With nine games to play in the first half of the season, Indians low Single-A affiliate Lake County holds a tenuous one game lead in the Northern Division of the South Atlantic League (SAL). While the starting pitching at Lake County has been the backbone of the team, the offense has been paced by the consistent performance all year of outfielder Roman Pena. Pena leads the Captains in just about every offensive category and was named to the SAL All-Star game. He should be on the move to Kinston very soon, but before doing so Tony had a chance to speak with him this past week.

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Pena is in his second stint at Lake County, as he played there last year hitting .240 with 7 HR, 70 RBI and a .698 OPS in 123 games. This year, he was in line for a promotion to advanced Single-A Kinston, but because of a backup in the system in the outfield and also still needing to work on some things at the low-A level, the Indians sent him back to Lake County.

By staying at Lake County he can play everyday and gain confidence, which is something that has shown itself the first half of the season.

"Yeah, I like it out here," said Pena in an interview recently at Classic Park. "I like this team, stadium, the manager and the staff and all that.

I know I can be on another team, but that is fine.

As far as numbers go, I am just going out there playing the game.

At least I get to keep playing."

There is no doubt Pena could be in Kinston right now, but had he made the roster there out of spring training he would have been the fourth outfielder on a team that already had highly regarded prospects Nick Weglarz, John Drennen, and Cirilo Cumberbatch in the starting outfield. Instead of making the roster there as a fourth outfielder and playing sparingly, as Jason Denham has in that role there, Pena came back to Lake County to hone his craft and play full time. With the numbers he has put up in the first half at Lake County, he surely will be on the move soon to Kinston, especially since someone like Drennen could be on the move to Double-A Akron by the end of the month. Possibly after the All-Star break which is just over a week away.

So far, the return to Lake County has paid off for Pena as he is having a monster year for the Captains. In 57 games, Pena is hitting .321 with 4 HR, 41 RBI and an .841 OPS. He leads the team in hits, doubles, home runs, RBI, and total bases, and he is 5th in the league in hitting and 8th in RBI.

He was also one of six Lake County players named to the SAL All-Star game, which will be played on June 17th in Greensboro, NC.

"He is definitely more confident this year," said Jim Rickon, who is the hitting coach at Lake County. "He is a little bit smarter, which obviously comes with another year in the game and having a little more experience under his belt. I think this year he is a little more balanced and staying on the ball a little bit longer.

He is not trying to pull off the ball as much, and that has helped along with the little bit of experience he has gained."

Pena is an exciting left-handed hitter who has line drive power to all fields. He also showcases a very strong arm in the outfield due to his experience as a pitcher in high school where his fastball clocked in as high as 88 MPH.

With his power arm and electric bat, he has a lot of potential to be a good right fielder.

Pena was drafted out of Montgomery High School (CA) in the 9th round of the 2005 Draft. Originally from Mexico, Pena attended school in San Diego, CA since 7th grade.

As a young kid drafted out of high school, it was a dream come true for Pena.

"It was one of my dreams, because I want to play in the big leagues," said Pena. "When I got drafted I said this is where it all starts and here we go."

Every draftee experiences that rush on draft day, the feeling that "they made it". But, that feeling gets a quick dose of reality once they sign and start playing baseball in the low minors.

For many, it is an eye-opener when they get to the minors because of how far away that dream really still is even though they are now a professional baseball player.

When you start off in the rookie levels, the major leagues are but a star way off in the distance.

"I didn't think it was going to be this hard," said Pena. "Sometimes it is hard to play this game, but you gotta do your best to make it easy on yourself and have fun."

One of the early issues Pena encountered in his first two seasons in the minors in 2006 and 2007 was developing a good plan at the plate and becoming a more disciplined hitter. In 660 career at bats coming into this season Pena struck out 205 times, which is about once every three at bats.

Included in that total is a whopping 138 strikeouts in 455 at bats he had last year at Lake County.

So, when it came time to set some goals for this season, Pena put most of his focus on his approach at the plate.

"I want to improve my at bats and two strike approach," said Pena. "Last year I had 138 strikeouts, so I am just trying to improve it this year.

I have improved a little bit, and I still get strikeouts because it is just part of the game.

I mostly work on it during batting practice, and then in games just go out there and play everyday and have fun."

Pena has an advantage over most of the players on his team, and in the league for that matter, in that this is his second year playing a full season. For many players, learning to adapt from playing 50-60 games a year to 140 games a year is hard to do, and even Pena struggled with it last year when he was exposed to it for the first time.

A lot of players have a hard time learning to deal with the ups and downs that a 140-game, five month season brings.

It is a grind, and a real test how mentally touch a player may be.

"In your first year you can get frustrated when you are not hitting," said Pena. "Watching the guys this year, they focus so much on the numbers.

Sometimes I will tell them not to go into the cage and go crazy because you are going to get a lot of at bats.

Last year I had 455 at bats, and I was in the cage all day everyday.

Your body gets tired in the second half of the season and you need to learn how to handle that.

If you go 0-for-4, there is nothing wrong with your swing and just stay with what you are doing."

This past offseason, Pena played winter ball in Mexico for the second straight offseason. Winte r ball can be beneficial to players who are looking to get some at bats or pitch some innings because of missed time during the season because of an injury.

But, winter ball can also give a player an edge by allowing them to work on one area of their game and get valuable insight from more experienced teammates on the roster.

Last year in Mexico, Pena played about 44 games which was a big increase in playing time over the two full games and about 19 at bats he had the previous year there.

"Yeah, it helps a lot playing winter ball," said Pena. "You get a lot of experience over there as you see a lot of off-speed pitches.

The pitchers really work the counts.

It is a different world from here.

I always hang out with the players who have played there longer and they teach me things like how to watch the pitchers or hitters.

I definitely learned a lot down there."

Pena wears a gold necklace that has a pendent in the shape of the number nine hanging from it. The necklace carries special significance to Pena, as the number nine was worn by his grandmother Olypia Zonta when she played softball.

"Yeah, my grandma taught me how to play baseball," said Pena. "She used to wear #9, and I have been wearing #9 since I was like four years old.

When I was in the GCL in 2006, I picked the number and I have been getting this number since then.

Some of the guys here like #9 too, but when you play one year in one league you get to choose your number first."

Pena will be on the move soon, and since no one currently wears that number up in Kinston he should have no problem retaining it.

Photo courtesy of Carl Kline