There have been a lot of surprise performances this year in the Indians farm system. Arguably one of the more notable surprises is the emergence of Double-A Akron third baseman Lonnie Chisenhall as a legit frontline prospect in the Indians organization and one of the top prospects in all of the minor leagues. Some may ask, how can Chisenhall be the biggest surprise when he was a Top 10 guy going into the season and was a first round pick by the Indians in 2008? Tony explains why in his latest.

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Some may ask, how can Chisenhall be the biggest surprise when he was a Top 10 guy going into the season and was a first round pick by the Indians in 2008? Well, the reasoning is three-fold: he has moved much more rapidly through the system than originally thought, he has shown more power than originally anticipated, and most of all he has made an exceptional transition from shortstop to third base this season.

Coming into his first full season this year the biggest question mark Chisenhall needed to answer was what position he would settle into. There was no question he could hit, but there was uncertainty would he adapt well at third base, or would he have to be moved back to shortstop or even to second based? The question has now been more than answered as he has shown he was up to the challenge of moving to third base and seems to have found a permanent home there.

Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins thinks so too.

"He is exceptional at third base and is going to be an above average defender in my opinion," said Atkins in a recent interview.

Chisenhall impressed last year by showing improved throwing, footwork, and range at shortstop while playing with short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley. There was some thought that with that improvement he would remain at shortstop this season, but the Indians drafted him with the idea all along that he would play shortstop his first year in the organization and then move to third base the season after that. They did not want to put too much on his plate right out of the gates, and instead choose to focus on the move in Instructional League last fall.

With a full six weeks of work in Instructional League, an offseason program, and a full spring training, Chisenhall had the foundation in place to go into this season and face the challenges that third base would provide him.

It showed early on as in his first 52 games with High-A Kinston he committed 19 errors; however, in the 66 games since then - including 19 errorless games at Double-A Akron - he has only had three errors. The significant drop in his error rate show he is growing into the position well and has become more comfortable with the position change.

"When [the errors] came they certainly came in bunches those first few games," said Chisenhall in a recent interview. "They were all mistakes that I could control, and once I figured out if I just settled down and calmed down a little bit and take my time I learned I could control those mistakes. I wasn't booting the ball, I was just making a bad throw or trying to do too much. I fixed it. Obviously when I make an error, hopefully I can learn from it and it is not something that can't be fixed. Third base is a different transition. I am learning you have more time over there, and sometimes you have to chest up some balls and things like that. But I am learning."

Atkins thinks Chisenhall went through a feeling out process, which is why the error totals were so high earlier in the year.

"He made I think about [19] errors the first two months of the season, and if you watched him play you would never believe it because it looked like it was so easy at third base," said Atkins. "What it was is he was learning his

limits. He always played shortstop and he was learning what [the third base] position entailed, what plays he could make, and what plays he should just eat the ball or let the shortstop get. What that meant is because he is aggressive and confident he learned on the aggressor side and made errors. I think once he learned those limits we saw a significant drop off in the errors. [His recent] numbers are indicative in what we were seeing."

Third base isn't called the hot corner for nothing. You have to be extremely quick to react to hard shots by right-handed hitters, come in on slow rollers and fire off an off-balance throw to first base, make the hard back-handed play on the line or make a swift stab of a ball in the hole between third base and shortstop. The challenge of so many different plays with so little time to react is what Chisenhall has had to learn to grow accustomed to, and he has done that.

"I think the hardest thing is you have to be able to do everything," said Chisenhall. "You gotta be able to go back on balls and use your arm, and come in on balls and use your hands. The variety of plays is probably the most difficult. You have the shortstop plays where you have to cover a little bit of range, and then you have the slow rollers and chest up some top spin balls and stuff like that. I think the combination of all the plays is the most difficult. I work on them all every day and every week. If I have a mistake on one I will certainly go back and review and see how I can fix it."

One of the main reasons the Indians moved Chisenhall to third base was because of his electric bat. With him moving to the less demanding position of third base - though it certainly presents its challenges especially with the initial move there - they felt it would help him focus and develop into a better run producer by playing a corner infield position.

"I think I was pretty much drafted as a hitter, and if I was able to stay at shortstop I think that was going to be a bonus," said Chisenhall. "But they felt more comfortable with me moving over to third so I could concentrate more on hitting and driving in runs instead of such a defensive emphasis that shortstop has in the major leagues."

