It took awhile, but the Indians earlier this week finally announced their undrafted Latin free agents signings that they picked up during the International Signing Period which runs from July 2nd to August 31st. In all, the Indians picked up 15 players from three different Latin regions. Tony had a chance to speak with Indians Assistant GM John Mirabelli about the signings, and talks about the players and the process in his latest column for us.

It took awhile, but the Indians earlier this week finally announced their undrafted Latin free agents signings that they picked up during the International Signing Period which runs from July 2nd to August 31st.

In all, the Indians picked up 15 players from three different Latin regions. In the Dominican Republic they nabbed seven players:

Angel Hernandez (OF), Alexander Joseph (LHP), Jairo Kelly (INF), Jorge Martinez (INF), Luigy Rodriguez (INF), Amiro Santana (RHP), and Juan Santana (RHP).

In Venezuela they picked up another six players: Yan Carlos Caripa (RHP), Juan Carlos Dela Cruz (C), Richard Delgado (INF), Nietzer Jimenez (RHP), Alejandro Rivas (RHP), and Gustavo Rojas (C).

Finally, in Panama they picked up two players: Jonathan Cedeno (LHP) and Franklin Moreno (C).

The final tally of 15 signed players from Latin America was something the Indians never anticipated or originally planned for as the International Signing Period opened on July 2nd.

"It was more than our original expectations," said Indians Director of Scouting and Assistant General Manager John Mirabelli about the 15 signings. "As we got into the signing season a couple of things unfolded.

First, we are never going to walk away from quality players that present themselves.

Second, our draft was very pitching heavy and the trades we [made recently] infused a lot of pitching into the organization.

This year some position players [in Latin America] popped up as we started moving deeper into the International Signing Period.

Some premium position players presented themselves who we thought were a pretty good value and we felt it was a good time to stock an inventory of premium position players in our organization.

So we were a little more aggressive than we originally set out to be."

The Indians initially goal was to sign eight to nine players, but because of the addition of some additional resources late in the signing period they were able to add the additional five to six players they did not anticipate having a chance to sign. Obviously, the Indians recent trades involving the big league team freed up a lot of salary and they did not spend anywhere close to the same level they did on the draft this year as they did in 2008, so the savings in those two areas likely had an impact in giving Mirabelli and his staff a financial boost to pickup the additional players.

Even with all the cutbacks, it was business as usual in the Indians Scouting Department as they had just as much flexibility as they have ever had to go out and sign players. While Mirabelli declined to comment on what the Indians actual budget was in the International market this year, league sources have said the Indians operated under an International budget just a little north of $3 million this year which was a little bit above what they had to work with in previous years.

While they still had the ability to be just creative and aggressive with their signings, Mirabelli was quick to point out how much of a disadvantage the Indians and many other teams are in

when it comes to signing undrafted Latin free agents. Most of the top players have agents who send their players right to the big market teams, so except for very rare cases the big money teams in the past few years have started to capitalize on all the top available talent because they can outspend anyone.

"The non-drafted amateur talent pool is the most un-level playing field in all of professional sports," commented Mirabelli. "It has absolutely no restrictions. It is just who has the most money and who is going to write the check."

Because the Indians are not able to outspend most of the competition, they have to in turn out scout the competition. The Indians struggles with the Amateur Draft domestically in the early part of this decade are well documented, but the Indians have always had a strong showing in Latin America and always seem to unearth a lot of gems that the big spending teams gloss over. A few years back they signed the likes of Victor Martinez, Fausto Carmona, Rafael Perez, and Jhonny Peralta all to bonuses of $75,000 or less.

In addition to that some of their top prospects on the cusp of the big leagues are guys they signed as who were mostly unheralded Latin American free agent singings at the time like Hector Rondon, Jeanmar Gomez, Kelvin De La Cruz, Alexander Perez, and Danny Salazar.

This year the Indians may not have made any headline Latin American signings, but they are confident that the group as a whole is very strong and that down the road some players will step out more into the forefront.

"I like this group, and I think we accomplished some goals with the premium position guys," said Mirabelli. "That's what we wanted to accomplish going into the year. I think we probably added a little more depth than we originally targeted, which could be a good thing because there are plenty of spots to put athletes.

Whether it is second, shortstop, or center field, we will find a place for those kinds of players."

With the end of the International Signing Period on August 31st, it also closes the book on eight long months of preparation for the signing period which began the previous November. Soon they will begin the process for the 2010 signing period as they will start looking at guys with a showcase the first week of November in Venezuela and then another showcase the second

week of November in the Dominican Republic.

With the scouting process soon to be rekindled for 2010, Mirabelli explained their process and what they look for when scouting Latin ballplayers that are mostly 15 to 16 years old throughout the scouting process.

