When you think of the Indians very good 2008 Draft you immediately think of names like third baseman Lonnie Chisenhall (1st round), right-handed pitcher Zach Putnam (5th round), and left-handed pitcher T.J. House (16th round). Another player from that draft who is impressing and could quickly become one of the first names you think about is 19-year old right-hander Clayton Cook. The 6'3" 175-pound Amarillo, TX native was selected in the 9th round of the draft out of high school, and is now playing for the Indians short-season Single-A affiliate Mahoning Valley. Tony had a chance to talk to him recently.

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Cook signed right away and impressed last year in his first taste of professional ball pitching at the rookie-level Gulf Coast League (GCL) out in Winter Haven, FL where he went 1-2 with a 2.52 ERA in 11 appearances (six starts). In 25.0 innings of work he allowed just 20 hits, eight walks, and had 26 strikeouts. He pitched well beyond his years and impressed the Indians with his composure and maturity on the mound at such a young age considering he was 17 years old for most of his time on the GCL club. It was a really good, unexpected debut for him considering

he was still transitioning to professional baseball and was a few years younger than most of the hitters in the league.

"It was almost like I was so young and I didn't know what I was getting myself into," recalled Cook about his experience in the GCL in a recent interview. "I didn't know the magnitude or what the situation was, I just got in there and I told myself to pitch my game and I will do fine. Do what got me there. I am always motivated by flying under the radar, and it is what motivated me to push harder and show people what I can do."

Cook quickly signed with the Indians after the draft and was able to be with the GCL team the entire season. By signing early it afforded him the opportunity to get his feet wet quickly and get some exposure to the professional game and lifestyle. He performed very well, which surprised even himself.

"Looking back on my high school career I feel like I was good, but there was a lot in my approach and my routines I could have gotten better at there," said Cook. "And the second I stepped into Winter Haven I was automatically just mentally more mature, the stuff was a lot better, and the fastball command was there from the get go that I really did not have in high school and show to scouts. So a lot of that success comes from that. Not showing what I had pre-draft as in high school you can throw high 80s low 90s you can throw a fastball anywhere or a curveball in the dirt and guys will swing. Here I knew I was going to have to actually pitch. I was more zoned in, and more focused. I kind of surprised myself a little bit actually as the command I had I did not know I had it until I really focused in."

Cook was set to be a Sooner and go to the University of Oklahoma after graduating high school, but he made it very clear to scouts before the draft that he would be willing to forgo college and get his professional career started right away if he received a fair offer.

"No, and I pretty much made it pretty clear to scouts too," said Cook when asked if he was dead set on going to college. "I didn't give them a number, but I gave them an idea and told them I wanted to sign and wanted to play. When the Indians drafted me in the ninth they called me and asked me 'will you sign' and I was like 'yeah, I'm in'. It was never take me and I will talk and then I will talk to my family as we had already talked about it. It was what I wanted to do as it was always a dream to pursue a dream in major league baseball and was

never a dream to play college baseball."

One of the interesting facets of the baseball draft is the inclusion of high school players, and the hard decision those picked face in signing now or going to college to improve their stock. But for most players, that comes at a risk as once you enter college you cannot be picked again until after your junior season. A lot of bad can happen in three years, and this is a gamble Cook did not want to take, especially since he was so sure he wanted to get his professional career going now.

"That's the thing," said Cook. "I had been told the quicker you get in here the more you are learning and the quicker you can get better and move up. Maturing mentally and physically and developing a routine."

The Indians place a lot of their higher level Latin players in Lake County at age 19 and by the time they are 21-22 years old they are in Double-A or Triple-A. The same can be said of some of their higher profile high school picks too. By signing early, it allows the player time to transition to the game much quicker and all the while develop and learn professional routines right from the start. Yes, the first two or three years for a high school (or Latin) signing are hardly glamorous and are not fun at all because they spend most of their time in extended spring training and in rookie-level ball where there are no fans and they feel disconnected some from the organization.

