Minor league opening day is today for most teams, and the Lake County Captains will get things started tonight with right-hander Joey Mahalic taking the hill. Last year the Captains had a fun season and went to the playoffs, and were led by a very strong pitching staff. This year, it should be more of the same with strong pitching and a very high profile bats. Left-hander T.J House and outfielder Abner Abreu are the stars and high profile prospects on the team, and Tony previews it all inside.

Minor league opening day is today for most teams, and with that I will be providing team previews for all the Indians full-season minor league affiliates through the end of this week. Today, we kick things off with the Single-A Lake County Captains.

Last season the Captains recaptured some of that magic they had in their inaugural season at Lake County in 2003 when they steamrolled their way to the playoffs. While the 2008 Captains did not dominate and win 100 games like their 2003 predecessors, they were just as exciting to watch, particularly with a nice quintet of starting pitchers and a deep bullpen.

The Captains qualified for the playoffs for the first time since 2003 by winning the first half division championship. Unfortunately, their season came to an unexpected halt as they lost the opening series of the South Atlantic League playoffs to West Virginia in a best-of-three series.
After winning Game One of the series on the road 10-4, the Captains came home and lost both games at Classic Park and managed to score just one run combined in those two games and picked the worst time of the year to put up their worst defensive performance as a team.
Their Achilles heel all year was their inconsistent hitting and defense, and it

eventually did them in.
Even with the quick exit and end of their season, the Captains put the finishing touches on what was their second most successful season since becoming the Single-A affiliate for the Indians in 2003.

This year's team will once again be filled with several young players making their full season debuts, and there will be several veterans returning to Lake County at the outset of the season. It will be a team loaded with some good high upside pitching in the rotation as well some intriguing arms in the bullpen.
The lineup will be the weakest link of the team, but there are some exciting bats to follow.

It should be another exciting year on the corner of Route 91 and Vine Street!

Minor League Affiliates

Columbus Clippers (AAA)
Akron Aeros (AA)
Kinston Indians (High A)
Lake County Captains (Low A)
Mahoning Valley Scrappers (Short Season A)
Arizona Indians (Rookie)

Coaching Staff

Manager: Aaron Holbert
2nd season as Lake County manager, 2nd season in Indians organization

Hitting Coach: Jim Rickon

4th season as Lake County coach, 11th season in Indians organization

Pitching Coach: Tony Arnold
1st season as Lake County pitching coach, 17th season in Indians organization

Starting Rotation

T.J. House (LHP), Alexander Perez (RHP), T.J. McFarland (LHP), Joey Mahalic (RHP), Ryan Miller (LHP)

Like in 2008, the starting rotation will be the strength of the team. The Indians have really built up their pitching depth at every level in the system, and the depth is very apparent even in Low-A.
While lefty Ryan Miller will certainly be the veteran of the staff, and righty Joey Mahalic is returning for a second year, the most talented and highly touted of the bunch is T.J. House.
Young newcomers Alexander Perez and T.J. McFarland are also young pitching prospects with bright futures.

The return of Miller and Mahalic may be a surprise to some, but it is mostly due to the depth in the system above them that has pushed some starting pitching talent back a level, which is what happened to these two. Even though they are returning to the Captains to start the season, both have some work to do before they can get hitters out consistently at the next level.

Miller went 8-7 with a 3.72 ERA in 26 starts for the Captains last year. He throws a good fastball that sits 89-91 MPH and he complements it with a curveball, slider, and changeup.
His problem has been his control (5.3 BB/9 in 2008) and staying consistent in the zone, which will create even bigger problems than they already are if he doesn't correct it before going to Kinston.

Given his previous experience in Lake County, he should not stick for long as he should get the first promotion.
When/if that happens, left-hander Chris Jones should get the call from extended spring training to fill his spot.

Mahalic broke through last year as a 19-year old at Lake County going 7-6 with a 4.19 ERA in 20 starts. His sinking fastball sits around 90-92 MPH and has topped out as high as 94 MPH, and he complements it with a slider and changeup.
Due to his youth, he was inconsistent at times last year and like Miller still needs more work with pounding the zone consistently.
He is returning to Lake County to get better at keeping his sinker low in the zone and also continue developing his changeup.

