Lake County Captains outfielder Matt Brown is off to a sizzling start to the 2008 campiagn after the Indians made him their 13th round selection in last year's draft out of Wichita State. The hard working, likable young prospect also went through a personal tragedy three years back that has helped him channel and improve his focus. Tony was out in Lake County to see the Captains play last week, and had a chance to speak with Matt about both the start and the tragedy. Another great piece from T.

Lake County outfielder Matt Brown is as tough as they come. He is a hardworking player who plays with the pedal to the metal by coming to the ballpark every day and giving it his all.

His inspiration comes from his own competitive spirit, but also from a personal tragedy he recently went through which has helped him channel and improve his focus.

Three years ago when Brown was a freshman in college at Wichita State, he lost his father Jim Brown to colon cancer. The loss was hard to take for the younger Brown. When he was a little boy his father was his T-ball coach, and as Brown grew up his father was always there for him in life and in baseball.

It was a rough time for Brown, but he was lucky to be surrounded with a great support system and a lot of family and friends who helped him through it all.

"That is pretty much why I do this, for them," said Brown. "Me being a Christian, I also play the game for that reason to just to try and be a good steward and maybe touch people along the way as I go down my road to hopefully success or whatnot."

Colon cancer is preventable and curable if detected early enough. Brown was a senior in high

school when his father's colon cancer was detected, but the diagnosis was too late and he was only given a year to live. Jim Brown always had a dream to see his son play college baseball, and his drive to see his son play his first game in college along with his faith helped him live three months longer than he was given in the original diagnosis.

After Brown's father was able to see his son play, he passed away a short time later.

"He ended up making it to my first college game," recalled Brown. "I ended up getting a start as a freshman going to a big D-1 school at Wichita State.

He ended up getting to watch me play one game in college and then he ended up passing about three weeks later.

He got to see me play one game so that is definitely a blessing.

I wake up every morning and make him proud and go out there and have fun."

Having fun is certainly something Brown loves to do on the baseball field. With his father with him everyday in spirit, Brown comes to the park with a good focus but also the ability to have fun. It is a balance to his game that was preached to him by his father as a kid and something Brown still abides by today.

These days things are a lot of fun as Brown is off to a sizzling start at Single-A Lake County. This is Brown's first full season in the Indians organization, and with just two games left in April, Brown is finishing off a very good month of April by hitting .345 with 2 HR, 20 RBI, and an .877 OPS in 22 games.

The left-handed hitting Brown is pumped by his hot start, which he credits mostly to his hard work in developing a good routine and being better prepared.

"I'm stoked," said Brown about the start to his season. "I have just been trying to get a plan and preparation together and it has been going real well.

That's the key in trying to be able to control your mind and be able to do those things every single day because you can have a bad couple games and all of a sudden you want to start switching things around.

But that's not the way to do it.

Stick to a plan, stay within your zone, and see ball-hit ball."

Brown was drafted in the 13th round of the 2007 Draft out of Wichita State, and after signing quickly he was assigned to short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley last year where he began his professional career by hitting .250 with 0 HR, 31 RBI, 6 stolen bases and a .665 OPS in 63

games. His time in Mahoning Valley was a learning experience as he made the adjustment from college ball to the professional ranks.

"Last year was my first season in pro ball, and I had to make the adjustment from metal bats to wood bats," recalled Brown. "We did a lot of changes to my swing, my stance, my preparation, and my plan those three months [in Mahoning Valley].

Every couple of weeks we were trying to find something that would fit to my strengths.

In the offseason and in spring training we worked on it a lot, and now I think we have a good plan.

That's the key, to be able to find a routine that you can do every day so that you can go out to the ballpark and perform."

Brown's new plan has been the catalyst to his hot start. His revised plan is more just him simplifying his approach, looking for a good pitch to hit, and staying within the strike zone with his swing. The adjustments he has made have helped his approach and overall plate discipline as he is only striking out once every eight at bats so far this season, whereas last year he was striking out about once every five at bats. Also, his long, maximum-effort swing was shortened which has helped him create a more consistent bat path to square up the ball and make good contact more often.

"In college they usually stay away from you and usually don't come in on you, so I was pretty much stuck on the outside half of the plate" said Brown. "I was not really worried about covering the inside pitch and things like that, I was more worried about adjusting to curveballs and changeups.

When you get to pro ball, people are throwing 94-95 and you can't adjust to those pitches.

I think that is basically what they did to me.

They have a good plan that I can go out and do everyday.

They got me real short as I am not too big now and trying to do too much with the bat head.

I basically have a plan where I am looking up the middle so I can cover a little bit of outside and a little bit of inside.

I'm not trying to cover black on black, as I am trying to stay away from those pitches.

I'm just trying to see the ball and put some good wood on it."

Going into a season, every player is working on improving their game. Brown has excellent makeup, and his focus is a rarity for a player at this stage of their development cycle.

Because of this, he has a head start over most of the players his age or at his level because of the routine he has developed.

He is mentally prepared for the ups and downs of the game as well as with what he needs to do to improve as a player.

In addition to applying his new plan at the plate, one of Brown's other big goals for this season is to focus on learning to handle the rigors of his first full season and playing 140 games. The daily grind of playing that many games can take a toll mentally on a player, especially those experiencing a full season for the first time.

"You have to come into spring training prepared mentally and physically to be able to handle 140 games," said Brown. "I harp on the mental side of the game because it is pretty much 90% mental. You can have all the talent in the world, but when it comes to that stretch of games where you are hitting .230 and you are failing seven or eight times at the plate, that's tough on your mind.

You have to be able to be strong enough to go out there and have a good focus every single game and not get down on yourself and stay even keel."

Indians fans are well aware of the "even keel" approach, as this is something that the Indians organization preaches, specifically manager Eric Wedge. The idea is that a player can't get too high when things are going well, nor can they allow themselves to get too low when things are going bad.

Players need to control their emotions and not let them be affected by them, good or bad.

By doing this, it will help a player stay more relaxed and focused.

Brown is often ribbed by his teammates because he acts like a clown and is always happy everyday he comes to the field. But this is just Brown trying to keep his mind clear and prepared for another game.

"Absolutely," said Brown. "Going back to the mental side of the game if you are down and dragging that just puts a bad mood on your whole game.

My dad just always taught me to just go out there and have fun and enjoy it and once that time comes where I don't enjoy it I need to find a new profession.

Hopefully that doesn't come too soon and I spend a lot of years playing this game because I love it so much."

Brown's wide base of tools make him an intriguing prospect. He has good bat speed, raw power, good arm strength, is an average runner and his defense is a major strength for him.

He is also versatile where he can play any of the three outfield positions, but right now the organization is focused on developing him as a right fielder.

With his very good arm and raw ability with the bat, Brown could develop into a very good right fielder down the road.

"In college I played a little bit of center, but I have mostly played right because of my arm," said Brown. "I have been blessed with a pretty good arm, so I think that is mostly the reason why I am in right field. Definitely at this level you have to be able to play all the positions, which is why you come to the field everyday and just do the little things right and work on things."

Lake County manager Aaron Holbert agrees, and plans to continue Brown's development in right field.

"We are looking for him to primarily play right field this year," said Holbert. "He plays some left.

I am not sure about center field as we have not tried him there.

As an organization we'd like to see him play some right field so we are going to try and focus our attention just leaving him out there and seeing how he fares."

Aside from a minor setback in spring training where he missed some time with a groin issue, Brown has fared well so far this season. His early assault on pitchers in the South Atlantic League is a testament to his hard work, discipline, and drive to succeed.

And also him playing the game of baseball the way his father taught him to.

Photo courtesy of Ken Carr