Talk about bursting onto the scene. About two months ago, most Indians fans probably never heard of left-handed pitcher Ryan Miller. He was a virtually unknown pitcher the Indians drafted in the 36th round of the 2006 Draft out of Blinn Junior College (TX) who was a draft-and-follow signing in May of 2007. Not any more. After ten starts this year, Miller is 7-0 with a 1.20 ERA, 9.98 K/9, and 1.13 WHIP and is rocketing up top prospect lists. Tony had a chance to talk to him on a recent trip to Canal Park.

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He performed well last season for both short-season league teams the Gulf Coast League Indians and Mahoning Valley Scrappers going a combined 4-4 with a 3.83 ERA, 8.58 K/9 and 1.12 WHIP in 12 starts.

Miller did not completely come out of nowhere as I had him at #33 in my Top 50 Prospect List coming into the season.

Even still Miller was sort of under the radar when the season started, but when you fast forward to today he is definitely on the prospect radar where after ten starts this year he is 7-0 with a 1.20 ERA, 9.98 K/9, and 1.13 WHIP.

While skills and tools are looked at moreso than actual performance, eye-popping numbers such as those have gotten him noticed by everyone throughout baseball.

Miller credits his success to the hard work he put in during spring training, and feels it has carried over into the season.

"I had a good spring training," said Miller in a recent interview at Canal Park. " I think it all started there just focusing on commanding my fastball as I struggled with that in the past.
I realized if I can fix that and control it, that it should not be hard for me to get batters out.

I have had some pretty good success working ahead of hitters and staying in the zone.

I have been able to work off that and use my other two pitches to get batters out.

I am starting to throw my changeup real well and keep it in the zone.

It is helping me a lot in keeping batters off balance and not making the innings as long or hard as they could have been."

Miller will not blow you away as his fastball only sits around 87-91 MPH, but he has a deep mix of pitches in that he also throws a curveball, slider, and changeup. His curveball is his best secondary pitch and shows good break and command to where it could be a very serviceable major league pitch in the future.

His power slider has less break, but it is quicker and more of a pitch he uses to backdoor right-handers and to attack left-handers.

His changeup is a work in progress, and he will continue to get a lot of work in developing the pitch all season to see where it goes.

The key to his success this season has been his ability to throw strikes with his fastball which has helped set up and make his curveball and changeup more effective.

"Ruben Niebla (Lake County pitching coach) and I talk about that a lot in the bullpen and stuff," said Miller. "You really don't have to muscle up and throw it by guys. Just hit your spots and keep it down in the zone and you should be alright.

Where I am getting myself into trouble is when I am getting these misses way up arm-side.

Batters can see that.

I just have to keep it down."

Many have wondered with the numbers Miller is putting up why he has not been moved up a level to advanced Single-A Kinston. But, even though the numbers are impressive, Miller still

has a lot to do before he is ready to move up the minor league ladder and be challenged by better and more experienced hitters in the Carolina League.

Of all the evaluation tools available in the minors, actual statistics are much lower on the totem pole when teams make decisions on whether to move a guy up or down.

Sure, they want to see the player perform, but more importantly they want to see the player actually use the tools and skills they have and show they are ready to move up.

Miller is still adjusting to his first full season and trying to get stronger. Last year he struggled with walks at Blinn when he walked 45 batters in 85 innings, and the issues continued when he came to Cleveland as he walked 20 batters in just 49.1 innings.

The troubles have carried over into this season as he has 26 walks in 52.1 innings.

Right now, Miller's main area of focus is to get him more consistent with locating his pitches around the zone, and it is something he will need to shore up before he moves onto the next level.

"Ruben and I had a meeting the other day and we talked," said Miller. "He was like, 'You look at the numbers and there is no way you should be here right now.'

And he is like 'I know and you know there are things you still need to work on' and I was like 'I know exactly what it is'.

We are both on the same page, and that is I have to eliminate the big misses.

If I can stay down and low and get rid of the up and away and in balls I am throwing that is pretty much it.

I need to keep my 0-2 or 1-2 slider or whatever I am throwing as a strikeout pitch in the zone a little better.

I talked to Ross Atkins the other day and he was just telling me to work on staying in the zone a little more consistently and I should be alright."