House just graduated from high school last year, and though he was not drafted until the 16th round, he was a top two round talent who slid for signability reasons.
The Indians gambled by taking him then signed him, and he now may be on the verge of becoming the best pitcher in the system.
That's how good he is from a talent and makeup perspective.
He is physically advanced for his age with his size (6'2" 215 lbs), and he throws two plus pitches a low 90s fastball and a good slider.
He also is working on developing his changeup, which he has had much success with to this point.
Provided he performs well and stays healthy, House should spend almost all of the 2009 season in Lake County.

McFarland was one of the higher profile pitchers the Indians signed out of high school in the 2007 Draft. The now 19-year old pitched for the rookie-level GCL Indians in 2008 going 3-4 with a 5.07 ERA in 12 starts.
The lefty throws a fastball that sits at 90-91 MPH though has topped out a few MPH higher, and complements it with a slider and changeup.
His main focus this year will be to continue to refine his mechanics and pitches, as well as work on being more consistent in the zone.

Perez is someone almost every Indians fan has never heard about, but like with Kelvin De La Cruz last year, could be someone by season's end who is a household name. The Indians love his potential, and feel that as he grows into his 19-year old frame currently listed at 6'2" 160 pounds, that he will be special. His fastball sits at 90-92 MPH, but he has the arm strength to add more velocity as he matures.
What separates him from most other pitchers is how far advanced his secondary pitches are at his age.
His changeup and curveball are both potential out pitches at the big league level.

Bullpen

Santo Frias (RHP), Matt Langwell (RHP), Russell Young (LHP), Steve Smith (RHP), Michael McGuire (RHP), Dave Roberts (RHP), Paolo Espino (RHP), Kyle Landis (RHP)

Guys who are stuck in the bullpen in the low levels of the minor leagues really have a tough task ahead of them in proving they belong. Typically , it is the failed starters who later are converted to the bullpen at the Double-A or Triple-A levels who tend to stick as relievers in the upper minors and eventually the majors, but there are always a few exceptions.
As we saw last year with the Captains, there are some good relief talents that can be mined from the depths of the farm system, and this year should be the same.

Frias has shown some increased arm strength hitting as high as 94 MPH with his fastball this spring. He is probably the most exciting arm of the bunch because of growth potential and ability to amp the fastball up to the mid-90s. McGuire has the big body and power arm people love in a pitcher, sitting around 91-93 MPH with his fastball.
He is a project, and the Indians will continue to work on his command and secondary pitches.
Roberts has the highest draft pedigree of the entire pitching staff as he was a 4th round pick in the 2008 Draft out of Long Beach State.
His fastball sits 91-93 MPH and tops out at 95 MPH, and complements it with a good power curveball and a changeup.
He struggled at times in 2008 at Mahoning Valley, and needs a bounce back year this season to prove he was not the reach many think he was in last year's draft.

Espino is looking to bounce back from a disastrous 2008 season where he struggled in Kinston early in the year (0-2, 8.49 ERA, 7 games), got hurt, and then returned and finished the last third of the season with the Captains (2-0, 3.16 ERA, 19 games). He sits 90-92 MPH with his fastball, but his best pitch is a nasty curveball and he also throws a changeup. Landis is somewhat of a surprise return to Lake County, and could be the first to move up when a promotion opportunity presents itself.
He was 2-0 with a 1.97 ERA (38 appearances) with the Captains last year, and really pounds the zone with his low 90s fastball and complements it with a slider.

Langwell, Smith and Young are all products of the 2008 Draft. L angwell was an 11th round pick out of Rice, and throws a good hard sinking fastball that sits 90-93 MPH.
He also throws a slider and changeup, with the slider considered a plus pitch and out pitch at the next level.
Young was impressive in his professional debut at Mahoning Valley last year going 6-3 with a 3.38 ERA in 15 starts.
He shows good control and keeps the ball down in the zone.
Smith sits 88-90 MPH with his fastball and experienced some success last year in the rookie-level Gulf Coast League going 1-1 with a 2.59 ERA and opposing batters hit just .186 off him in 16 games.

