Akron has been one of the Indians more successful affiliates in terms of wins and championships. They qualified for the playoffs last year for the fourth straight year and sixth time in the last seven years. This year as Akron will boast five of the Indians Top 11 prospects and seven of their Top 25 prospects (per Tony's rankings) on the roster to start the season. In his latest, Tony Lastoria takes a look at the 2009 Aeros, and some of the elite prospects that will be playing ball in Canal Park for them this season.

The Indians Double-A affiliate the Akron Aeros kicked off their season last night, winning in impressive fashion 9-5. What else is new these days in Akron.

Akron has been one of the Indians more successful affiliates in terms of wins and championships. They qualified for the playoffs last year for the fourth straight year and sixth time in the last seven years. More impressive, they have made it to the Eastern League Championship series in five of the last six seasons, including the last four seasons. They won their first two times in the Championship Series in 2003 and 2005, but lost the last three times in 2006, 2007 and 2008.

Like in previous seasons, Akron has seen a lot of great talent pass through that helped them win and then moved on to Triple-A Buffalo and eventually Cleveland. That will be the case again this year as Akron will boast five of the Indians Top 11 prospects and seven of their Top 25 prospects - per my preseason rankings - on the roster to start the season.

The stars of the team will be catcher Carlos Santana, outfielder Nick Weglarz, first baseman Beau Mills, and shortstop Carlos Rivero on the offensive side, and pitching-wise right-hander Hector Rondon will anchor a deeply talented pitching staff.

With Triple-A Columbus loaded with so many impact hitting prospects, Akron fans should be treated to the likes or Santana, Rivero, Weglarz, and Mills for all or most of the season. The makeup of the pitching staff could change quickly as several arms are returning this season that

should probably be in Columbus to start, and they will likely move up by mid-season once some of the veterans in Columbus begin to fall by the wayside or injuries crop up in Columbus or Cleveland.

The offense will be powerful and deep, and be the strength of the team. But, the pitching should be good as well led by staff anchor and emerging mega-prospect Hector Rondon followed by a deep rotation and bullpen of quality arms and good prospects.

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: Mike Sarbaugh
2nd season as Akron manager, 20th season in Indians organization

Hitting Coach: Lee May Jr
3rd season as Akron hitting coach, 6th season in Indians organization

Pitching Coach: Ruben Niebla
1st season as Akron pitching coach, 9th season in Indians organization

Starting Rotation

Frank Herrmann (RHP), Chuck Lofgren (LHP), Hector Rondon (RHP), Josh Tomlin (RHP), Steven Wright (RHP)

There is no question about it, Rondon is the ace of the staff and the big pitching prospect everyone will make it a point to see at some point this year. That said, there are four other pretty good pitching prospects in the rotation with Herrmann, Lofgren, Tomlin and Wright.

Each have experienced various degrees of success (and failure), and all to this point are still on the prospect map.

After a rough first six weeks in Kinston last year, Rondon really broke through as an upper-echelon starting pitching prospect finishing the year 11-6 with a 3.60 ERA in 27 starts. At 20-years old - about three years under the league average - he dominated the Carolina League finishing 4th in wins (11), 8th in ERA (3.60), 6th in starts (27), 6th in innings pitched (145.0), 3rd in WHIP (1.19), and 2nd in strikeouts (145).

He added some good weight this offensive and looks like he really matured as a pitcher.

His fastball has great life and sits 92-94 MPH and tops out at 96 MPH.

His best secondary pitch is a nasty slider that is becoming a put away pitch to right-handers, and he also throws a curveball and straight changeup.

He has all sorts of projection with his body and the arm strength to add even more velocity as he continues to mature.

Most of his work this year will be with repeating his delivery and developing his changeup and curveball.

Herrmann has been nothing short of consistent in his three year Indians minor league career. He has lived up to his nicknames of "Frank the Tank" and "The Herrmannator" because of his ability to eat innings, seemingly never give in, and his durability where he has made exactly 26 starts in each of his three seasons in the organization.

He sits 91-92 MPH with has fastball, and throws a slider and changeup that he is still refining.

Even though he went 11-6 with a 4.10 ERA at Akron last year, he is returning to the Aeros for a second tour of duty due to the logjam of starting pitching at the Triple-A level.

Once the starting pitching begins to thin out in Triple-A Columbus, Herrmann is expected to be the first starter moved up.

Lofgren had a season to forget last year in Akron (2-6, 5.99 ERA, 28 games), partly due to personal reasons as well as some mechanical issues that affected his command. Lofgren used the offseason to his advantage and is has come into the 2009 season with a clear mind and is about 15 pounds lighter.

