In case you have not noticed the Indians are in dire need of bullpen help. Back in the beginning of May the Indians made several moves up and down the system changing several of their hard-throwing impact starters into bullpen roles. One of those pitchers they converted to a relief role is right-hander Zach Putnam. And Putnam is flourishing in his new role as a reliever. Tony had a chance to talk with him about it this weekend.

In case you have not noticed the Indians are in dire need of bullpen help.

They have exhausted almost every option available to them at the big league and Triple-A level only to find a few band aids to cover the holes in a bullpen that was a train wreck each and every night the first six or seven weeks of the season. The current bullpen really is a patch job of duck tape, bandages, and super glue to piece together a bullpen that took a hand grenade and blew itself up into a million pieces earlier this year.

How long those band aids will hold is anyone's guess. It is just a temporary fix with the hope that when some of their regulars get healthy or return to pitching like they should be that some of the issues this year may be ironed out. But, the fact of the matter is the Indians need to start developing internal solutions to fill bullpen needs at the big league level now and in the future, and if that means converting high level pitching prospects into bullpen roles to expedite their way to the big leagues, so be it. And it looks like this is starting to happen.

Back in the beginning of May the Indians made several moves up and down the system changing several of their hard-throwing impact starters into bullpen roles.

It was a significant change in their philosophy of handling some of their higher upside pitchers, but was a change they considered worth taking considering the challenges they have been facing this year and in years past of putting together a quality big league bullpen.

One of those pitchers they converted to a relief role is right-hander Zach Putnam.

Putnam is flourishing in his new role as a reliever. His impact arm with a fastball that sits 92-93 and can touch 96 MPH to go along with a devastating splitter give him two major league out pitches as a potentially dominant late-inning reliever. The Indians saw that potential with his arm, and while they always envisioned him at some point moving from a starting role to relief role, they pushed the envelope and moved him to a reliever sooner than later. Because he has an advanced feel for pitching to go along with excellent makeup and composure on the mound and those two outstanding pitches, they felt he could handle the sudden change even though he has limited professional experience and hasn't even been in the system for a year.

Putnam began the season in the rotation at High-A Kinston going 2-0 with a 4.13 ERA in five starts. In 24.0 innings pitched he allowed 22 hits, 5 walks and had 23 strikeouts. If not for an injury to right-hander Bryce Stowell in spring training, Putnam was actually slotted to open the season in the Kinston bullpen from the start, but with Stowell sidelined Putnam slid into his rotation spot which allowed for him to get more regular work before his eventual move to a priority bullpen role.

That move came on May 6th when he was promoted to Double-A Akron and officially moved to the bullpen as a priority reliever. Since that move, in 10 appearances at Akron he is 1-1 with a 5.94 ERA and in 16.2 inning has allowed 19 hits, 7 walks, and has 14 strikeouts. His has performed well in the short time he has been in Akron, and he has handled the quick promotion and role change well.

"Yeah, it's [been] crazy," said Putnam in a recent interview about the sudden callup to Akron and change to the bullpen. "My head is still spinning a little bit, but I am thrilled. It definitely happened faster than I thought it would, but they told me that it may not be my last run as a starter. I have been starting my whole life and never really experienced the bullpen at all. I experienced some success in Kinston, so I figured they were going to leave me there and ride it out, though I knew that down the road somewhere that I was going to be switched to the bullpen. It is definitely an adjustment for me, but I am still pitching and that's

what I gotta keep telling myself is it is the same thing I have been doing just a little bit of a different role."

Just because Putnam has been moved to the bullpen does not mean he will never go back to starting, but it seems very likely this is a role he will stay in and will be groomed for the big leagues.

"He is a guy we took in the draft last year out of Michigan who has a power fastball up to 95 MPH and has a strikeout splitter," Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins said recently. "He did have the ability to start in college and may have the ability to start in the major leagues, but we see him as having the potential to be a high upside bullpen arm. Sometimes you just make the decisions to develop them in those roles. Is it out of the question that he will never start again? No, it is not out of the question. But in the near future he is going to be developed as a bullpen arm."

In addition to his fastball and splitter, Putnam also throws a slider, curveball and changeup. The slider does have the potential to develop into a plus pitch for him, though the changeup is more a show pitch and the curveball is at best an average pitch. To go along with his stuff, at 6'2" 225-pounds he has the big frame, strong legs and broad shoulders to be a workhorse as a late-inning reliever. He is tenacious on the mound, much like a pit bull where he will attack and challenge hitters and go right at them without backing down. That aggressiveness combined with his excellent composure in tight games and his notoriety throughout his college career as being a big game pitcher is what the Indians and scouts love about him in a bullpen role.

"Obviously he is moving quickly as he was just taken in the 2008 draft and in 2009 he is already in Double-A," said Atkins. "He is showing plenty of ability. He has already touched 95 MPH in Double-A and has gotten a couple of strikeouts with his split finger. He is extremely athletic with a great baseball pedigree. He is someone we are excited about."

Excited is an understatement.

The Indians should be absolutely thrilled to have a pitcher like Putnam burning up the ranks and with such great potential as a much needed late-inning arm. They have not had such an arm come through the system in the bullpen and used at the big league level under GM Mark Shapiro's watch, a tenure which started over

seven years ago. Right-hander Adam Miller is the closest thing they have had to a an impact prospect with such great ability being put in the bullpen, but he was always groomed as a starter and was not put in the bullpen until a last resort effort to salvage his fading career because of his injury woes.

The Indians have always done a good job scoring runs and putting together a solid rotation, but the bullpen has been another story. Under Shapiro, the bullpen has always been their Achilles Heel and for the most part why a season went wrong. In the past, they have had trouble developing prospects for such a role for the big league team and only recently seemed to have changed their plan with how they handle developing some of their higher level pitchers in the system. It appears that they are now being a little more proactive moving some of those arms to a bullpen role to better fill a need at the major league level.

Putnam's fast callup to Akron is a byproduct of some of their on-the-fly changes in their philosophy this year. In year's past, they would never have a pitcher go right to Double-A with just a handful of innings at the professional level. They value the stop at Kinston very much, and prefer even their best players to get a good amount of innings or at bats at that level before moving them to the Double-A level in Akron. But, with this sudden change in their philosophy mostly surrounding some of their higher level power arms, if you have "it" you now have a chance to move through the system a lot quicker than in years past.

"Yeah, you never know," said Putnam about the possibility he could be in Cleveland this year or next year. "Expecting to be in Kinston the whole year and coming here now I have to prepare myself for whatever happens everyday I come to the park. On one hand you have to prepare yourself for the rest of the year here in Akron and settle in, but on the other hand you have it in the back of your mind that 'I wasn't expecting that call [to Akron] either, so shoot, anything can happen.'"

Putnam was a 5th round pick in the 2008 Draft out of the University of Michigan, and made just three appearances last year at short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley because he signed so close to the August 15th signing deadline. Even though he made just those three appearances in Mahoning Valley, he showed his stuff there and in spring training earlier this year where club officials all the way to the top came away impressed with what they saw.

The casual observer may look at Putnam's numbers on the surface where he has a 3-1 record and 4.87 ERA in 15 combined appearances at Kinston and Akron this year and say that he doesn't seem all that impressive. But when you scratch below the surface, you see what makes him so intriguing. He gets hitters to pound the ball into the ground (2.07 GO/AO), has surrendered just two home runs in 50.0 career innings pitched (0.2 HR/9), and has a good 2.7 BB/9 and 8.3 K/9 rate.

"We just saw him as someone who has the potential to be very special as a bullpen pitcher and quick," said Atkins. "So we felt with his variables it was a good transition at the time as he was a dominant college player, dominant in spring training, and was dominant in Kinston. He has what we are looking for with the demeanor, the strikeout pitch, and a high groundball rate. The hitters in the Eastern League just cannot lift the ball. He has the highest groundball percentage in Double-A at 80% or close to it."

He has been stellar in 13 of his 15 outings or 39 of his 40.2 innings pitched, however you want to look at it. He really has experienced two bad outings - all in one inning each - which have spiked his ERA and the hit totals against him. In one outing in Kinston he allowed seven runs in the first inning before settling in to go four shutout innings the rest of his start. Also, in a recent bullpen appearance he allowed eight runs in just two thirds of an inning. Considering he has allowed just 22 earned runs all year in 40.2 innings, if you take away those two innings of work he has allowed just seven runs in his other 39.0 innings (1.62 ERA).

"I think what happened is it was my first away start, so I was not really accustomed to the timing of getting ready to pitch," said Putnam about that Kinston start where he allowed seven first inning runs. "I came off the mound about the same time I would if I were starting at home. We had a long first inning and a half hour break between when I was in the bullpen warming up and going to the mound [in the bottom of the first inning]. By the time I got out there I kind of lost my edge a little bit. I only threw like 17 pitches in that first inning, and that tells you they were swinging first pitch. A couple guys hit the ball hard and squared it up pretty good, but more than that I think it was just a lot of balls finding holes and a perfect storm of bad events all in one inning."

Now that he is in Akron, Putnam's family can more easily attend games since they are only about three hours away in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Getting to Kinston is always a struggle for the parents of players, especially those not within a reasonable driving distance to just pop down for a long weekend. The closest large airport is in Raleigh-Durham, which is a little over an hour and a half away from Kinston, and all the regional airports that surround Kinston are within 30 minutes or so but can be hard to find good flights in and out of.

Putnam's love for all things baseball as well as maize and blue at Michigan come from his father, Steve, who was able to make it down to Akron for his debut last month.

"My parents actually saw my first outing so that was nice," said Putnam. "I'm only about three hours away, and it is a pretty easy drive, so I think it is going to be hard to keep my dad out of the park (laughs). My parents were just beside themselves when I called and told them I was going to Akron and I was going to be close to home. Obviously it was for my sake they were proud of me, but for them too as they can now see me pitch. They had not gone down to Kinston, and I don't think they planned on coming down until June or something."

At this point, Putnam is ready to face the challenge of adapting to work as a relief pitcher and at the same time face some of the best competition at the Double-A level he has ever gone up against in his life. And to maybe someday soon get that big league shot.

"This all happened sooner than I expected," said Putnam, "but the underlying factor is whatever is going to get me [to the big leagues] faster I'm

all for it."