Erik Stiller is not your ordinary pitching prospect. You see, Stiller is a graduate from the prestigious Ivy League school Princeton University. He graduated cum laude with a degree in Economics at the age of 21, and upon graduation had lucrative job offering after job offering thrown at him. But, Stiller had other ideas. This May, the 6'5 right hander was promoted from Kinston to Akron, and is striking out a hitter an inning and touching the mid nineties on the radar gun. Tony had a chance to talk to him last week at Canal Park.

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Stiller always had a dream to play professional baseball and it was something he did not want to give up on. As Day Two of the Major League Baseball Draft commenced in June of 2006, he received a call from the Indians that would forever change his fortunes. The Indians told Stiller that if he went undrafted that they wanted to sign him.

Stiller got a big break in that several of the Indians front office personnel are former Princeton student-athlete alumni, namely General Manager Mark Shapiro and Director of Baseball Operations Mike Chernoff. Chernoff and Stiller actually played on the same team together at Princeton as Chernoff was a middle infielder and team captain his senior year at Princeton in 2003 during Stiller's freshman season.

The rest of the draft played out, Stiller signed, and here he is today pitching in Double-A Akron just two years later. And, instead of a hot shot job making six figures in the business world, he is in the minors making a four figure salary, sleeping in rundown hotels, and eating bad food.
But Stiller would not have it any other way.

"Money can give you the opportunity to do a lot of good things, but ask anyone of my friends who's out in the "real world" working an 8-5 or 8-8 and making a lot more money than me, and they'll tell you exactly why I'd rather be doing this," said Stiller in a recent interview at Canal Park. "I get paid to hang out on a baseball field and throw a ball around every day. I'm not exactly padding my savings these days, but I love what I'm doing and feel extremely blessed for that. Plus, at the end of the day, if all goes well, there's a chance to get to the big leagues, which would make this whole minor league experience look like a pretty decent investment from a financial standpoint."

In addition to getting a great education at Princeton, Stiller was still able to learn about the game and grow as a pitcher. Princeton is not typically a hotbed that pumps out major league talent, although that is starting to change somewhat with the Padres Chris Young and Yankees Ross Ohlendorf both in the big leagues and graduates of Princeton. Their coach, Scott Bradley is also a former major league catcher.

Peter Stiller, Erik's father, has been with his son every step of the way through life and baseball, and feels the Princeton experience was great for his son.

"Princeton turned out to be great for him," said the elder Stiller. "Scott Bradley the head coach spent several years in the majors and caught Randy Johnson's first no hitter.
He understood professional baseball and instilled in his players a real respect for playing the game the right way.
Princeton has had several top pitching prospects like Chris Young of the Padres who we met on the recruiting visit, and Ross Ohlendorf who is with the Yankees and was a year ahead of Erik."

Stiller was not viewed as much of a prospect coming out of high school because many scouts viewed Stiller's determination to attend Princeton as a major turn off because of signability reasons. Even still, in his senior season at Bryan High School (TX) he played in the same district with some very good players that helped him get noticed. He played against 2002 first round draft picks Scott Kazmir and Clint Everts, and Kazmir of course is now one of the top left-handers in the big leagues pitching in the Tampa Bay rotation.

"I played in a pretty good district in high school," said Stiller. "I played against Kazmir and Everts who were both first round picks out of the same high school.
It was me and those two guys where we were probably the three best guys in the league.
We were all in the same year as 2002 high school guys.
All the guys I played with got drafted at different times.
I wasn't throwing as hard, but I thought I was still a tall, thin guy who threw in the upper 80s so maybe there would still be a chance.
I am sure there were scouts at games, but I never heard from them and even if there was

anything there the Princeton thing probably killed it.
They certainly were not going to draft me knowing I was not going to sign out of high school."

Even though they were heading in different directions in their lives at the time, Kazmir and Stiller both had a mutual respect for one another. Stiller's father recalls one exchange while his son played with Kazmir.

"Kazmir played for Cypress Falls High School in the Houston area, and later that summer Erik and Scott were on the same team at Baseball USA which was a big complex for youth baseball in Houston," said Peter Stiller. "Scott was going to pitch a couple innings and then take off. Erik pitched after him and as Erik came into the dugout Scott was packing up and Erik said something to Kazmir like 'so, 94 mph fastball?' and Kazmir responded 'yeah, so, 1520 SAT?'."

It has certainly been a wild two years for Stiller as a minor league prospect. After the 2006 Draft, he debuted at rookie-level Burlington and went 2-2 with a 6.45 ERA in four starts before moving up to short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley where he went 3-3 with a 3.23 ERA in nine starts. He did not make a team out of spring training last year and stayed behind in extended spring training, but was eventually activated and sent to Single-A Kinston at the end of May.
That is when Stiller blew up and started to open some eyes, as he went 3-6 with 4 saves and a 2.89 ERA in 25 appearances (5 starts).
Most noticeably his fastball velocity spiked to 93-94 MPH where the previous year it mostly sat around 90-91 MPH.

