It has been three weeks since the Indians traded ace left-hander and reigning American League CY Young award winner Cliff Lee to the Philadelphia Phillies for four young prospects. While Indians fans are still a bit unsettled by the deal, all of the players the Indians received in return from the Phillies for Lee have now had a chance to settle into their new organization. One of those payers is 18-year old right-handed pitcher Jason Knapp. Tony had a chance to speak to Knapp recently, and gives us the details on the player widely regarded as the headline piece received in the Lee deal.

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One of those payers is 18-year old right-handed pitcher Jason Knapp.

Knapp is widely regarded as the true prize the Indians were able to land in their deal with the Phillies. While the other three prospects they received - right-hander Carlos Carrasco, catcher Lou Marson, and infielder Jason Donald - are all talented, major league ready and in Triple-A, Knapp is considered by many people in the game as the biggest piece the Indians received in the trade because of his seemingly unlimited upside as an impact pitcher.

Before being acquired, in 17 starts for the Phillies Low-A affiliate Lakewood in the South Atlantic League he was 2-7 with a 4.01 ERA. In 85.1 innings he allowed 63 hits, 39 walks, and had 111 strikeouts. His near 12 strikeouts per nine innings is what quickly catches your eye about him, and he surely caught the eye of the Indians when he faced Low-A Lake County on April 21st this year going seven shutout innings allowing just one hit, one walk, and piling up 14 strikeouts.

Knapp is no longer the enemy and is now pitching for Lake County and in two appearances to date is 0-0 with a 4.76 ERA (5.2 IP, 5 H, 2 BB, 7 K).

While Knapp was sad to leave the Phillies, he is now thrilled to be an Indian pitching for them and not against them.

"It feels like a good opportunity for me," said Knapp in an interview last week at Classic Park. "I have only been here a few weeks, and so far the staff seems real knowledgeable and helpful to me. The guys in the clubhouse are real nice. So far it has been good."

The Indians are clearly excited to have him on board.

"He is a really impressive power arm that strikes guys out," said Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins recently. "Everything we have learned about him since we have acquired him was all of the things that we read about him and anticipated and then some. He has really been very professional, very mature. It is clear to us he is extremely driven to be a major league pitcher."

In this modern age where information is available virtually as it happens with social networking, text messaging, and blogs, Knapp initially caught wind he was being traded from his agent and some text messages, and then a few hours later a Phillies representative contacted him to confirm he had been traded. The trade to Cleveland came as somewhat of a shock to him because he had spent so much time concentrating on the rumored talks between the Phillies and Blue Jays for ace right-hander Roy Halladay.

"Yeah, it was earlier in the day when I got a call from my agent who said pending medical

transactions you are traded to the Indians," said Knapp. "I was a little surprised as I knew the Phillies were going after Halladay, but I didn't realize they were going after Lee.

I didn't know they were speaking to Cleveland at all.

I was caught off guard, got my head around it, and went to the ballpark and went about my day.

I got dressed and went into the dugout, and right before the game started Chuck Lamar (Phillies Assistant GM) gave [manager] Dusty [Wathan] a call.

He took me aside in the dugout and he talked to me on the phone and said I was officially a part of the deal.

So I went into the clubhouse just to change out of my uniform, stayed the night in the hotel, and they flew me to Cleveland the next day."

As a recent second round draft pick in the 2008 Draft by the Phillies, Knapp's departure from Philadelphia is bittersweet as that was the team he negotiated and signed with to begin a professional career and he thought he would be with them for many years. Instead, in just a little over a year he has quickly had to submit a change of address form and move his professional career track to Cleveland, a move he never expected or even thought about.

A flurry of emotions initially overcame him once he learned he had been traded, but in the end he just wants to play baseball no matter who it is with.

"I was drafted in 2008 as an 18-year old, so you kind of don't think it is a realistic thought to get traded so early," said Knapp. "But if the right opportunity comes up for the Phillies or Indians it doesn't matter how old you are, it is just a business as you are just a name on some paper. I was a little surprised, but it wasn't a huge deal to me. Other than location it doesn't really make too much of a difference for me other than what uniform I am wearing."

There were some mild concerns about Knapp's health when he was acquired because he had been shelved with bicep tendonitis. The injury was only minor and actually expected from a young player like him who throws as hard as he does and is still getting used to the full season work load. Upon joining the Indians he underwent a thorough evaluation of his arm, took a physical, and was cleared and considered good to go.

