Taking a break from his prospect countdown for a moment, Tony takes some time out to give us a qucik rundown of the latest happenings with the Indians farm system from over the past week. Tony hits on Wes Hodges' defense, some of the national rankings of Indians prospects, highlights from he and Paulie's Thursday night radio show, and his recent trip to Lake County to attend their Hot Stove banquet.

Taking a break from the prospect countdown for a moment, here is a quick rundown of the happenings from the past week:

Here is an excerpt from a recent Brendan Harris interview in Baseball Prospectus , and when reading this think about some of the recent "piling on" this offseason in regard to Indians third base prospect Wes Hodges' defense.

David Laurila: *Depending on who you talk to, Brendan Harris is either an above-average defensive infielder or a below-average defensive infielder. Why do you think that difference of opinion exists?*

Brendan Harris: *I think that I was thought of as a pretty solid, or above-average defensive player when I was coming up with the Cubs. And I always remember this one game. I got traded, and I was in spring training with the Nationals, a new organization who, like I said, kind of cleaned house and got a new GM. I lost a ball in the sun, and then I made an error. Afterwards, the GM comes in and says, "I didn't know that you were that stiff defensively. You're really going to have*

to work on that" I think that was the second game of spring training, and defense is like hitting in that you need to get some rhythm; you need to get your feet moving in rhythm on ground balls. And I legitimately feel that he held that early-season impression against me my whole time there. Then I had different coaches I had never seen, and never worked with, say that I was stiff defensively. I felt like that rumor kind of permeated through the whole team-all of that from an early first impression. I wasn't that defensive about it; I just said, 'OK, I'm going to put some more work in.' There were some areas I thought I could improve, and I got after it and attacked my weaknesses, but it was still frustrating to have one guy, from a five- or ten-minute assessment, kind of give me a label. Even when I got to spring training in Tampa, I felt like I had a good camp, especially defensively, and Joe Maddon said, "Man, I didn't know you could play short; I didn't know you were that good defensively." I said, "Well, you haven't really seen me play," and he goes, "It was in this report," or whatever. So that report is still out there. I kind of want to find it and rip it up. But, seriously, I'm conscious of always getting better and always improving, and not getting defensive about somebody's critique of me. But at the same time, I feel that the critique was somewhat unwarranted, so it has been a little frustrating.

Just something for a little perspective. Three months ago Hodges was adored and many were looking forward to his debut as the everyday third baseman in Cleveland, that is, until Baseball America (BA) released their Top 10 Prospects back in November and not only did he miss the Top 10, but he did so they say because of a bad rating on defense. Ever since then, it seems like a lot of publications have piled on and used that some BA report. This is that unfortunate grapevine effect which happens with scouting reports of young players, where because all these writers/reporters for all these sites can't possibly see everyone, they often pull info from the same source, and all of a sudden that one source sounds like many sources.

It is the nature of the beast with scouting. Scouts typically see a pitcher ONE TIME over the course of a season and make a grade based on that one outing. Obviuously, they are trained to look through the actual results and numbers on the day, and instead are looking at things like makeup, confidence, control, command, pitchability, velocity, and so on. But it is amazing how they can do this in just one showing. Typically, a professional scout will have about seven organizations he scouts for his organization. Among each organization, he makes one 5-day visit to the pro team, Triple-A team, Double-A team, advanced Single-A team, and Single-A team. They stay at each stop for five days to see the entire five man

starting rotation pitch. They generally do not see the short-season league teams, as those leagues startup after the draft and the amatuer scouts who had been scouting talent for the draft will follow the short-season league teams and maybe make another round to some of the full season teams if possible. But that is it.

In a nutshell, scouting is not an exact science, and sometimes these erroneous reports come into play when some misinformation goes through the grapevine. I'm not saying BA's report is invalid, but I do find some of the widespread national "piling on" a bit too convenient right after the BA report. Now, Hodges is certainly not a gifted defender, but he is not as bad as he is being made out to be these past two to three months by the fans and media. I am pretty confident he will be at worst an average, steady defender at third base, and he is working hard to prove people wrong.

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Some national rankings are starting to come out for organization and individual prospect lists. ESPN's Keith Law just released his organizational ranking and Top 100 ranking of all the prospects in the minor leagues. The Indians had five players make the Top 100: Carlos Santana (C), Matt LaPorta (OF/1B), Adam Miller (RHP), David Huff (LHP), and Nick Weglarz (OF). Santana came in the highest at #13.