Lake County pitching coach Ruben Niebla and manager Aaron Holbert are big Miller supporters. They agree that Miller is close to being ready for a callup to Kinston, but that he needs more work on strike zone management.

"Bottom line, he has good stuff," said Niebla. "He can spin a breaking ball, has good feel for a changeup, and he has good deception to his fastball which is a good combination to have. Some of the things he is working on is polishing those strengths of his and getting more consistent in the strike zone."

"We saw great things out of him in spring training and fortunately for us he has carried it over," said Holbert. "It is just a matter of him continuing to throw his fastball for strikes and then get to his secondary and third pitches his curveball and changeup.

He is doing a tremendous job."

If Miller can get those things squared away in the next few starts, he will likely be on the move to Kinston sometime this month. With the first half wrapping up in about two weeks, and Miller named to the South Atlantic League All-Star team, he likely will stick in Lake County through the end of the first half and participate in the All-Star festivities and then move up to Kinston shortly thereafter.

"[Ross Atkins] just told me what I need to work on," said Miller. "He said if you can nip this in the bud now in the next two starts, who knows.

It all depends who is needed where really.

But, I am not going to look ahead and I am just going to focus on being [here in Lake County] like it is my big leagues.

Whatever happens, happens.

I am going to work here and just make sure I do my job."

Miller was a part of a little history last year as he was part of the last draft-and-follow class when he signed last May. Major League Baseball recently made a change to the collective bargaining agreement and eliminated the draft-and-follow process which basically gave a club a full year to try and sign a drafted player while scouting them in junior college.

As a 2006 draft pick, the Indians were able to retain Miller's rights up until the draft the next season.

The Indians scouted Miller extensively in his sophomore year at Blinn and eventually signed him.

Miller welcomed the whole draft-and-follow process and felt it benefited him to go back to college for his sophomore season.

"I think it helped me tremendously," said Miller. "I think if I would have signed after my freshman year at college who knows where I would be right now.

I probably would not be the same guy.

Don't get me wrong, I am getting great coaching here, but I think I needed that one more year of college just to get more experience and more strength.

The pitching coach there we worked together a lot and he helped me with my fastball command.

That extra year was tremendous for me."

Blinn College is in Bryan, Texas, which is close to his hometown of Cypress, TX. Miller's baseball career took off at Blinn where as a freshman he went 6-3 with a 3.01 ERA and 83 strikeouts in 68.2 innings in 2006, and as a sophomore in 2007 went 9-0 with a 2.05 ERA and 105 strikeouts in 85.1 innings (15 starts).

After his sophomore season at Blinn, Miller was all set to attend the University of Arkansas in the fall and play baseball there.

Over the course of the whole draft-and-follow process, the Indians closely monitored Miller and were in constant contact with him. Miller was really considering going to Arkansas because he was not sure how things would work out with the Indians, but after his great year at Blinn the Indians liked what they saw and Miller believed he was ready to play professionally, so the two sides agreed on a deal that officially made him a Cleveland Indian.

"The Indians kept in contact a lot throughout the year," said Miller. "They came out and watched me often.

It was a good thing for them too as they could actually keep track and see how I was doing and see if I was progressing.

I actually had some of their crosscheckers come out and watch.

I talked to Les Pajari, the scout who drafted me, all throughout the year just to keep him updated on how things were going.

We did not go very long without keeping in contact."

Growing up, baseball was always number one for Miller. His inspiration to play it came from watching his uncle Chad Poeck, who was a right-handed pitcher in the Texas Rangers organization from 1999-2000 and has played independent ball ever since.

"My uncle played pro ball and I always tried to follow in his footsteps," said Miller. "He played in the Rangers system and made it up to Double-A with them.

He played for many years.

I love the game and loved watching him.

He pretty much taught me since I was a little kid what to do."

While watching his uncle play, Miller often dreamed of being a professional baseball player. On ce his talent began to shine as he got older, his dream started to become a reality.

Now that he has become a professional baseball player, Miller doesn't plan to stop there.

His goal is to make the major leagues.

"When I got to college I decided to just work a little harder and see what happens," said Miller. "I noticed it was paying off and now I feel this could be something. Who doesn't love getting paid to play the game they love?"

If Miller keeps pitching the way he has been, it won't be long before he is in the big leagues and getting paid a lot more money to play the game he loves.