a new pitcher and minor league sensation seemingly overnight last year. He went to spring training with a shot to win the #5 starter spot in Cleveland, but lost out to fellow left-hander Cliff Lee. In any case, Laffey will be up with the big

league club at some point this season.

Ben Francisco - Outfielder
Age: 26 Height: 6'1" Weight: 190
Bats: Right Throws: Right

2007 Buffa	.318	95	377	60
Career	.294	587	2252	373

The Indians selected Francisco in the 5th round of the 2002 Draft out of UCLA. Francisco is one of the most under-rated

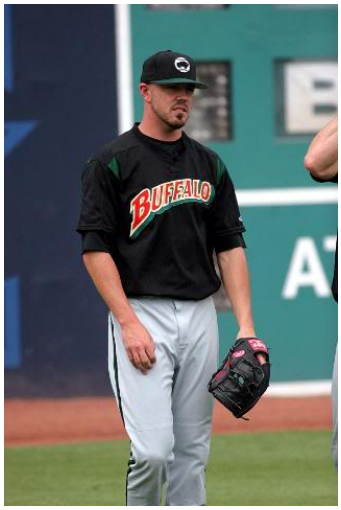
players in the system who has always put up good numbers and has some good attributes, but because of his age and no outstanding tools he often gets overlooked. In 2002, he was named the Topps Minor League Player of the Year in the NY-Penn League (NYPL) and won the NYPL batting title (.349). Last year, Francisco was named a Topps Triple-A All -Star and won the International League batting title (.318). Francisco's bat provides very good extra base hit production, and he has showed very good ability hitting the fastball, whether in Cleveland or the minors. He has proven he can hit anyone's fastball as they cannot get it by him or elevate it past him. He handled the up and down well of going back and forth from Cleveland to Buffalo last year, and is someone who has a lot of value for the Indians at the major league level. He is a versatile defender who can play all

three outfield positions well. His speed is average, but he is an excellent baserunner as his instincts on the basepaths lead to many of his stolen bases. While he is capable of helping the Indians right now, the Indians would like to see Francisco become more consistent defensively, which is something that is more easily accomplished in the minor leagues. Francisco has little to prove in Buffalo, and will be the first outfielder called up to Cleveland when a need arises.

Sean Smith - Right-handed Pitcher Age: 24 Height: 6'4" Weight: 195 Bats: Right Throws: Right

	IP			
2007 Buff	9	7	4.25	24

Career	44	30	3.82	133



Smith was selected by the Indians in the 16th round of the 2001 Draft out of Sacramento City JC. One of Smith's best attributes is how consistent he has been during his six years in the Indians system. He has a career minor league ERA of 3.82, and to show how consistent he has been he never has had an ERA below 3.24 and never higher than 4.25. Smith is a highly touted draft-and-follow player who always has

had the talent, but a bunch of minor injuries early in his minor league career held him back. Finally healthy the past two seasons, Smith was able to put up two good seasons in a row and has grown by leaps and bounds. Smith does not have electric stuff, but has learned that he has to attack hitters by getting ahead of them in the count and to be aggressive by pitching to contact. His fastball consistently checks in at 88-91 MPH, and he also throws a 12-6 curveball, slider and changeup. He has had command problems in the past, but his emergence the past two years was tied to more efficient use of his pitches, increased velocity in his fastball, and pitching with a lot of confidence. At one point early in the season last year at

Buffalo, Smith had a streak of 22.2 consecutive scoreless innings, and his ERA ranked near the leaders in the International League. But, he seemed to wear down late in the year as he put up a 4.81 ERA after the All Star break compared to the 3.93 ERA he had before the All Star break. Smith ended up going on the disabled list late in the season with shoulder fatigue and missed the last few weeks of the season, but he reportedly is 100% healthy now.

