It's been a long time coming for Jason Smit. After spending the better part of the last three seasons at the Indians spring training complex for nine-plus months a year, Smit was put on the opening day roster for short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley when their season started about three weeks ago. Such is the life for an international player who signs at 16-years of age. Smit has been one of the pleasant surprises in the Tribe farm system this year, and Tony had a chance to talk with him about it this week.

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Since signing in July of 2006, Smit had spent the 2006, 2007 and 2008 season's playing at the Indians former spring training site in Winter Haven, FL for their then rookie level Gulf Coast League team. In between there he also spent all of extended spring training in 2007 and 2008 and all of Instructional League in 2006, 2007 and 2008 at the Winter Haven complex.

If anyone ever needed a tour guide of the ins and outs of Winter Haven the old Chain O'Lakes complex, he would be your guy.

The Indians moved their spring training site as well as all their player development operations to Goodyear, AZ this year. While Smit did stick around earlier this year in Goodyear for his third extended spring training, it was a much better experience because he expected to come east and play for one of the Indians Single-A affiliates in Ohio, be it Low-A Lake County or Mahoning Valley. The move east would also mean he would get his first taste of the excitement of finally playing in front of fans, something he had almost no experience of doing in an Indians uniform prior to his arrival in Mahoning Valley a few weeks back.

"Actually, to the day they named the rosters I did not know where I was going to be, but it feels good to be here," said Smit in a recent interview at Eastwood Field in Niles, OH. "I didn't know what to expect coming into this season because last season I was injured the whole year.

But I really had a good spring training and extended spring training with my hitting.

I could have been [with the rookie team] again, though I didn't think I was going to because I played so well.

I kind of think in a way I have earned my place coming here [to Mahoning Valley].

It is so much better coming here and playing in front of people instead of in the GCL [or in Arizona]."

Smit, now 19, was signed out of Australia at about this time three years ago. At the time he was signed, he was widely considered a top ten International prospect.

He was a guy that the Indians felt was a middle of the diamond player who had a lot of upside offensively and for his age had great instincts for the game and a very advanced approach at the plate.

It was always felt that he had the potential to play anywhere in the infield or even the outfield.

Indians Assistant GM and Director of Scouting John Mirabelli plucked Smit from those International waters three years ago, and likes what he has seen so far this year.

"I gotta tell you, he is one of my pleasant surprises of the year," said Mirabelli. "He has struggled with injuries and had trouble getting his feet on the ground in terms of a position, which is hard when you have an injury, but I will tell you what, he is swinging the bat and he is showing some power."

Smit's versatility has been put to the test as injuries along with maturity have pretty much moved Smit out of the middle infield picture. He is continuing to grow and fill out, and even though he is listed at 6'0" 165-pounds, he is noticeably bigger in both height and weight.

An injury to his shoulder which occurred in spring training and later a hamstring injury which plagued him much of the rest of the year pretty much ruined his 2008 season.

The injuries started the ball rolling near the end of last season where the Indians decided to move him to the outfield in Instructional League, and to date he has handled that transition exceptionally well.

"I got hurt last year halfway through spring training and I missed all of extended spring training and I only ended up with about 50 at bats throughout the season," said Smit. "So, it was pretty hard to get going because you would play two innings in one game, then two innings the next game, four innings, four innings, four innings and just kind of progress [to get back into regular game activity].

This year I have not had an injury yet so I am hoping for the best."

With the move to the outfield, Smit has grown to love the new position. Though he primarily is now considered an outfielder he will also play first base, and at times if there is a need he will also play third base. T
he transition to the outfield mostly occurred last year, and this year he spent most of spring training and extended spring training working out at first base to add that skill to his repertoire.

"Yeah, I am kind of moving all over the place, but whatever spot gets me at bats I will play there," said Smit. "I have talked to the club on a number of occasions and said I will play anywhere, though I don't think I will be playing much middle infield too much anymore.

To be honest, while I haven't been playing the outfield very long I feel very comfortable out there.

I can play all three spots in the outfield, and also play first base and some third base."

The Indians feel that Smit is showcasing the athleticism they loved when they signed him with his recent ability to learn so many positions in such quick order.

"When we originally signed him he was very young but physical and his father and brother [had good size], so we thought that he would become a bigger kid and would have some power," said Mirabelli. "We felt good about his potential power down the road. We were not always sure of him staying in the middle infield as I actually thought he would end up at third base, but he is playing pretty good in the outfield and has played first base.

If he can ever get his arm back and get some confidence in throwing, maybe [down the road] we go back to third base with him."

So far this season, through games played on Tuesday July 7th, in 18 games Smit is hitting a very good .323 (21-for-65) with 0 HR, 8 RBI, and an .892 OPS. While he is off to a good start, he is still focusing on getting better with his pitch selection and pre-pitch routines.

"The last two seasons I have been working on a lot during the season," said Smit. "I am working with [Mahoning Valley Hitting Coach] Phil Clark to work more on approach and not change anything mechanically.

Just concentrate more on pitch selection and stuff like that.

When we sit down and talk he is happy with my mechanics, but it is more about what pitch to swing at or take.

I think he has been really good about everything, and has been a good change for me."

Smit has only been playing baseball since he was 12-years old, which shows how raw of a prospect he was when the Indians signed him as a 16-year old in 2006. He has also spent much of the last three years stateside in the United States away from his family and long-time high school sweetheart who all still live in Australia.

Through all of the challenges on the field and off it in adapting to the professional game, lifestyle, and being apart from loved ones, he has handled it very well.

Now that he is in Mahoning Valley and playing in front of fans and finally getting some exposure, he will be a player a lot of fans watch in the coming years as he moves his way through the Indians system. But for now, Smit says his main focus is on this season.

"Right now I just want to stay healthy," said Smit with a smile," and get after it everyday."

Mirabelli agrees.

"He is still young at only 19 years old. He is a great, smart kid. Is a very hard worker and has a lot of intangibles that you like to bet on with a kid like that.

He has bounced back from a little bit of adversity - young kids don't always do that - and I am very pleased where he is right now."