He still has the stuff to be a starter, and the Indians are committed to seeing him through as one even after such a rough year last season.

This is Lofgren's third year in Akron, and an important one for him to get himself back on the prospect map.

Tomlin shot up the prospect rankings after a very impressive campaign in Kinston last year. He has always put up the numbers as his career minor league stat line is a record of 29-11, 2.94 ERA, 1.8 BB/9, 8.2 K/9, and 1.05 WHIP in 88 career games, but it goes beyond the numbers in the minors and his tools never stood out.

That changed last year as he started to consistently clock in with his fastball at 90-91 MPH and touch 93 MPH, and the development of his slider was one of the biggest stories of the system last year to where it now is a legit out pitch for him.

Wright really made amends for his subpar 2007 campaign by starting the 2008 season in Kinston and going 2-4 with a 2.99 ERA in 14 starts and then moved up to Akron and went 4-3 with a 4.30 ERA in 14 starts. He sits at 90-91 MPH with the fastball and can get it up to 93 MPH, but his bread and butter pitch is his slider which is a major league out pitch.

He is a good makeup guy and hard worker, and while he is starting now he still projects more as a bullpen guy in the bigs because of that nasty slider and ability to amp it up to 92-93 MPH with the fastball.

Bullpen

Ryan Edell (LHP), Michael Finocchi (RHP), Randy Newsom (RHP), Vinnie Pestano (RHP), Scott Roehl (RHP), Erik Stiller (RHP), Neil Wagner (RHP)

The Akron bullpen is filled with a lot of players making their second and even third appearance with the team. Everyone except for closer Vinnie Pestano has pitched in Akron previously, so this veteran and experienced presence in the bullpen should be one of the strong points of the team just from a consistency standpoint as the season moves along.

Newsom probably has the biggest beef of anyone in the bullpen as to why he is not opening the year in Triple-A Columbus, though he should be the first pitcher called up when his performance dictates it or a need arises. He is one of the more commonly known Akron players in the history of the franchise, mostly because of his 48 career saves at Akron which has just obliterated the franchise record. While he only sits in the low 80s with his fastball, he throws from the unique submarine-sidearm slot.

He struggled at times with walks last year, and this is something the Indians will want to see improved before sending him to Columbus permanently.

Pestano is expected to handle the bulk of the closing duties with the Aeros, with Newsom setting up and pitching in save situations on nights that Pestano gets off. Pestano is another sidearmer who relies more on command and control and pitches to contact to get his outs.

His fastball sits at 89-90 MPH, and he complements it with a curveball that he needs to continue to improve this season.

Wagner is a power-armed righty who can bring it consistently at 93-95 MPH and has topped out as high as 98 MPH. He spent the last few weeks of the season in Akron last year, and really impressed in the playoffs. He lacks a good secondary pitch, so the continued development of his changeup and slider will be key for him this year.

Edell is making what looks to be a permanent conversion to a relief role. While he had a good season as a starter in Akron last year going 7-8 with a 3.80 ERA, his stuff does not project well as a starter and he always projected more as a lefty coming out of the bullpen.

He sits 90-91 MPH with the fastball and throws a good curveball, and his exceptional command

and ability to spot the ball should be on display every night he comes out of the bullpen.

Stiller is the poster child for perseverance and confidence in your abilities as he went from an undrafted free agent signing in 2006 to Double-A and one of the Indians better relief prospect in less than two years. He has the size at 6'5" 210 pounds to go along with a fastball that sits at 91-92 MPH and tops out at 94 MPH that makes talent evaluators drool.

The key for him this year will be consistency and refining his delivery.

Finocchi missed half of the 2008 season recovering from a broken foot, and really struggled upon his return in the second half of the season in Kinston (1-1, 6.52 ERA, 22 games). His power-sinking fastball sits at 92-94 MPH and he complements it with a hard slider and changeup.

He gets hitters to pound the ball into the ground, but needs work on his fastball command and becoming more confident using his secondary pitches.

Roehl is the veteran of the bunch at 27-years of age, and went 1-2 with a 2.54 ERA in 40 games with Akron last year. He has good life on his low 90s fastball, but his secondary stuff needs more work. He has a career 3.31 ERA, 3.1 BB/9, 8.1 K/9, and 1.27 WHIP in his minor league career, yet has moved slowly.

If Newsom were not to get the call to Columbus for some reason, Roehl would be next in line.

Catchers

Damaso Espino (C), Carlos Santana (C)

Santana is the guy everyone will be watching early on this season. The near-unanimous #1 prospect in the system, fans are excited to see the switch-hitter in action and what he can do at the Double-A level and with the Indians for a full season.