Chisenhall's bat has been dynamite. To date the left-handed swinger is hitting .260 with 22 HR, 90 RBI and an .807 OPS in 118 combined games at Kinston and Akron. He has gone through a rough stretch with Akron as in 19 games there he is only hitting .171, though as a 20-year old in Double-A for the first time some

early struggles are expected at the plate.

If you talk to just about any scout who has seen Chisenhall play this year, just about every single one of them will rave about his swing. Many have considered it the best swing they have seen in years. He has a very good swing plane, is quiet in the box, and has a polished approach to hitting. He is a very patient line drive gap-to-gap hitter with plus bat speed, is short to the ball, and shows good command of the strike zone. It all combines to what many think will make him a .300 hitter in the big leagues.

"As we have talked about before, he has one of the best swings in our system," said Atkins. "Lonnie is a left-handed hitter who has some natural power. He doesn't have to generate power as the ball just jumps off his bat. It is not light tower power where in BP he is just launching balls out of the stadium, but in a game the ball goes a long way off of his bat."

Part of what makes Chisenhall so special is how much of a good hitter he is at such a young age. He is still just 20-years old and already has an MVP-caliber season in the books this year at High-A Kinston in 99 games (.276, 18 HR, 79 RBI, .838 OPS) and was very good last year at age 19 in Mahoning Valley in 68 games hitting .290 with 5 HR, 45 RBI, and a .794 OPS.

To be at Double-A already speaks volumes of the hitter he is, and a lot of that is a byproduct of him signing right away last year to get the development and transition process going.

"Yeah, I got a lot of at bats last year in Mahoning Valley since I signed early and I did not miss any games," said Chisenhall. "I also went out to Instructs, so I got a lot of games under my belt using the wood bat and everything. I am happy with my transition, and it has really helped me out this year."

While a lot of first round picks will hold out and sign around the signing deadline in mid-August, Chisenhall wanted to sign right away to get a jumpstart to his career. By signing early, he was able to get in 278 at bats last year at Mahoning Valley instead of missing almost the entire season like a lot of late signings do.

"I understand why a few guys hold out, as you only get a bonus one time," said Chisenhall. "I was happy with what the Indians did. Signing

early was obviously an advantage for me as I got to skip Low-A and I was happy about that. I think getting an early start is a big part of that and just learning the game and how you have to do things day after day."

While the quick transition to third base has been surprising, the other surprise this year has been the power Chisenhall has shown. The thought going in was Chisenhall was a .300 hitter in the making in the big leagues because of his sweet swing, and that his line drive stroke will lead to a lot of doubles in the gaps with the occasional home run to where he could be about a 20 home run hitter in the big leagues. His power surge with 22 home runs this year has some rethinking that stance and if he could potentially be a 30 home run hitter in the big leagues and still be a .300 hitter as projected.

"I have never been like the guy to hit the towering shots or anything," said Chisenhall. "I just try to hit the ball hard and square it up wherever I hit it. If you get a good angle or backspin it enough it will get out. The home runs are a little bit of a surprise to me, though the doubles are down because the home runs are up. But I am happy with the home runs and hope they continue."

While the home runs have been a positive development for Chisenhall, he is still making several adjustments at the plate, namely in reducing the strikeout totals. Last year at Mahoning Valley he only struck out 32 times in 276 at bats good for one strikeout every 8.6 at bats; however, this season he has struck out 95 times in 458 at bats which translates to one strikeout every 4.8 at bats.

"My power numbers are a little up, but so are my strikeouts, so I have to work on that a little bit with strike zone recognition late in counts," said Chisenhall. "[When I was in the Carolina League] there [were] only eight teams in the league, so they [were] learning how to pitch me and going after me early. I am seeing 2-0 changeups and first pitch curveballs and things like that. So I have to be able to adjust to that and recognize that early, and once I do that I will stay ahead in the count and hopefully reduce some of the strikeouts."

Akron qualified for the Eastern League playoffs last week, so Chisenhall's season will be extended at least another week. Still, the season has flown by for him and he believes that he has a built a lot of momentum to carry him through the offseason and into the start of next season where he should open the 2010 season as the starting third baseman in Akron.

"I set aside a few personal goals for myself this season, "said Chisenhall. "Obviously I want to win every game as a team, but that is usually not the case in minor league baseball as it is more about player development. As far as my season I am happy with how it has gone. It obviously has flown by. You look up and you have 450 at bats and yesterday you only had four. We have played a ton of games, but it seems like we just left spring training yesterday. The season is long, but you have to enjoy it."

"It is an endurance race and I have plenty of things to work on for next season."