While the bicep tendonitis issue is for the most part in the rearview mirror, the issue came up in his final start for Lakewood in early July.

"In my last outing I pitched [with the Phillies] against Kannapolis I could not get out of the first inning," recalled Knapp. "I could not throw a strike and I walked a few guys. I really should not have pitched that day, but I had a couple ibuprofens and I felt fine so I just pitched through it.
I went out there and really just had no control, so they pulled me out, and the next day the trainer gave me an evaluation.

He ran labrum tests and they were fine and other tests which I guess showed I had biceps tendonitis in the posterior rotator area.

So they decided to shut me down for a couple of weeks."

After being acquired from the Phillies, Knapp did not pitch right away for the Indians. He was still shutdown recovering from the tendonitis issue and did not make his much anticipated first appearance as an Indian at Low-A Lake County until on August 11th.

In a return to throw program he was limited in that outing to just three innings or 50 pitches, whichever came first, and went two strong innings.

In his next outing on August 16th he went 3.2 solid innings and was working on a four inning or 60-65 pitch count.

For his next scheduled outing this Saturday August 22nd he should be up to the normal pitch count of 75-80 pitches for pitchers his age and at his level.

"[He had] bicep tendonitis, which is near where the bicep connects to the shoulder," said Atkins. "He has a dull ache where his bicep connects to his shoulder, and that is very typical of all pitchers, especially of young pitchers when their velocity is increasing and climbing. It is just something we have to monitor and make sure we don't push through. We are just going to honor the progression he was on with the Phillies and make sure we respect the process. We are going to err on the side of caution and let him work through that and not push him through it."

Had Knapp not come down with the bicep tendonitis he likely would have been pulled back some anyway from his starts and missed a start or two. Having thrown 85.1 innings by early July he would have had to miss a few starts in order to fall in line with the 120-125 innings a team typically gives a pitcher who is pitching in his first full season, especially a young pitcher a year removed from high school.

"I had not pitched probably more than 60 innings in a season before this year," said Knapp. "I feel like I am in good enough condition to pitch all year. It was disappointing in July to be going fine and all of sudden [have the injury].

It was disappointing, but not too surprising."

Several of the Indians top brass were in attendance for his brief organizational debut on August 11th, and they were impressed with what they saw of their new prized acquisition. Knapp sits at 92-95 MPH with his fastball but has touched 97 MPH and some around baseball think he has the arm strength to eventually hit triple digits on the radar gun.

He complements his fastball with a curveball and changeup, two pitches which have flashed promise and many consider as future plus secondary offerings for him.

The caveat with a guy like Knapp who looks good on paper is that projection often does not always translate. He no doubt has front of the rotation stuff and ability, but now it is all about building the execution and command of all his pitches. In addition to command the development of at least one very good secondary pitch is vital, and so far this season his curveball he feels has become a better pitch for him.

"[I have the most confidence in] my curveball," said Knapp when asked which secondary pitch he most feels comfortable throwing. "I feel like I can throw it for strikes. I

am also working on the changeup, and [Lake County Pitching Coach] Tony Arnold has helped me out a lot with working on the changeup in the bullpen.

I threw it a couple of times [in my first outing], and I guess in Instructional League I am sure I will continue to work on that and other things."

Knapp also has a slider he used to throw that at some point he could unveil to hitters again as the command and control of his fastball and secondary pitches improve.

"I had a slider, but the Phillies kind of got me away from throwing that," said Knapp. "They said to master the three pitches and then down the road in maybe a year or two [I would] get the slider back."

Knapp has the stuff, the makeup, and the body to be a dominant pitcher for the Indians for many years. Injuries are always the great equalizer and an unpredictable factor that can sideline a career. If he can avoid any serious injuries, the key to his success will be developing much better command of all his pitches, which for a pitcher like him is often the last that comes.

"I [need] experience and work with the pitching coaches," said Knapp. "We go into the bullpen and if I mess up and throw one pitch where I did not want to, they will tweak my mechanics however they have to or they will pick something out that I did wrong.

I just [need to] try to become as consistent as possible with my mechanics and the command should come after that."

Photo courtesy of Ben Zedner of the Lake County Sentinel