As for his organizational rankings , he put the Indians at #5 and had this to say:

5. Cleveland Indians: The trades of Casey Blake and CC Sabathia combined with some depth-oriented drafts have filled out this system over the past two years, although it's arguable how many impact guys the Indians have after Carlos Santana. A healthy Adam Miller, who has No. 1 starter stuff, would have had them a little higher on the list. They are one of a half-dozen teams whose prospect lists genuinely run 12 to 15 names deep.

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Thanks again to right-hander Frank Herrmann for coming on our on-line radio show Smoke Signals on Thursday night . He really provided a lot of insight into what goes on in the Winter Development Program that just wrapped up yesterday at Progressive Field. Also, he really made a lot of great points about the whole "making adjustments" process. One of the things rarely talked about is

how players are asked to tweak or overhaul things with their deliveries, reportoire, swings, etc many times over the course of the season. Some players are able to go with the flow and make those adjustments, while some others lack trust in the coaches and can sometimes be very against doing something they are not comfortable with or changing the way they have done something for years. One of the intangibles which makes an average prospect like Herrmann coming out of college into an above average prospect is that high aptitude and ability to be coached.

Next week on January 29th we will have catcher Matt McBride on the show, and down the road on February 5th closer Vinnie Pestano and February 12th outfielder Nick Weglarz.

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The Lake County Captains, the Class A affiliate of the Cleveland Indians, will have a new flagship radio home in 2009 as the team has reached an agreement with Media One Group of northeast Ohio to make Star 97.1 WREO the new Captains flagship station. The majority of all regular and post-season Captains games will be heard on Star 97.1 WREO, with select weekday day games airing on ESPN 970AM WFUN, which is also owned by Media One Group. AM 1330 WELW, which has carried Captains baseball broadcasts since the team's inaugural year in 2003, will continue to broadcast games on the Captains radio network. Star 97.1 is a 50,000 watt FM station with an east to west coverage area that ranges from the west side of Cleveland to Erie, PA and has southern coverage to Youngstown. This is the first year that Star 97.1 will carry Captains games. ESPN 970AM WFUN is an all-sports station that carries ESPN national radio, local sports programming and is also an affiliate of the Cleveland Indians. The daytime coverage of ESPN 970 is the same as the coverage area for Star 97.1.

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Speaking of Lake County, I was able to attend their Hot Stove Banquet this past Monday. It was really nice to see some of the folks there at the stadium since it has been about five months (already?) since the season ended. Also, several top prospects such as as Wes Hodges, Michael Brantley, Frank Herrmann, Erik Stiller, Neil Wagner, Josh Rodriguez, Carlos Santana, Luis Valbuena, and Hector Rondon were present and took part in a question and answer session with the fans. I had a chance to talk to a lot of the guys I had talked to over the course of

the season, and was able to finally for the first time talk to Brantley in person. He is only 21 and will be the first month or two of the Triple-A season this year, and is already 6'2" 200 pounds and strong. Good kid, and extremely mature. He often gets knocked because of a lack of power, but I believe it will start to show some this year with more doubles and triples. He's going to be special.

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Minor league free agent outfielder Jason Cooper has left the Indians and signed with the NY Mets. While he has changed organizations, his playing destination in 2009 will not change. You see, the Mets new Triple-A affiliate is the Indians old Triple-A affiliate the Buffalo Bisons. Cooper has spent a lot of years now in a Bisons uniform, and this season will mark his sixth year as a Bison. He played in Buffalo in parts of the 2004 (16 games) and 2005 (73 games) seasons, and spent all of the 2006, 2007, and 2008 seasons in Buffalo. He is certainly a fan favorite at Dunn Tire park, and when he hangs it up he will most definitely have his number retired and his name entered in the Buffalo Hall of Fame.

In fact, if he plays there all season and does not get hurt, he has a good chance to be the record holder or near record holder in virtually every offensive category. At the moment, he has played in 410 games as a Buffalo Bison which is the most in the Modern Era of the franchise. Cooper passed the record last August, which was formerly held by Buffalo Baseball Hall of Fame catcher Tom Prince who had played in 400 games with the team from 1988-1992. He also ranks 2nd in at-bats (1,359), 5th in hits (331), 2nd in doubles (81), 2nd in triples (19), 6th in home runs (49), and 2nd in RBI (212).

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Less than three weeks until pitchers and catchers report on February 12th (Minor leaguers report March 6th), and the new spring training complex in Goodyear is right on schedule for the inaugural spring training season there. Here are a few pictures, courtesy of The Arizona Republic: