Lake County Captain right-hander Dallas Cawietzell refers to himself as a "country bumpkin". No longer confined to the country and corn fields from his home state of Iowa, as a minor leaguer he is able to get out and see many towns and cities up and down the eastern half of the United States. He is having the time of his life and along the way is starting to establish himself as a good middle relief prospect in the Indians system. Tony had a chance to speak to him recently in a stop at Lake County.

For Lake County Captains right-hander Dallas Cawiezell, professional baseball has opened the doors for him to see much more of the world than the cornfields back in his home state of Iowa.

Born in Davenport, IA, Cawiezell now resides in the small town of Long Grove, IA that according to the 2000 census has a population of 597.

Cawiezell refers to himself as a "country bumpkin" and prefers the quiet lifestyle in the country he grew up on rather than the big city lifestyle where traffic congestion rules. His birth city of Davenport, IA was the biggest city he had ever been to until at 15 years of age he went to Chicago for a Cubs game.

Things are much different now for Cawiezell as a professional baseball player. No longer confined to the country he is able to get out and see many towns and cities up and down the eastern half of the United States.

With Single-A Lake County being located in the far upper left corner of the South Atlantic League, the team often travels anywhere from eight to twelve hours by bus anywhere east or south of Eastlake, Ohio to any of the 15 other teams in the league.

The cities they play in are not big cities by any means, but they are surely much more populated and "busy" than what he is used to back home.

This is a big change for Cawiezell as prior to being drafted by the Indians in the 40th round of the 2007 Draft, the furthest he had ever been from home was when he went to college at Valparaiso University located in the northwestern corner of Indiana, about 60 miles southeast of Chicago, IL. Aside from that, his life was mostly confined to the rural areas out in the middle of nowhere in Iowa.

Cawiezell attended a small Iowa high school, but still was heavily recruited as a football player. Believe it or not, but the 6'6" 255-pounder was actually a tailback in high school.

Kids his size at schools that small are usually put right on the offensive line no questions asked, but apparently he was either really gifted as a running back or the coaches felt he was big enough to be his own offensive line.

"I went to kind of a small high school and I was a tailback in football," said Cawiezell in a recent interview at Classic Park. "[I was big for a running back] and that's what they told me when teams recruited me. I got recruited from some schools for football, and they had me out pass blocking as a lineman and I was like 'I don't know any of this'."

Even while Cawiezell was being recruited for football he always left the door open for baseball, and to this day he feels his decision to attend college and play baseball was the right choice.

"I got recruited for football as a junior in high school and had not even played varsity baseball yet," said Cawiezell. "I tried to string out the recruiting process for football as I was recruited by mostly in-state schools and a little bit in Illinois, but mostly Big Ten schools. You try to string them out as an in-state kid and they say 'see you later then, we are going to find somebody better than you in Texas'.

It is a tough deal as you have to be totally into it.

I think if I would have played football I would have been miserable anyway.

College football?

That's a job.

Baseball?

This is just a fun game."

Cawiezell was drafted by the Indians as a college junior, so he had leverage to where he could go back to Valparaiso for his senior year if contract discussions with the Indians broke down. O n the flip side, being such an unknown player and going to a small school he risks getting hurt his senior year, which would pretty much wipe out any chance of a professional baseball career in the future.

That is why so many players sign out of high school or as draft eligible sophomores or juniors.

They can always go back to school, and at least in the Indians case one of the perks they give to signees is a voucher to attend any four-year college they are admitted to so they can earn a degree.

High school kids get a four-year college voucher while the college kids get a voucher for the one or two years still needed to finish school.

"At Valparaiso we weren't the best at baseball," said Cawiezell. "It was tough to leave my teammates there, and I loved my coaching staff, but not winning a lot it is easier to leave than if it were a successful program.

It was definitely tough and a big risk for a college kid to make.

It would be easier to lock up your long term future by getting your degree, but the pull is so hard to shy away from."

Cawiezell was a summer draft-and-follow last year where he went and played independent ball in the Northwoods League so the Indians could get a more extensive look at him. It also helped Cawiezell's transition to the daily grind of professional baseball.

