The ability to throw strikes is something that comes easier and more natural to some pitchers, but for most it can be a struggle. The Indians have several pitchers in the system who have become notorious for their exceptional command, namely pitchers like left-hander David Huff and right-hander Josh Tomlin. With the completion of the 2008 season another name will have to be added to that list, and that is right-hander Jonathan Holt. Tony had a chance to speak with him this past week.

The ability to throw strikes is something that comes easier and more natural to some pitchers, but for most it can be a struggle. The Indians have several pitchers in the system who have become notorious for their exceptional command, namely pitchers like left-hander David Huff and right-hander Josh Tomlin who are widely considered the top starting pitchers in the organization as far as the ability to control the strike zone goes.

With the completion of the 2008 season another name will have to be added to that list, and that is right-hander Jonathan Holt.

Holt is a 5th round pick by the Indians in the 2007 Draft out of the University of Tampa. He came into the draft last year as a reputed strike thrower after he put up an incredible 19.75:1 strikeout to walk ratio over 66 innings his junior season at Tampa (79 K, 4 BB).

He has lived up to that billing so far during his time with the Indians the last two years as in 109.1 career innings he has yielded only 11 walks while striking out 95 batters.

Overall at Single-A Lake County this year Holt went 4-6 with a 3.20 ERA in 41 appearances, and in 76 innings allowed 80 hits, 7 walks, and had 68 strikeouts.

"I think so," said Holt when asked about his strike throwing ability being his biggest strength. "Coming into the draft last year and talking to different teams they all said 'hey, you are a strike thrower'. I may not have the best pure stuff, but it plays up with being able to throw strikes and being able to throw any pitch in any count.

That has always been something that helped me in high school and college.

In high school I was not a hard thrower so I had to learn how to hit my spots and change pitches to keep hitters off balance.

I guess that is one of the reasons I have had success is being able to throw strikes, so hopefully that will keep going."

There are many other relievers who throw harder than Holt does, and many more that have much better secondary stuff, but being able to throw strikes is a skill in itself. For many pitchers, the ability to command and locate is one of the last things they learn and is usually the separator to determining their fate as a prospect.

In the end, it doesn't matter if a pitcher can throw 98 MPH or can snap off a devastating curveball because if they can't consistently control where the ball goes then they will not be very effective.

"I like the ability to be able to call upon him out of the bullpen and know he is going to compete in the strike zone," said Lake County Pitching Coach Ruben Niebla in a late season interview. "He does a great job disrupting timing, he throws all three pitches in any count, and he uses his fastball well. At times when he needs to he goes out of the zone with his fastball as well, which is another trait that some of these guys at this level might not have yet and he has the ability to do that. It is something that people don't often hear about with a player having the ability to command the fastball outside of the zone. He does that to keep guys off the plate."

Holt's innate ability to pound the strike zone with quality strikes at such a high rate clearly gives him a leg up on the competition as far as his standing goes when compared to other pitchers at his level in the Indians' system. What Holt needs to learn now is how to attack and finish hitters off.

"For the most part I feel I can throw the ball where I need to, now it is just refining it and trying to keep it down in the lower half of the zone and learning how to attack hitters a little better," said Holt. "I talked to Ruben and Dave Miller the [Minor League] Pitching Coordinator about it. They said the big thing for me is to learn how to attack hitters and put them away. So that is what I really tried to work on, to know when to throw certain pitches in which spots."

Telling a pitcher he needs to learn how to attack hitters is one thing, but actually implementing it and working on it is another thing. So, what does a pitcher faced with a challenge of becoming more aggressive really actually do to improve in this area?

"I think it is a little bit of everything," said Holt. "[For example], commanding your fastball to both sides of the plate and then throwing your offspeed stuff maybe first pitch or three pitches in a row. It depends on the hitter as each hitter has a different plan that you are going to go out and use on them.

Some hitters you can finish with fastballs or a breaking ball, or a fastball inside.

That is something I have to learn as in college I was usually fastball-fastball-slider.

Now it is more maybe a first pitch slider and finishing up inside with a fastball.

Most hitters I found in the [South Atlantic League] looked outside to try to cover the outer half of the plate with two strikes, so if you could get a fastball inside then you might have some luck in there."

While throwing strikes is clearly Holt's biggest strength, it may also be his biggest weakness. If hitters know he does not walk very many people and is consistently around the zone at such a high rate, chances are they are going to dig in and go up to the plate hacking when they face him.

The ability to back off and sort of deprogram himself some to learn how to throw purpose balls is something Holt is learning how to incorporate into his gameplan, which will help to keep hitters more honest.

"That is another thing that Dave said I need to work on, which is to throw purpose balls to maybe move some hitter's feet by throwing a ball inside for a purpose to set up the outer half," said Holt. "That is something that I have always grown up doing which is to throw strikes and now it is like 'hey, you have to throw purpose balls'. So that is going to take some time for me to learn when I can get away with it and when I should throw a purpose pitch inside or away."

Holt primarily throws a three pitch mix of a fastball, slider, and changeup, and his fastball consistently sits around 88-91 MPH and has good arm side run and sink. His breaking ball is more of a modified slider - commonly called a slurve - because it lacks the velocity to be a true slider and has more break to it.

"This year in the beginning when my mechanics were all out of whack I was around

mid-to-upper 80s, but I [ended up] in the 88-90 range," said Holt. "I talked to Ruben about the velocity part of it, and he said you can't worry about it and once you get used to throwing everyday and get used to the full season your velocity will come back a year or two down the road. I am just learning how to get through that and actually pitch."

His changeup has come a long way in the short time he has been with the Indians. He lacked a feel for it coming out of college, but throughout the season started to become more confident in it and has developed a feel for it and it has improved enough to where it now has the potential to be a good pitch against left-handers.

"When I came out of college I had no changeup whatsoever," said Holt. "Last summer when the Indians put me in as a starter right out of the draft I was kind of learning the changeup on the fly.

This year they told me coming out of spring training that I would be in the pen all year.

Since then, it has come a long way."

After pitching so many innings this year, Holt is not participating in the Indians Fall Instructional League currently going on out in Goodyear, AZ. With the offseason here, Holt has a lot of time on his hands to reflect on his accomplishments and look at correcting some of his mistakes.

"It was a good season, a long season," said Holt. "It was definitely a learning experience going through that first full season. I got a little taste of it last summer with the travel and trying to keep in a routine. That was a big thing, setting up a firm routine.

It has been a satisfying year I guess.

Probably after the All Star break I started throwing better as early in the year I started out pretty bad with the mechanics and the numbers were not pretty, but I just kept working through it with Ruben.

I think it was a good learning experience to go through my first real adversity on the pitching side early in the year.

It was physical with mechanics, but also the mental side of not tinkering with too much stuff and just going out and trying to pitch through it and get better."

After a well deserved break this offseason, around the holidays Holt will start to get himself ready for the 2009 season. He learned a lot over the course of the 2008 season, and hopes he can use those experiences and instruction he received from coaches to set him up for a very good 2009 campaign.

"I will just try to keep up on my mechanics [this offseason]," said Holt. "I am

not going to pick up the ball for a little while, but just do dry drills and keep up with the mechanics.
When I start back up I will continue to work on my changeup.

Dave told me being able to throw a changeup to a righty and lefty would serve me well.

I just really need to try and get better in every phase."

Holt has a chance to move fast through the system from here on out, and projects as a good major league middle reliever. Time will tell if that projection holds true.

Photos courtesy of Ken Carr and the Lake County Captains