"When you are dealing with players in Latin America, the bat is really a long projection because basically you are dealing with strength and body projection," said Mirabelli. "First and foremost our profile looks at the defensive side of the ball with the speed, the arm strength and the athleticism.

We start with that because we think we can project off of that.

Now obviously there has to be some bat to ball ability, but very few of these guys show a lot of power at a young age.

With these kids we start with the arm tool, the run tool and the athleticism and the defensive tool to see if there is a place for them in the middle of the diamond somewhere.

If the answer is yes, then we are going to look at what kind of offensive upside they have.

It is projection.

We do a lot of framework with our trainers in measuring everything from their flexibility to their vertical leap just trying to project how much bigger and stronger, agile, and flexible they will get.

They are 16, so there is a lot that goes into trying to project the offensive side of it."

All of the players in the 2009 class are 16 to 17 years old, and were players who were first-year eligible guys to be signed this year. Some just turned 16 while a few turned 17 shortly after July 2nd, but after some very careful checks into the background of the players the Indians believe that they are all the age as listed.

The Indians were recently burned when a signing from last year - infielder Jose Ozoria who now goes by the name of Wally Bryan - turned out to be several years older than originally thought.

The more detailed background checks to verify age and vitals is a big reason why Mirabelli and the Indians waited so long to release the list of signings this year.

Almost all of these players are expected to participate with the Indians summer league team in the Dominican Republic next year. One of the organization's goals of late has been to identify a player from a recent Latin signing class that may be further along than the others and have him spend a considerable amount of time stateside in his first professional season.

They did that this year with infielder Giovanny Urshela who signed last year and ended up splitting the season between the Dominican Summer League and the Arizona League.

They would like to do that with a player or two from this year's crop, though have not yet identified who those players are or if there even is anyone.

Overall, the Indians are satisfied with what they were able to accomplish this year in Latin America and have strong hopes for several players in this class.

"It was a very good year in getting some depth in premium guys," said Mirabelli. "We got a lot of speed as all of those guys are very good athletic runners.

They are middle of the diamond guys, and that is something our organization certainly needs.

So all in all, I feel good about it."

At this time of the year after undergoing such a heavy scouting season for the Amateur Draft in Latin America, the scouting staff would normally take a little break. But, after the year the organization went through this year, there is no time to rest as they are committed to righting the ship and getting ready for 2010 not only at the big league level, but on the player development and scouting front as well.

"When you had the kind of year we had, I don't think any of us should take a break this year," said Mirabelli. "We have to get after it and get better."

With the recent Latin American signings this summer, they appear to be off to a good start.

**Parallel League News**

In case you have not noticed, Arizona is going to be flooded with baseball leagues the first half of the month of October. Right now all teams are at about the midpoint of their Instructional League season in Arizona, but in addition to those games the Arizona Fall League kicks into action on October 13th and the new Arizona Parallel Fall League is currently in action.

The Parallel League and Instructional League are going on simultaneously, and often games from both leagues are played at the same time on adjacent fields on the same complex. The new Parallel League is a league of four teams that are co-operated between eight organizations.

The Indians and Cincinnati Reds make up the Goodyear team.

The feedback so far about the league has been very positive, and next year it will likely become a full fledged league and formally replace the Hawaii Winter League which Major League Baseball pulled out of after last year.

The rosters for Instructional League and the Parallel League tend to be very fluid as players will often participate in both leagues depending on the organization's need for a player to get at bats or innings pitched on a given day. The rosters are still mostly players who were at the Single-A level this year or guys who are trying to stay sharp in preparation of the Arizona Fall League.

Also, it serves as an opportunity to give innings and at bats to players who missed significant time this season due to injury.

**White Update**

2009 1st round pick right-handed pitcher Alex White made his professional debut last Saturday pitching in a game in the Instructional League. He was working on a 20 pitch count or one inning, whichever came first, and managed to throw a shutout inning of work allowing two hits, no walks, and recorded one strikeout.

He looked good on the mound, and his fastball consistently sat at 92 MPH.

It was his first game competition since pitching in Omaha back in June for North Carolina in the College World Series.

## Overheard

Not a lot is known about the current crop of Latin signings by the Indians, but Baseball America had infielder Jairo Kelly ranked in their top 25 listing for Latin players. Also, infielder Luigy Rodriguez is supposedly the fastest player ever to workout at the Indians camp in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

## Last But Not Least

Those looking for my year end awards for the Indians minor league system, I will post those sometime next week. With the recent developments in regard to the big league team letting manager Eric Wedge go along with this International signing piece, this pushed the awards piece back a week. Also, for those interested, I will be heading out to Instructional League and the Arizona Fall League to take in some action and report on what I see from October 11 - 15.