He certainly wetted the appetite last year as he hit .326 with 21 HR, 117 RBI and a .999 OPS in 130 combined games with advanced Single-A Kinston and Inland Empire.

He was the MVP of the California League even though he did not play there the last six weeks of the season after being traded to the Indians, that's how impressive his numbers were there.

His ability to hit for average and power as well as exhibit good plate discipline is what excites so many people about his abilities in the box, and when you add to it a lethal throwing arm you have one heck of a catching prospect.

He needs work transitioning to the catching role and getting better defensively, which is something he will work on all season.

Espino was actually acquired last year as well in a much smaller deal last June where the

Indians picked him up from the Royals for cash considerations. He will be Santana's caddy, but is the ideal backup that will help groom Santana in all the nuances of the catching game.

Infielders

Jared Goedert (3B), Jerad Head (INF/OF/C), Beau Mills (1B), Carlos Rivero (SS), Josh Rodriguez (2B), Niuman Romero (INF)

Mills won the Carolina League MVP last year in Kinston after he hit .293 with 21 HR, 90 RBI and an .879 OPS. He will be part of a quartet of impressive bats in Akron this year, and even though he won the MVP last year he has been sort of overlooked because of the presence of Santana and the big-bopper Weglarz on the team. In any case, he has an electric bat with excellent power and strength and will be one of the more exciting players to watch this year. He is a very intense player on the field, and has extraordinary makeup.

His main area of focus this year will be to continue to improve at first base as his defense is largely knocked by scouts and national pundits.

Rivero is a talent that is expected to blossom this year. He has never really put up the numbers and has always been about potential, but this is the year his potential is expected to start showing itself with better performance and results numbers-wise.

He is often compared to Indians shortstop Jhonny Peralta from a physical and hitting standpoint, though he projects to be a better fielder than Peralta.

He will open the season at just the tender age of 20 and won't turn 21 until two months into the season, so will be one of the youngest players in the Eastern League.

His big area of focus this year will be with improving his plate discipline.

Goedert is starting to level out and look like a good, solid prospect in the system. He may not be a star in the making, but he has the physical tools, versatility and bat to potentially crack a big league lineup some day at third base, second base, or as a utility player.

He is a line drive, gap hitter with the ability to hit the ball out to any part of the ballpark.

He also has an advanced approach at the plate and makes the routine play defensively.

Rodriguez had a disappointing season at Akron last year (.241 AVG, 7 HR, 49 RBI, .694 OPS), and will look to rebound this year. While he split time at shortstop and second base last year, he is expected to spend most of his time this season at second.

He is a great athlete with a knack for hitting and packs some thunder in his bat.

His main area of focus this season will be more consistency at the plate and becoming a better

situational hitter.

Romero had sort of a breakout season last year (.296 AVG, 6 HR, 53 RBI, .753 OPS), though it was more to put him on the map as a utility option for the Indians down the road. He can play anywhere in the infield, and is a leader, particularly with the other Latin players.

Head is the do-it-all handyman of the team that can literally play anywhere on the diamond.

He can catch as well as play anywhere in the infield and outfield.

He has some pop in his bat, but needs to get more consistent at the plate and work on his plate discipline.

Outfielders

Jose Constanza (OF), John Drennen (OF), Mickey Hall (OF), Nick Weglarz (OF)

Weglarz is the big-bopper in the Akron lineup and will primarily play left field for the Aeros. He is an impressive physical specimen, and at 250+ pounds and strong as an ox he easily has the best power bat in the Indians' system.

He has tremendous power, and often is compared to Jim Thome because of that left-handed power and plate discipline.

He takes walks and shows exceptional patience at the plate for a player who will be 21-years of age the entire season.

What he lacks in athleticism he makes up for with his exceptional makeup and ability to hit.

He needs more work being a little more aggressive at the plate as at times he was too patient last season.

Constanza is the scrappy speedster who will primarily hit leadoff for the Aeros. He has outstanding bat control and bat-to-ball ability, and very good baseball instincts.

He projects as a fourth outfielder because of his speed, versatility, and limited pop in his bat, and may eventually break in with the Indians in such a role down the road, but for the Aeros should be the regular center fielder.

Drennen has spent almost all of the last three seasons in Kinston, so a move up to Akron should energize what last year looked like a fading career. He has a compact build and sweet swing, but after such a disastrous season in Kinston last year (.235 AVG, 3 HR, 39 RBI, .630 OPS), this is a big year for him to regain his prospect standing in the organization.

Hall came over from the Red Sox in the Paul Byrd trade, and will serve as the fourth outfielder.