Left-hander Chris Jones is a prospect that has not been talked about a lot this year, mostly because he was hindered with an arm injury in spring training that prevented him from pitching until later in the year. Also, being down at the bottom of the minor league ladder in the rookie-level Gulf Coast League 1000 miles away from Cleveland in Winter Haven, Florida tends to keep players like Jones out of sight. But not to Tony. He talked with the young prospect this past week.

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But, even though he may be out of sight, he is by no means out of mind to the followers of prospects in the Indians system. The Indians drafted Jones in the 15th round of the 2007 Draft out of Gaither High School in Tampa, Florida. He is a slender left-handed pitcher whose fastball sits around 90-91 MPH with good arm side tail.

While he relies on a steady diet of fastballs and changeups, his out pitch is clearly his curveball which projects as a plus pitch that he often relies on when he needs to make a big pitch.

His changeup projects as an average pitch with good sink and fade.

Jones was pegged for the Lake County rotation at the start of this season, but an arm injury held him back in spring training and resulted in him rehabbing it the rest of the year and getting in some action in the Gulf Coast League where he finished the season 3-4 with a 3.10 ERA in

11 starts. In 52.1 innings he held batters to a .229 batting average and walked 20 while striking out 36, and by the end of the season all pitch restrictions were lifted and he was up to a normal pitch count.

"He is 100% healthy," said Gulf Coast League Indians pitching coach Steve Lyons in a recent interview. "He made a lot of improvements, and is still trying to acclimate to professional baseball as even though he was here last year it was not very long.

He has learned that it is more than just showing up on the day you pitch and that there is work that goes in between those five days."

It was a long season for Jones, one filled with the frustration early on because of the injury, but also with growing confidence as he finished the season strong and looked poised to crack the Lake County rotation next year provided he is healthy.

"I threw twice last year [at Lake County] at the end of last season," said Jones. "This year I didn't pitch until the end of spring training, but [in the Gulf Coast League] I did really well and I got back into the swing of things.

I got a couple innings under my belt and a couple games this year."

Most high school kids are wide-eyed and very timid and nervous in their first days as a professional after signing a contract right out of high school. This was not the case with Jones as he had a lot of experience playing AAU ball where he played three years with the Midland Redskins in Ohio. Being from Tampa, he was scouted and hand picked from players all over the nation to be a part of the team, which is a lot for a 16-17 year old.

"It was a travel team and they flew us up [to Ohio] and the players are hand picked all over the nation," said Jones. "They actually have scouts for the teams. You are gone for two and a half months and you play 65-70 ballgames.

All you do is play baseball, but it got me ready for this and being away from home and stuff."

During his time playing with the Midland team he developed a good relationship with one of the coaches there that ended up getting a job with Indiana University. Jones was so devoted to the coach, he was set to follow him and play college ball for Indiana University before he ended up signing with the Indians. Even with his AAU experience, his decision to skip college and go directly to the pros was a big adjustment for him.

"Pretty much everything changed," said Jones. "Just the way the game is played in general. You can definitely tell it becomes your job.

It is a different kind of baseball as in high school it was go have fun, play well, and have people look at you.

While as a professional you have already been looked at, you don't have to worry about anybody else picking you up, and you are just pretty much playing for a job.

That's a big difference."

Now that Jones has made the transition from high school, he is going through the growth process in the lower levels of the minor leagues with developing as a pitcher while at the same time developing physically.

"I have gained a bunch of weight this year," said Jones. "Other than that I am probably in better shape than I have ever been in because the Indians have had more time to actually work with me because I was hurt.

[We also] changed my windup again and have gone back to a full wind up over my head because I guess my hands were real jerky through my whole windup before.

It is tough for any pitcher with anything you change as the smallest things you change can make the biggest difference.

I actually started that in the [middle of July], and we just tried to make the windup smooth and it helped a lot."

With his 2008 season finished, next year is already here as Jones is currently taking part in the Instructional League out in the Indians new spring training complex in Goodyear, Arizona. The Instructional League is a month long development session where young players like Jones get to work on some changes and further develop as players in a relaxed environment with the entire Indians player development staff present.

Many players use the time in "Instructs" as a springboard to a successful campaign the following year, and this is something Jones hopes to accomplish as well.

"I'm definitely excited [about next year]," said Jones. "I figure I am working real hard, and I should move up next year [to Lake County] so I am real excited about that."

Photo courtesy of Ken Carr