Wyatt Toregas - Catcher
Age: 25 Height: 5'11" Weight: 200 Bats: Right Throws: Right

2007 Akr	.250	86	284	36
Career	.263	341	1219	177

Toregas was selected by the Indians in the 24th round of the 2004 Draft out of Virginia Tech. The Indians added Toregas to the 40-man roster this past offseason to protect him from the Rule 5 Draft, which gives them a third catching option they have not had on the roster in several years. Toregas

has ability with the bat, and a little bit of power pull side. Toward the end of last season Toregas learned to hit the ball to right field and made strides in using the whole field. He became a good situational hitter moving runners. When you can catch and throw like Toregas does it allows the Indians to give his offense more time to develop. He is a leader, and he gives maximum effort and everything he has. Toregas is an excellent defensive catcher that can control a running game. He consistently averages 1.85 seconds on throws to second base, which is much better than the major league average of 2.0 seconds. Toregas is the best

defensive catcher in the Indians system, and he has been ranked as the best defensive catcher in the league he played in the last two years. He moves well behind the plate, handles a pitching staff well, and calls a good game. Last year, Toregas struggled through a season riddled with injuries as he was on and off the disabled list all year with back and elbow injuries and only played in 86 games. This is Toregas' first exposure to Triple-A, and he will be called on to be the leader of the pitching staff and be ready for a call to Cleveland if Victor Martinez or Kelly Shoppach are injured.

Brad Snyder - Outfielder Age: 25 Height: 6'3" Weight: 200 Bats: Left Throws: Left

2007 Buffalo	.263	86	259	41
Career	.279	524	1934	34

Snyder is a former first round pick of the Indians in the 2003 Draft out of Ball State University. Snyder's compact stroke generates excellent bat speed, and he has very good power to all fields. His swing is geared for pitches in the zone, and when he stays within himself he hits almost everything hard. Snyder has good speed, which plays up due to his very good instincts on the basepaths. Snyder has mostly played center-field during his time with the Indians, but his power bat and plus arm project

him as a major league right-fielder. Snyder's athleticism is a big strength, and his power/speed combination is salivating where except for last season he has played well at each stop in the minors. He has the potential to be a Jeromy Burnitz type player with more speed, or even an outfield version of Howard Johnson. Snyder had eye surgery last offseason, and with some of the adjustments at the plate the Indians implemented, many felt that he could improve on his high

strikeout rate in the minors. In 2006, Snyder set an Akron record with 158 strikeouts and struck out once every 3.3 at bats. But, last year in Buffalo his strikeout rate increased to once every 2.8 at bats. On top of that, his power and batting average slipped considerably. The Indians expect him to have a big year in 2008 when he makes a return trip to Buffalo, and it could be a make or break year for Snyder.

Reid Santos- Left-handed Pitcher

Age: 25 Height: 6'1" Weight: 170 Bats: Left Throws: Left

	[redacted]	[redacted]	[redacted]	IP
2007 Ak	8	3	2.72	39
Career	20	16	3.89	13

Santos is from Wahiana, Hawaii and was taken by the Indians in the 13th round of the 2002 Draft out of Saddleback College (Mission Viejo, CA). Santos broke onto the prospect scene in 2006, where he put up a good season in Kinston by going 2-0 with 4 saves and a 3.44 ERA, and held opposing hitters to a .223 batting average and struck out 65 in 70.2 innings pitched. He got a late season callup to Akron and was dynamite, as in nine

appearances he had a 2.61 ERA and did not walk a batter and struck out 20 in just 10.1 innings pitched. Santos is not overpowering in that his fastball sits around 91-92 MPH, but for a little guy he throws harder than you think. His fastball has good velocity, and he has a good assortment of secondary pitches with a slider, curveball and changeup. His changeup is good enough to where it really plays up the speed of his fastball, and he has the ability

to strikeout hitters with his fastball, slider and changeup. He is a strike-thrower and has very good command and location of his pitches to all areas of the strike zone. His durability is also helped because of a low effort delivery. Santos was much like a super utility pitcher last year in Akron as he pitched in every role conceivable be it in middle or long relief, setup man or closer, or in the starting rotation, and his versatility will be invaluable

to the Buffalo staff this season.

The Rest

Josh Barfield (Second Baseman): The Indians acquired Barfield in a November 2006 trade with San Diego in exchange for Kevin Kouzmanoff. Barfield is a former high profile prospect who had a rough year in Cleveland last season when he hit .243 with 3 HR and 50

RBI in 130 games. He has excellent bat speed and wears out the right-center field gap. He also is solid defensively and runs well. The Indians want to see him play everyday in Buffalo to regain the confidence that he obviously lost last year, and he will be the first option they turn to when a need arises in the bullpen.