Catchers

Adam Abraham (C), Michael Valadez (C)

Abraham hit .214 with 5 HR, 22 RBI and a .696 OPS in 40 games with the GCL Indians in 2008. He is making the conversion to catcher after playing at third base most of his life, so he will be a work in progress behind the plate all year.
The Indians like his athleticism, leadership qualities, and unwavering confidence, which is obviously why they chose to try him out behind the plate.
He is a line drive hitter who has good pop, and should be the regular catcher to start the season for the Captains.

Valadez is returning to Lake County for the second consecutive season, and hit .251 with 1 HR, 17 RBI and a .620 OPS in 191 combined at bats between Lake County and Mahoning Valley last year. He is a good defensive catcher who handles a pitching staff well and calls a good game, but his limited bat has relegated him to a backup role and status as an organizational player.

Infielders

Mark Thompson (SS), Jeremie Tice (3B), Karexon Sanchez (2B), Chris Nash (1B), Walter Diaz (INF), Nate Recknagel (C/1B)

After hitting just .236 with 5 HR, 46 RBI and a .655 OPS in 416 at bats with the Captains last year, Thompson is returning to Lake County to work on becoming more consistent as a hitter and gain some confidence at the plate. He very well could start at Triple-A or the bigs on his outstanding defense alone, but his offense has been suspect since joining the organization.
Sanchez is very versatile and has big league potential as a utility player, but will get the lion's share of playing time at second base with the Captains.
He hit .246 with 12 HR, 60 RBI and a .733 OPS in 414 at bats with the Captains last year, and is returning to Lake County to work on further developing his offensive approach.

Diaz will be the utility infielder on the team backing up every position in the infield except first base.
He has limited ability offensively, but his versatility and defensive abilities will be good coming off the bench as needed.

Tice had a nice debut last year at Mahoning Valley where he hit .274 with 5 HR, 36 RBI, and a .767 OPS in 63 games. He is still growing as a third baseman since he has only been playing there for three years, but has the ability to become at least an average defender there.
His offense is his meal ticket, led mainly by his great strength and ability to muscle almost any pitch out of the park.
Nash is returning to the Captains after a disappointing 2008 campaign which was sidetracked from the start because of a shoulder injury in spring last year.
He ended up hitting .230 with 5 HR, 38 RBI, and a .641 OPS in 74 games at Lake County last year.
He has very good power potential and great size, but really needs to work on his plate discipline this year at Lake County in order to move up.
Recknagel will mostly split time at first base and designated hitter, and may catch from time to time.
He has good pop and should be one of the more consistent offensive performers for the Captains this year given his advanced college bat for the level.

Outfielders

Adam White (OF), Donnie Webb (OF), Abner Abreu (OF), Ryan Blair (OF)

The Indians promoted all of their top hitters from the 2008 Draft up to advanced Single-A Kinston to start the season, but one of their top international free agent signings in the past few seasons - Abner Abreu - will headline the Captains lineup. Last year at 18-years of age in the Gulf Coast League he finished with 31 extra base hits and led the league in doubles (16), home runs (11), total bases (107) and slugging percentage (.538), and was second in RBI (37).
He probably has some of the best raw power in the entire organization where even with his wiry frame he has some awesome raw power and the ball just explodes off his bat.
He is a very aggressive hitter at the plate so he is prone to high strikeout totals.
The Indians are very high on Abreu and feel he has a lot of room for growth physically and as a player, and looks like he could be a star in the making.

Blair and Webb are 2008 draftees, while White is returning to the Captains for a second tour of duty. Blair is a smart and versatile player, and someone who the organization feels is a lot like Matt Brown who could break onto the scene this year like Brown did last year with the Captains.
Webb under-whelmed with his performance in Mahoning Valley last year (.218, 1 HR, 17 RBI, .581 OPS), but has some tools to

be a good leadoff hitter with his good speed, solid two-strike approach, and ability to drive the ball into the gaps.
White really struggled last year offensively with the Captains, particularly in the second half of the season, where he hit .215 with 4 HR, 40 RBI, and a .602 OPS.
His speed and defense are both major league quality, but if he can't hit or get on-base it won't matter, so he is back at Lake County to refine his offensive approach and prove he has some value as a fourth outfielder in the organization.