When the 2009 season started for the Indians full season minor league teams in early April, Cook and a host of other players stayed around in extended spring training to continue to work on their development and get them ready for full season baseball. Even though Cook had an outstanding rookie season with the GCL club, he was still just 18-years old when the season started in April, so he needed more time to develop and get himself ready pitching over the course of a full season.

During his two month stay in extended spring training at the Indians new Player Development Complex in Goodyear, AZ, he worked on his mechanics and secondary offerings.

"Overall I'm still learning how to attack hitters and a couple mechanical things here and there but nothing too major with that," said Cook. "I have worked on the curveball a little bit more because last year it was a little bit more loopy and I tightened it up in extended and throwing it more for strikes now which is a good thing."

One thing is for certain, Cook and a lot of players at Mahoning Valley and Low-A Lake County who spent a bulk of the early part of the season in Arizona at extended spring training are happy to be out of there.

"The thing is, when you wake up it is still 95 degrees at 10am in the morning," said Cook. "It is hot and by the end of the game it is to its max. I am from a warmer climate in northern Texas, but nothing like the 115 degrees it was in Arizona. I was not fully ready for it, but I think I had an easier transition than those from more humid places or up north."

Cook's best pitch is his fastball and given his age he can command it to both sides of the plate well. His fastball sits at 87-89 MPH and touches 91 MPH, and he complements it with a curveball and changeup. He will likely never be a big-time power pitcher, but he has the arm strength to add a few MPH where down the road he can maybe sit at 90-91 MPH with the fastball and top out at 93 MPH. He gets good movement on the pitch and commands it well, so increased velocity down the road would only be a bonus.

While the fastball has not gained any velocity this year, Cook's fastball command and curveball have improved. His curveball is a solid secondary offering, but the key to his whole arsenal is the development of his changeup to give him at least three solid-average pitches so he can remain a starter.

"Actually last summer I barely used my curveball," said Cook. "It was all fastball-changeup, and it was the best changeup I have ever thrown in my life. This year it has been in spurts where it has been good, then so-so, then good, and back and forth. The curveball has been more consistent this year."

Cook is the youngest player on the Mahoning Valley roster, though has pitched

like the leader of the staff and team where in ten starts he is 3-2 with a 2.26 ERA. In 51.2 innings he has allowed just 39 hits, walked 19 and has 48 strikeouts. He handles himself professionally and comes to the field everyday ready to work. His confidence level and composure on the mound is outstanding where he often shows an ability to battle and get outs even when he doesn't have his best stuff.

After spending last year in the GCL and this year in extended spring training with no fans, Cook is happy to be playing in front of thousands of fans every night pitching for Mahoning Valley as he travels around the NY-Penn League.

"It's a lot of fun," said Cook. "When I got drafted I thought the GCL was cool and I was excited to get there, and after awhile with no fans it was kind of the same old grind. Then when you get here it is just awesome. I am really enjoying it. It is a good environment with some great fans here, and a great place to try and get better and advance through the system."

Cook has the draft pedigree and the numbers to back up the assertion that he is one of the Indians best young, promising pitching prospects. If he keeps this up, advancement through the system should be no problem, and barring injury he should open next season in the Low-A Lake County rotation.

But for now, the focus is on today and his time with Mahoning Valley as they look to secure a spot in the NY-Penn League playoffs, and he will be a big key down the stretch in determining their playoff fate. During these last few weeks he will look to continue to develop as a starter so he can stay in that role, though whatever role gets him to the big leagues is fine with him.

"I would like to be a starter as I have been one my whole life," said Cook. "I really enjoy it. Talking with [Mahoning Valley Pitching Coach] Kenny [Rowe], he has gotten me into a routine of waking up at the same time, eating breakfast at the same time, getting to the field at the same time as close as we can. Just kind of getting into a routine and mentally prepared. I would definitely want to start, but whatever is the fastest way to the big leagues I wouldn't fight it."