This season Stiller returned to Kinston where he dominated by going 1-0 with a 2.79 ERA in nine appearances and had 27 strikeouts in 19.1 innings before he was moved up to Double-A Akron the first week of May. While he has been inconsistent during his time at Akron so far (3-1, 6.04 ERA, 12 appearances), he has shown flashes of being a good middle relief prospect.
He is still averaging around a strikeout an inning, his fastball is still consistently touching 93-94 MPH, and he is using his great size (6'5" 210 lbs) to get on top of hitters.

One of the biggest differences from Single-A to Double-A is the quality of the hitters a pitcher faces, and Stiller realized it right off the bat.

"I am kind of getting used to a smaller zone and more disciplined hitters here," said Stiller. "They see the corners a little better and they are more willing to foul off some pitches or take some pitches and look for their pitch. I feel good out there and I am trying to adjust to those things. I am trying to stay within myself to do the same things I have been doing and not change too much just because the guys are more disciplined."

At every level, every season, players are always looking to find ways to improve. Prior to being called up to Akron, the Indians had Stiller specifically work on throwing more to first base and

work on his pickoff move.
Now at Akron, Stiller is just concentrating on keeping sound mechanics.

"I know my mechanics pretty well, so if something is off I gotta be the one to sort of find it," said Stiller. "I think [Akron pitching coach] Tony Arnold would make any suggestions if he saw something. I am always trying to focus on throwing out front as I am pretty long. It is easy to get long and throw from up high rather than getting it up front and being short with it."

One of the best things Stiller did was go to Hawaii last offseason to play in the recently resurrected Hawaii Winter League (HWL). Some players will request to go to some of the Latin leagues if they really want to go there, but most of the offseason league assignments for players is determined by the organization they play for. For a lot of players coming off an injury or have a need to get more work in they will talk to their agent to have the organization get them hooked up somewhere.
For Stiller, that place was in the HWL, which was the second season since the league came back in 2006 from a near ten year hiatus.

"Last year in Hawaii was good," said Stiller. "We played a 40 game schedule in about 50 days so it was pretty intense.
They lost one of the fields they were supposed to have as they were supposed to have the University of Hawaii field and another field.
The Hawaii field was being renovated, and so we had to play on this other field that was sort of like a high school field.
We played two games a day as we had four teams playing so there was a doubleheader everyday.
The field got pretty beat up, and it was not a good field to begin with, so it gave some people problems at times.
I enjoyed it though and it was a good level of play."

Stiller was sent to Hawaii to work primarily on his changeup and also work on consistently driving his fastball down to the bottom of the zone. Stiller throws four pitches, but his changeup did not get a lot of work last year because he was coming out of the bullpen for most of the season. Since the changeup is arguably his best secondary pitch, the Indians wanted him to get more work with it and not lose his feel throwing it. They were also looking to get him more innings to stretch him out in the event they decided to put him back in the starting rotation this coming season.

"Playing there definitely helped with the changeup," said Stiller. "I played with some different grips and I found one I liked that I have confidence in and comfortable throwing now. The thing with changeups is that sometimes it is one of those pitches that you need to be able to throw six, seven, ten, twelve times in a game.
Starters will throw it a lot because it is a feel pitch and by the third or fourth one they have the feel.

Sometimes that first one or two is tough.
So when you are in the pen and you are only going to come in and throw one or two changeups, if you don't have the feel you are just wasting them.
So I feel like I have gotten to the point where I am comfortable coming in for one inning and using the changeup once and being able to throw it for strikes."

A lot of pitchers drop the changeup from their repertoires when the move to bullpen. Since it is such a feel pitch, most go with a standard two-pitch mix of a fastball-slider or fastball-curveball. Some though have made a living throwing changeups coming out of the bullpen, namely San Diego Padre great Trevor Hoffman.
Even though Stiller is coming out of the bullpen and throwing only one to two innings an outing, he is still throwing all four of his pitches (fastball, cutter, curveball and changeup).
Being able to throw all four pitches with confidence has been a big reason he has been able to record so many strikeouts.

"Most of my strikeouts are coming from the fastball," said Stiller. "But when you are throwing four pitches and are willing to use them at any time, your fastball is more effective. Especially when you are ahead in the count because now they have to try to fight off the fastball, but be ready for the curve or cutter.
If they are looking for any of those three pitches then I will throw a fastball on the outside corner and they will be much more likely to miss it or take it because they did not expect it."

Stiller's ascension up the Indians minor league ladder has been pretty incredible considering he was not drafted and also that he has barely been in the system two years (he signed June 10, 2006). His family and friends regularly tune into games on the radio to listen in on how Erik is doing, and several times a year his father goes to see him pitch. When all you can do it watch and listen, it can be hard for any loved one, especially a father.

"Following him in the minors has been exciting, but sometimes listening to games is nerve wracking," said his father Peter. "You really hang on every pitch. You also realize what a grind professional baseball is day to day for the players.
Erik has been fortunate to have a great network of friends, coaches, and fellow players to ease that."

It will get a lot harder as Stiller goes on, but he has the makeup and intelligence to handle those difficulties as they come up. It is just a matter of whether or not the talent continues to blossom and show itself.

So far, it has.

Photo courtesy of Ken Carr