They call Nick Weglarz "Big Red" because of his enormous size and red hair, but these days many opposing pitchers call him "Code Red" after the pounding he has given them in the Eastern League this year playing for Double-A Akron. The 21-year old outfielder is blossoming into the big time power prospect many thought he could be when the Indians selected him in the 3rd round of the 2005 Draft. Before Tony sets out on his two week excursion to North Carolina to see Kinston play, he takes some time to get us up to speed on what the Gentle Giant in Akron has been up to this season.

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The 21-year old outfielder is blossoming into the big time power prospect many thought he could be when the Indians selected him in the 3rd round of the 2005 Draft out of Lakeshore Catholic High School in Stevensville, Canada. To date this season Weglarz is hitting .243 with 13 HR, 59 RBI and has an .853 OPS, and his experience in his first taste of Double-A has been a good one so far.

"It's been good here in Double-A for the first year," said Weglarz in a recent interview at Canal Park.

It wasn't so much fun in the early going as he hit a miserable .089 (5-for-59) with a .386 OPS in April. Since the frigid April start Weglarz has rebounded in a big way hitting .329 with a 1.055 OPS in May and .281 with a 1.007 OPS in June.

"I struggled a little bit the first month, but I think it was a combination of trying to do too much and a couple of mechanical issues that I have ironed and gotten better with since the start of the year," said Weglarz. "I have been working on having a consistent bat path each at bat. I just started relaxing at the plate and doing what I am capable of and not trying to do too much and things just started to click. I never doubted myself as I know I can play at this level. I don't think I have struggled like that ever in my life. It was tough, but it was a learning experience at the same time."

Weglarz worked a lot before and after games with Akron Hitting Coach Lee May Jr. to try and get him out of the funk he was in offensively. They made a few adjustments at the plate, namely spreading his legs out to give him a wider base, and the results to date show for themselves.

"We tried different stuff and drills, but we didn't do anything drastic," said Weglarz. "I took it upon myself near the end there that when it all comes down to it I was not seeing the ball at the plate and I was missing the pitches. So I spread out a little bit so I could see a few pitches and try to get a better pitch to hit. And I started to lay off stuff that was borderline out of the zone that I was putting in play or fouling off, and I started getting better pitches."

The batting average may not be impressive, but when you factor in his 58 walks to just 59 strikeouts and a .389 on-base percentage, there is a lot to like about him besides the power at the plate. His advanced approach at the plate, discipline, and light tower power is what has made him such an intriguing prospect for the Indians. His size is striking as he stands in at the plate at 6'3" 255-pounds with thighs the size of tree trunks, but he still shows some good athleticism for a player his size.

He's very much a gentle giant as he may be one of the kindest and level-headed players off the field, which is why his abilities, size, and demeanor are so often compared to former Indians slugger Jim Thome. He has a long ways to go match the 500+ home runs Thome has hit at the big league level, but the similarities are certainly there. Weglarz may not have the advanced ability to hit for average Thome had at age 21, but Weglarz has him beat by about 30 pounds in size and arguably has more power than Thome had at 21 years of age.

Because of his size and power potential there has been some concerns on how long Weglarz can remain in the outfield. As he continues to grow and fill out,

eventually he may grow out of the outfield and have to be put at first base. He has shown no signs of needing such a move as he has held up well in the outfield the last two years even after gaining 30-plus pounds of weight. It is a testament to the athleticism he has for a guy his size, and his determination he has in sticking in the outfield.

He has also been getting some time in right field this year, and in the limited time he has had in right he has shown good arm strength and kept his throws on a line with good carry. Overall he has become a solid defender in the outfield, and is not the liability big sluggers so often can become in the outfield.

For at least the time being the Indians still plan on keeping him in the outfield as he has not worked out at all at first base since signing four years ago. This is good news to Weglarz as he prefers playing in the outfield and wants to stay out there.

"I feel comfortable out there now," said Weglarz about playing the outfield. "I have also played a couple games in right field. Everything seems backwards over there, but it is the same thing as left. It is just a comfort issue that playing three years in left I got used to the left side of the field, but growing up I always played on the right side of the field [at first base]. It is just about learning to get better reads in batting practice and in the game and getting comfortable out there."

Coming into the season, I rated Weglarz as my No. 2 prospect in the system , which was a surprise to many that he was ranked ahead of the recently acquired outfielder Matt LaPorta. Both were close, and LaPorta was for most of the time ranked ahead of Weglarz in early drafts of the prospect ranking, but in the end they were flipped because one thing which I kept going back to was Weglarz's awesome play in International competition.

In last year's Olympics in Beijing, Weglarz was an offensive force for his Canadian teammates hitting .455 with two home runs in seven games and was named team MVP. His performance against world power Cuba where he smoked two home runs estimated around 500 feet apiece was impressive, with one of those home runs a moon shot to dead center that hit off the top of a pole 40 to 50 feet up in the air. Earlier in the year in March (2008) he again suited up for Canada and went to Australia to play in the Olympic qualifiers where he hit .450 in the seven games played and lead all players in the tournament with three home runs.

Weglarz's performance in those 14 games between the Qualifiers in March and Olympics in August are a big reason to get excited about his potential. While he had never had an at bat above the High-A level going into those tournaments, he more than held his own facing Triple-A level talent and above and in some cases major league talent.

Weglarz also took part in the World Baseball Classic (WBC) this past spring, adding yet another International tournament to his resume. Canada only played in two games as they lost both of their games in the first round to the United States and Italy, and were eliminated from pool play. Still, Weglarz enjoyed the experience getting to play at home in front of his hometown fans in Toronto at the Skydome and playing against the best talent in the world.

"It was awesome," said Weglarz about his WBC experience. "We wanted to win, but kind of overlooked Italy since we were gearing up for Venezuela. The experience of me going through that and playing at home [was great] as it was the first time I had played in Canada since I signed [with the Indians]. It was almost a sold out crowd at about 45,000 with a ton of family and friends there."

Given his experience playing in International competition the past few years, Weglarz does see it as an advantage in helping with not only his development, but also gaining experience controlling his emotions on the big stage and playing in some hostile environments.

"Going back to the Qualifiers last March we played in front of 35,000 wild Taiwanese fans, and [my teammate] Rob Ducey who played in the big leagues told me that if you can play in front of that you can play in front of any big league crowd," said Weglarz. "Then in the WBC with 45,000 fans out there a lot of the big league guys on our team said it was a playoff atmosphere. I don't think it gets any more electric than that, and if you can play in front of that and perform it is about as big as it gets."

As this season continues to roll along Weglarz has hit a rough patch of late and is hitting just .189 with a .728 OPS in 13 games in July. Part of that may be from some of the crazy travel the last few weeks as he went to St. Louis to take part in the Futures Game and then immediately flew to Trenton, NJ to play in the Eastern League All Star game. He and his other All Star Akron teammates encountered some of the familiar issues with air travel when their flight back to Akron was

delayed, and when they changed flights their luggage and playing equipment did not arrive until a day later.

This will be a key offseason for Weglarz as he is up for roster protection in the Rule 5 Draft this year, and since he will surely be protected he'll be officially added to the Indians 40-man roster in mid-November. This brings with it bigger paychecks, but also more attention and scrutiny from the fans. But with about six weeks left in the season, Weglarz's only focus right now is on finishing strong.

"For me I think I have been a better player and have played the best I have in my career," said Weglarz. "If you take out April I am sure my numbers are even better. I want to get my swing more consistent and cut down on the few flaws I have, and if I can do that I think it will only help me.