Currently on temporary leave from the Indians, outfielder Nick Weglarz is a key cog in the lineup for the Canadian Olympic baseball team. Pool action in baseball finally kicks off tonight when Taiwan and the Netherlands open play at 10:30 PM (eastern) and then China vs. Canada follows shortly after at 11:30 PM. At 6'3" 250-pounds Weglarz is a fearsome presence at the plate, but even while he is a hulking, menacing mass at the plate, outside the lines he is a gentle giant who has made his family proud. Tony recently had a chance to talk to Weglarz and his family, and shares their story in his latest.

At 6'3" 250-pounds, outfielder Nick Weglarz is a fearsome presence at the plate for any opposing pitcher. Just 20 years of age, the scary thing is he is expected to get even bigger in the next few years as his body continues to mature and fill out.

But even while he is a hulking, menacing mass at the plate, outside the lines Weglarz is one of the kindest, gentlest young men in sports today. A gentle giant. The big Canadian redhead has makeup which is off the charts, and combined with his persona off the field and his abilities at the plate, the comparisons to former Indians great Jim Thome are stirringly dead on.

"As a young child, Nick was very busy, always on the move and always smiling," said Carol Glintz, who is Nick's aunt. "Nick still has that million dollar smile that captivates your heart instantly! We all look forward to Nick's periodic returns home to catch up and be entertained by his firework displays."

Those fireworks displays Weglarz puts up are a result of some incredible God-given talent and Herculean power, and he has molded and refined his abilities over the year with lots of hard work. His makeup and how he carries himself is the result of a great support system growing up, namely his mother and father Stan and Cheryl Weglarz along with his younger sister

Amanda. The Weglarz family has been with Nick every step of the way from youth baseball, to Little League, to the Canadian junior national team as a 16-17 year old, and now in professional baseball in the minor leagues.

"Nick's greatness stems from a strong family team with parents and a sister that have given everything to support his success," said Glintz.

Indeed.

Any parent or relative of a talented athlete in junior high or high school knows how much dedication, time, money, and patience is needed with a successful young athlete. All the games, travel, gear, expenses, and so on that is needed while you help your child achieve their dream. It is a lot for parents to endure, especially those who have kids that are part of a national tournament team as soon as eight to ten years old.

You name the sport, kids are attending more and more camps and clinics and playing on more tournament teams these days to improve their chances at a college scholarship or taking it a step further to maybe play their sport professionally.

The seeds for this success are usually sown early, and many different people usually have a hand in helping those roots take hold and molding that talent. In Weglarz's case there was a laundry list of people who helped him, one of note was family friend and neighbor Tom Halbert.

"I have watched Nick play ball from day one," said Halbert. "A lot of his American friends may not realize that Nick was a left handed pitcher.
Nick pitched or played first base, some outfield and believe it or not he even was a catcher in his early years.
There were lots of times when his dad was working I would catch for Nick while he practiced his pitching or did a little batting practice or long toss.
I always knew Nick had a special talent and would make us proud."

All the time and effort paid off for Weglarz along with his family and friends on June 7th, 2005 when he was drafted by the Cleveland Indians in the third round of the 2005 Draft.

When the family heard their son's name announced on the on-line radio stream they were listening to, pandemonium ensued.

"At Nick's draft party we were all waiting and listening over the Internet," said his mother Cheryl Weglarz. "[Then we heard] ‘Nick Weglarz taken by the Cleveland Indians' and I grabbed one of my very best friends and hugged her and started singing Cleveland Rocks!"

Weglarz's life was turned upside down from that moment on. At 17-years old he was now a paid professional and had to go out on his own to and begin to pay his dues in the minors to hopefully live his dream to be a major league baseball player someday.

After he finished up some business back home with high school, he reported to the Indians then rookie-level team in Burlington, NC about halfway through the season.

It was a time of mixed feelings for Weglarz's mother. There was some hesitation from his saddened mother who was a bit apprehensive about sending her young son 1000 miles away to a strange place where they did not know a soul.

However, at the same time she couldn't hold back the joy and excitement she had for her son as he went off to start a baseball career and live his dream.

"In Canada we have a later graduation in late June so Nick could not leave right away for Burlington until after he graduated," recalled Cheryl Weglarz. "On graduation night Nick's school had presented him with a special award because he was the fist graduate of the school to make his dream a reality.

The graduation finished late and Nick had an early morning flight he had to be at the airport in Buffalo by 5:00 AM.

We took Nick to the airport, and it was a hard thing for me to do.

Out of high school, 17 years old, no family, no friends and the only Canadian [going 1000 miles away to Burlington].

But, he turned to us [as he left] and said ‘I'm on my way to work'.

Wow!

Nick's actual first job!"

Weglarz played in 41 games at rookie-level Burlington that year and finished the season with a .231 batting average, two home runs and 17 RBI. He was still very raw and growing into his body, and being only 17-years old the early struggles were expected.

While Weglarz maintained a positive attitude through his early struggles adapting to the professional game, the family probably took it harder at first than he did.

"In his first professional baseball game he went 0-for-4 with four strikeouts," recalled Cheryl Weglarz. "Being a mom I just wanted to reach out to him, but the next day he came back and got a few hits. We had to go to Burlington the first weekend because they would not sell Nick a cell phone since he was too young, so I had to sign a contract for him. We met many nice people in Burlington which I still keep in contact with, and it was so nice just knowing that if Nick needed something they were there for him."

The 2006 season was a long and frustrating one for Nick and his family. In the first game of the season he broke the hamate bone in his right hand and ended up missing the rest of the season. It was a setback that was never expected and was a true test of Weglarz's determination to get back playing again as well as dealing with some adversity.

After the injury, Weglarz flew from Florida to Cleveland to see a doctor and get an MRI on his hand and then flew back to Florida. A few days later he hopped on a plane again and this time flew from Florida to Baltimore to see a specialist for a second opinion and then flew right back to Florida. After it was determined surgery would be required, Weglarz again flew to Baltimore to have his surgery.

For a young kid who hates to fly, he sure piled up the frequent flyer miles quickly.

"The year he missed with a broken hamate bone was a long and frustrating time," said Cheryl Weglarz. "Cleveland did take very good care of Nick giving him the top treatment. Flying from Florida to Baltimore to have surgery and then staying in a hotel room going for treatment, then flying back to Akron using their facilities to rehab before the team came to the park, and then finally going to Mahoney Valley just to do on field workouts with them and at least feeling like he was part of the team.
Mentally he showed us he sure wanted his dream and it proved to us how much he wants to make it to the major leagues.

We just couldn't be any prouder of him."

Weglarz came back healthy and on a mission in spring training last year, and the Indians rewarded him by assigning him to a full season club at Single-A Lake County to start the season. The move was sort of surprise given that he had missed the entire previous season and was only 19 years old, but Weglarz quickly dispelled the notion that he was maybe not ready for a higher level of play. He had a breakout season and emerged as one of the top young hitting prospects in baseball when he hit .274 with 24 home runs, 83 RBI and an .891 OPS in 127 combined games at Lake County and advanced Single-A Kinston.

With his hometown of Stevensville, Ontario just minutes outside of Buffalo, NY, Weglarz's family was close enough to make the three hour drive down I-90 to see their son play many times last

year.

"What a beautiful park," said Cheryl Weglarz about their visits to Lake County. "Nick had many fans cheering for him. He had a Lake County grandma that always makes the boys their birthday cakes since most are so far from home.
Being a December baby Nick was a little more spoiled - I think - as grandma was always bringing him home made fudge or chocolate chip cookies.
We were lucky enough to meet grandma and her family.
Also, we were at the game when Nick actually hit himself in the face on the screen in center field.

What a home run!"

This year Weglarz came into the season as an established top prospect, and came into spring training much bigger and stronger. His numbers at Kinston so far this season may not be eye-popping, but for his age and ability he is performing as an elite prospect.

In 99 games at Kinston, Weglarz is hitting .273 with ten home runs, 38 RBI and an .839 OPS.

More impressively he has piled up 67 walks to 72 strikeouts.

Baseball Prospectus
recently introduced a new stat to their sabermetric statistics page called
minor league statistics and translations
, and when evaluating Weglarz under the peak translation by taking his regular statistics and adjusting them for age and league difficulty he is rated as the best player in the Carolina League.

Now at Kinston, Weglarz is once again back in North Carolina a few hundred miles east of where he started his career in Burlington three years ago. And, once again he is 1000 miles away from his family, which has limited the Weglarz clan to just one visit to Kinston this year to see him play.

"Nick has improved so much with his base running and outfield play [during his time] in Kinston," said Cheryl Weglarz. "Nick keeps getting stronger as the season goes on.

We have only gone to see Nick once in Kinston since it took 16 hours going there but only 13 hours coming home.

It is a very nice park and friendly staff, and [broadcaster and Team Media Relations Director] Chris Hemeyer has been such a great help this season. Nick had to have a picture sent for the Beijing Olympic committee and Chris was right there to help. I wish this park wasn't so far away."

Now in Beijing, China for the Olympics, his family could not be any prouder of all the accomplishments Weglarz has piled up the past few years.

"Besides finally making your dream come true, how much more could you ask for than to wear ‘Canada' across your chest!" said an excited Cheryl Weglarz. "Just when we think we can't get any prouder, Nick goes and does something else."

The family huddled around the TV on Friday night and took in the opening ceremonies, and when the Canadian Olympians made their appearance during the Parade of Nations the whole family cheered and clapped for Nick and his fellow countryman. They caught a glimpse of him walking around the arena, and had even received a call from him while he was inside the Bird's Nest several hours beforehand since Beijing is twelve hours ahead and the TV broadcast was taped.

Currently on temporary leave from the Indians, Weglarz is a key cog in the lineup for the Canadian Team. Weglarz hit .450 with three home runs, seven RBI and eight runs scored in seven games helping Canada qualify for the Olympics over the winter in Taiwan, and will be relied upon to produce big in his team's quest to bring home a gold medal in the Olympics.

Even though the opening ceremonies were days ago, baseball does not get under way until tonight when Taiwan and the Netherlands open play at 10:30 PM (eastern), with China vs. Canada following shortly after at 11:30 PM.

The Olympic baseball tournament involves eight teams where all the teams will play each other once in pool play. At the end of

pool play, the top four teams will move onto the medal round with the first seed playing the fourth seed and the second seed playing the third seed. The two winners play for the gold while the two losers play for the bronze in a consolation game.

Canada is one of the favorites going into the tournament, with the United States and Cuba getting most of the talk as the top favorites. In any case, Weglarz is ready to roll and represent his country.

"They say we shouldn't be taken lightly," said Nick Weglarz in a recent interview in Frederick, MD. "I'd say we are top four and can be right there. The last Olympics we

came in fourth. We have a good team, so I am sure we are going to do well and maybe surprise some people."

This is actually the last time that baseball will be part of the Olympics in the foreseeable future as it was taken out as part of the games starting in 2012. Reportedly, the earliest baseball can be brought back is at the 2016 games if no new sports are adopted into the games and baseball receives enough votes by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to be included again.

Playing on the international stage is something a lot of players will miss.

"It's playoff baseball and about winning," said Weglarz. "So that is a good experience in itself. Plus we played about five exhibition games against Team USA and they are all Double-A and Triple-A guys, so I got some time in against them.

Also, you play against the different countries that have a different style of play.

It is just something that you can't duplicate in minor league baseball."

As Weglarz and his Canadian teammates get set to kick off play tonight against host country China, his family will be watching from afar in the comforts of their living room.

"I am nervous but excited at the same time," said Cheryl Weglarz. "We can't wait for the first game. It rained for one of the exhibition games against the Netherlands so Nick is getting excited for the first game. Because of the time of the first game for us we will be watching alone, but Friday's game we will cheer on with family!"

Whether or not Weglarz and his teammates bring home the gold, in the eyes of his family he has already won gold for them.

"Nick has a heart of gold and monumental determination towards whatever he strives to do," said Rick Marriott, who is Nick's grandfather. "Nick has been with me on many occasions that he has proven this to me. The whole family can't be any prouder then they have been along his whole career."

A career which has only just started. One that over the next several years should be filled with many more golden moments.

Photos courtesy of Ken Carr and the Kinston Indians