Ross Atkins has been a part of the Indians organization for 16 years, five of those as a player and 11 as a part of the front office. He was drafted by the Indians as a right-handed pitcher in the 38th round of the 1995 Draft out of Wake Forest University, and in his five year professional career he reached as high as Double-A Akron compiling a 38-32 record with a 4.13 ERA in 141 games (66 starts).

Atkins is entering his fourth season as the club's Director of Player Development, and he took some time with me to talk about Lake County's move to the Midwest League this year and a lot of other topics surrounding playing at the Low-A level in Lake County.

Q: Being a former player who pitched at the Low-A level in your first full season, when looking back on it what experience did you draw from it?

Atkins: [At Low-A] you are learning what it really means to do things consistently and to establish and repeat routines and learning the value of them. That is truly the introduction to professional baseball as the short-season leagues are almost an orientation. But the true introduction is that first full season where you go through the process of 142 games and what that means physically and mentally. For myself at the time I was around Joel Skinner and Fred

Gladding, and they set the bar high because that is how they went about their days and had great playing experiences to go along with that. I think that is the most powerful lesson in that you are just learning the value of establishing and repeating a routine.

Q: Now that you are the Director of Player Development and a part of the front office, what are you hoping to see from these young men developing at the Low-A level?

Atkins: We are looking to see that they can do things consistently. [For example], with a starting pitcher what's his five day routine like? What is his consistency like with his work on the strength and conditioning side, on the mental side, on the fundamental side, and then with his performance? Is he consistent with his effort and intensity levels? Is he accurately evaluating himself based on those five day routines? For a position player it is a little different, but what is his daily routine like? What is he doing on a day-to-day basis to get ready for every game? On a weekly basis what is he doing from a strength and conditioning standpoint? For both pitchers and position player, is he starting to establish some awareness with his strengths and limitations and do they have a plan for addressing the limitations?

Q: Is there maybe something that doesn't show up in a box score or stat line that you think is important when evaluating a player? By the same token, is there anything in a box score or stat line that you don't think is as important at that level?

Atkins: All information is just a piece to the puzzle. There is certainly value in looking at the game objectively, but I just think you have to make sure you are looking at the right things like certainly not placing a lot of value on the win-loss record, ERA and batting average of a player. It's just making sure guys are doing the things that will predict major league success and not just minor league success. There is also within a box score a lot of things that happen that have value that don't come out in any stat line unless you create them. For instance, how many pitches per plate appearance? For pitchers or hitters, what are they doing late in the count or what are they doing with two strikes? What are they doing in 1-1 counts? What percentage of the time are they going to their changeup or fastball? Are they truly making an effort to develop that slider? So, there is absolutely a lot to be taken away when looking at things objectively, but it has to be complemented with subjective evaluations as well.

Q: What do you do to maybe help facilitate and help players adjust to that first full season at Lake County?

Atkins: There are a couple of things that we do, and they are both within Spring Training and Instructional League. Half of our Instructional League is an orientation and half is a fall development program. The orientation is for the player that is coming into the organization and will be coming to spring training for the first time and just played with a short-season club. The fall development program we are a little bit more advanced with assessing their routines and trying to tweak them and make them better and essentially take their plans to another level. The time that we can really programmatically do things to help them with their education and establishing them is the instructional fall program and in spring training because we have all of our resources on hand and available. We have class sessions with individual coordinators, but the way that our player development system is built is to essentially constantly monitor and address those routines. Every single player has a plan and that plan goes into a system and it is based on [looking at a player] fundamentally, mentally and physically. We have a group of coordinators that oversee the staff implementing the plan, but the coordinator has to sign off on it where they may say 'this is what you are going to do with that guy from a mental standpoint on a weekly basis'. Then myself and the field coordinator and pitching coordinator who oversee the whole plan make sure it is realistic, attainable, and is something we can measure. That's how we are constantly doing it.

Q: Lake County is switching from the South Atlantic League to the more travel friendly Midwest League this year. Who is responsible for such a switch? Is it something the affiliate mostly controls, or does the parent club make the change request?

Atkins: You can't really put one person on it, but Lake County did most of the legwork. [Owner] Peter Carfagna, [GM] Brad Seymour, and even individuals before Brad did all the most significant work on making the change occur. From our standpoint, it was just completely endorsing the decision and trying to help in anyway we could to see it through. Really the driving force behind it was the ownership of the Captains with their management support. It was a no-brainer from a player development standpoint [to move to the new league].