The Indians liked what they saw and they eventually agreed on a deal late in the year.

Upon signing, Cawiezell got a quick sample of the minor leagues late in the year at short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley where he went 0-1 with a 3.46 ERA in eight relief appearances.

"After my college season I played in the Northwoods League, which is a wood bat league," said Cawiezell. "Before I went there the Indians told me it would be as much like pro ball as any summer league you can go to. And it was, as the games, the bus trips, the stadiums are all just like a minor league atmosphere.

The switch was not too hard, other than the competition is far better here.

Just the grind of things, I was pretty ready for it."

This year Cawiezell is enjoying his first full season as a professional baseball player. He has played all year at Single-A Lake County and has established himself as a very good middle relief prospect for the Indians going 3-7 with a 3.83 ERA in 35 appearances.

In 47.0 innings he has allowed 45 hits, 12 walks and struck out 48.

It is his first experience playing a full season, and for a lot of players not used to the 140-game grind they typically can hit a wall halfway through the season. A quick look at Cawiezell's pre-All Star and post-All Star stats suggest he may have hit that proverbial wall as in the first

half he was 2-4 with a 2.88 ERA in 25 appearances while in the second half he is 1-3 with a 6.39 ERA in ten appearances. Some of it could be a result of him coming down with shoulder inflammation in mid-June which sidelined him for about a month, but in any case he is still adjusting to the everyday rigors of professional baseball.

"It's tougher mentally more than anything I think," said Cawiezell. "I mean you get tired physically, but everybody gets tired physically.

It is not like one team is more tired than the next team.

It is pretty much whatever team deals with it better than the rest.

It will be interesting come playoff time who is still around, who is still healthy, and who is still ready to compete and into it."

Cawiezell showcases a fastball that sits around 91-93 MPH and has topped out as high as 95 MPH. He complements his fastball with a slider and splitter, but he mostly relies on his fastball-splitter combination. He gets good downward action at times with his fastball, but it lacks much movement. He relies more on his ability to locate his fastball to both sides of the plate and has a ton of confidence in it.

"Dallas is a guy that pounds the zone with his fastball, and with his fastball being as explosive as it is at 92 to 95 MPH at times, he is going to be able to have a good year in this league," said Lake County pitching coach Ruben Niebla. "I think right now what he needs to work on is tightening up his slider, and repeating his delivery. He really still has some delivery stuff he needs to adjust, but for his progress up to this year he is really having a great year. He has been in very tight situations, and that is a very valuable guy for your team. He has a major league body, and he also has a split finger that could develop into an out pitch at the higher levels."

His slider is certainly a work in progress, and if he can grasp the pitch it will give him three good pitches in his repertoire. With his fastball and splitter already being out pitches, the addition of even an average slider would help tremendously in giving him another weapon in his arsenal.

Having a good breaking ball that breaks differently than his other two pitches will only help play up both his other pitches and keep hitters honest.

"The slider is a work in progress, that's for sure," said Cawiezell. "It has always been in my arsenal, but it has never been a commanding pitch where hitters would even fear it at all. My splitter is good, and it is an out pitch.

But having a slider that I can throw for strikes [in any count] would help my other pitches be [much better]."

Cawiezell has had problems getting a feel for the arm action required to throw a slider, but he has made some adjustments with it where he believes he is finally starting to become comfortable throwing the pitch.

"Some people have a natural breaking ball, like [Paolo] Espino who has an absolutely incredible natural curveball," said Cawiezell. "A guy like me, I don't have the arm action to throw a natural slider. So I really have to work on getting out in front, and Ruben has just set me up with a good grip that feels natural to me that I can get out in front and get downspin as opposed to side spin to get some depth and some tilt to it rather than a drifting pitch.

I know very little about it, and I am just doing whatever Ruben tells me to.

He is very knowledgeable, so I am just trusting him."

Whether or not Cawiezell can develop his slider remains to be seen, but so far he is enjoying life on the road as a country boy living his dream to be a professional baseball player.

"Yeah, it has definitely been a change [leaving Iowa]," said Cawiezell. "I am just kind of trying to learn to deal with things."

Photo courtesy of Ken Carr