Q: All of the Indians' minor league affiliates have become more localized over the past ten years or so. Do you think that with the teams becoming more local that some of the popularity of the players in the system and minor leagues in general has increased?

Atkins: Oh yes, no question. I think it is very hard to determine to what extent, but there is no doubt in my mind that it creates an overall better fan experience. If you went and watched Victor Martinez play in Mahoning Valley and then play in Akron and then now he would have

played in Columbus, or watching Matt LaPorta play in Columbus last year and he was in Akron the year before and now in Cleveland, I think it makes for a better fan experience. I think it also makes for a more interesting experience for players like Matt LaPorta as he has true Indians fans pulling for him for the right reasons in wanting to see him get to the big leagues and not just wanting to see him win that game that night. It definitely provides a more complete baseball experience for [our players].

Q: With four of your six affiliates within a short two-hour driving distance from Cleveland, and another affiliate located at the site of your sister operation in Goodyear, Arizona, is it mostly an efficiency thing where you can get out to see players at almost every level very easily, or is there more to it?

Atkins: It is not only very valuable to the fans, but it is very valuable to the players in that their fans around them are in greater number. This is a spectator sport, so there is value there. There is value that they are playing in the same geography in that they are getting used to the climate and living in the area and get more comfortable from a familiarity and cultural standpoint. It is a huge value, and I don't really know of any downside. We have warm weather in Goodyear and Kinston, and to have the remaining setup with the other four affiliates I don't know if we could make it any better.

Q: Being a former player, does it help that you can draw on some of the experiences that these guys are going through?

Atkins: There is definitely value from a compassion and understanding standpoint when I am dealing with a player and talking with them in that I was once in their shoes. I think there is also some value from a creative standpoint in thinking about what resources I can provide and put myself in the mind of that young player and think about not only the resources but getting the person to value that resource. But, I don't think it is a by no means necessary value, it just happens to be a part of my skill set.

Q: The general makeup of the Lake County team at the start of every season typically seems to be one that involves a big mix of young high school drafted and Latin free agent talent while all the advanced college hitters and pitchers from the recent draft skip Lake County and start at High-A Kinston. Is this a fair assessment, and what is the general philosophy when making up the Lake County team?

Atkins: I think that is accurate for the most part. It is always on an individual basis and case by case, but if you were to generalize what occurs at Lake County [that is how we set it up]. We approach every individual as such and then try to put them in the best position to have success. A guy coming out of an advanced college program who may have had a lot of success in that program in most cases is prepared to play at a little more advanced level and players closer to their age. You are looking at the 19-21 age range in Lake County and the 20-23 age range in Kinston, so there is certainly a chronological factor to it. But really we are just trying to place the individuals in the place we feel they will have the most success. The most important thing is to be certain they are being challenged.

Q: What do you think is the biggest change in the game today versus when you played?

Atkins: The internet has allowed the sharing of information and the increase of objective analysis has been a significant shift. When I was playing no one talked about OPS or even really on-base percentage much, so I think that has been a big shift. You now have the ability to share information real time and in your hands. It doesn't really impact the player that much as I think there is just a little bit more of an emphasis on strike throwing and plate discipline than in years past but not overwhelming. Everyone was talking about plate discipline and strike throwing when I was a player, just now there are better resources and tools to show them why it is so important and maybe get that message across sooner. I think just purely from a player development standpoint the resources just continue to get better because I think all front offices now realize the value to internally develop their own players regardless if they have the ability to supplement with free agents and as they can now do both. So they provide better resources to their players, and that is probably the biggest change.

Q: In the last ten years the internet has allowed more fans to be more actively involved in minor league baseball. Baseball America used to be the staple, but MiLB.com reworked their site a few years ago and lots of team focused sites such as IndiansProspectInsider.com have cropped up. Does the added exposure help or hurt the team and players?

Atkins: There is no question that it helps. It is a spectator sport and this is the entertainment business, so being exposed to that - be it sooner than later - it is going to happen. I think you learn how to manage that, and it is an important part to becoming a professional, so there is no doubt in my mind that I think there is upside to that. The only real downside to that is when they don't handle it in a professional manner, but from our standpoint we only want the individual

who is handling things professionally anyway. So I think there is only really upside to that.