"Minor Happenings" is a weekly column which covers the important developments and news in the Indians farm system. While most of the information in this report is from my own research and through interviews I have conducted with organizational personnel, some information in this report is collected and summarized from the various news outlets that cover each team.

I am back from my little excursion to Myrtle Beach which was a mix of business and pleasure, though it turned out mostly pleasure I must say. I had a chance to see High-A Kinston in action a few times while in Myrtle Beach and will have various pieces on all of the players I talked to over the coming days and weeks. Be on the lookout for player feature articles or small capsules on players like Alex White, Nick Hagadone, Chris Jones, Bryce Stowell, Jason Kipnis, and Rob Bryson, as well as manager Aaron Holbert.

I also had a chance to sit down for almost a half hour with Minor League Pitching Coordinator Dave Miller and talk about a plethora of pitchers in the system, so will have the comments from that conversation in part two of *Minor Happenings* which will post sometime this weekend. Yes, there is a lot of material to cover, so I am splitting
Minor Happenings
into two posts this week rather than just cram it all into one gigantic posting.

I have lots of new video I will posting this weekend on Kinston, and for those wondering I will be in Akron on either Saturday or Sunday to see them play (likely Saturday). Also, in addition to the Kinston players, I have a ton of other player articles to start pumping out now that I am finally home and settled in. A piece on Bo Greenwell will post over the weekend or early next week, and I also have pieces in the pipeline on players such as Austin Adams, Roberto Perez, Chris Kersten, Trey Haley, and Chris Gimenez.

Onto the *Happenings*…

Indians Minor League Player of the Week
(for games from May 6th to May 12th)

T.J. McFarland (Left-handed Pitcher – Kinston)
2-0, 0.00 ERA, 2 games, 11.0 IP, 6 H, 0 R, 0 BB, 8 K

Left-hander T.J. McFarland is doing a lot these days to bump himself up into the upper-echelon of pitching prospects in the Indians' system. The pitching depth in the organization is very deep at all levels and in all roles, so coming into the season he

did not rank as well as he might have if he were with the Indians two or three years ago or in another organization. That said, he has value and is someone the Indians are very high on after taking him in the 5th round of the 2007 Draft out of high school, and he could make a huge leap in the prospect rankings this offseason if he continues to perform and develop as he has the first month and a half of the season.

McFarland had a solid year last season at Low-A Lake County going 9-4 with a 3.58 ERA in 25 games (23 starts), and he has parlayed that successful 2009 stint as a 19-year old at the Low-A level into an outstanding start as a 20-year old at the more advanced High-A level where in six appearances he is now 4-0 with a 0.59 ERA and in 30.2 innings has allowed 21 hits, 5 walks,

and has 19 strikeouts. He doesn't strike a lot of batters out, but he pitches to contact and throws strikes and relies heavy on a sinking fastball to get hitters to pound the ball into the ground (2.32 GO/AO). The Indians consider his sinker the best in the system - which says a lot when guys like Joe Gardner and Frank Herrmann are in the system - and has been his bread and butter pitch and key to his success to date. His off the charts start to the season has him ranked 1st in ERA in all the minors.

Of course, five great weeks don't make a season or career, as Double-A Akron outfielder Matt McBride can attest to that. Those who recall, McBride scorched Carolina League hitting the first five weeks of last season and then was promoted to Akron and since then has been a pretty ordinary performer. So, perspective is always needed when looking at numbers even almost a quarter of the way into the season. That said, it is good to see with McFarland, and is the start he needed to have a big breakthrough season this year at an important development level in High-A Kinston where he will likely spend all of the season regardless of how well he performs save for possibly a mid to late August promotion to Double-A Akron.

Honorable Mentions:

Carlos Santana (C – COL): .357 (10-28), 3 R, 3 2B, 0 3B, 0 HR, 6 RBI, 5 BB, 9 K
Shelley Duncan (OF – COL): .406 (13-32), 6 R, 4 2B, 0 3B, 1 HR, 6 RBI, 1 BB, 4 K
Wes Hodges (1B – COL): .423 (11-26), 6 R, 4 2B, 1 3B, 1 HR, 5 RBI, 2 BB, 5 K
Donnie Webb (OF – KIN): .421 (8-19), 4 R, 2 2B, 0 3B, 2 HR, 7 RBI, 4 BB, 4 K, 2 SB
Chun Chen (C – LC): .538 (7-13), 1 R, 2 2B, 1 3B, 1 HR, 4 RBI, 2 BB, 2 K

Previous Winners:

04/29 to 05/05: Trey Haley (RHP – Lake County)
04/22 to 04/28: Jason Donald (INF – Columbus)
04/15 to 04/21: Bo Greenwell (OF – Lake County)
04/08 to 04/14: Carlos Santana (C – Columbus)

Director's Cuts

This week Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins chimes in on several players on the High-A Kinston roster and also talks about some other players at other levels off to impressive starts:

On Kelvin De La Cruz's promotion to Akron: "He was throwing the ball great [in Kinston]. He had a great spring training and is

coming off a year where he had an elbow injury, so it is always good to see a guy back to 100% after dealing with an elbow setback. He was blowing guys away in A-ball. He is one of the higher ceiling pitchers that we have, and we certainly need those and need them to perform. So we are glad to see him off to a good 2010 start and already a good Double-A start. He was great in his Double-A debut as he punched out seven and only walked one and faced a good lineup. He only had three starts [in Kinston] a year ago. It was a couple of things [as to why he returned there to start the season] in that he had not performed beyond that level, had not even performed at that level much at all, and the warm weather for a young Dominican player coming off an elbow injury we thought was a better environment for him."

On T.J. McFarland: "He is putting the ball on the ground and he reminds us a lot of Aaron Laffey when he was at that level. He didn't have the best of years last year but was solid at 19 years of age in the South Atlantic League and is off to an incredible start in the Carolina League. He has the weapons to be a starter and potentially is someone who will have three major league average pitches. He is just learning to use them as he predominantly pitches with his fastball. He is a high groundball guy, a good athlete, and a good high school player who is just off to a really great start with I believe is leading all of baseball in ERA right now. At the beginning of the season we were very healthy and had numerous guys we wanted to start. We had Nick Hagadone on a pitch count so we just used that to add a starting spot and called it a piggyback situation where you are pitching every fifth day but sharing that day with another pitcher. It is something we would rather not do, but in that situation he handled it extremely well. There is some side benefit in that he has to learn to come out of the pen for the first in the event that becomes his role one day."

On Nick Hagadone: "He has been great. The thing with Nick is he is a little bit older for that league. He is ready to have the leash cut off so to speak. We have been conservative with him because he is coming back from a significant injury. We will at this point increase his pitch count and start to take the reigns off a little bit, and I think that will free him up. But he is dominating. He is striking guys out, though walking a few more guys than we'd like to see. But he is one of the more physical and impressive individuals in the system physically and mentally. His 97 and wipeout slider will be seen at the upper levels at some point soon."

On Carlos Santana: "He is off to a great start offensively. I think if you see him on any given day he is a major league player in the minor leagues. However, especially at his position, there is a huge opportunity to make the most of the minor leagues and develop that leadership ability as a catcher. You really don't have the choice to be the best you can be as a catcher unless you are developing as a leader. He is a natural leader, but there are things about the relationships with a veteran pitcher or young pitcher that you have to learn from experience. He is going through that right now and I think Triple-A is a good place to do it. But the bat is unbelievable. They are pitching around him in Triple-A. Shelley Duncan has helped a little bit in performing behind him, but when they have come into the zone he has done damage. I think [Victor Martinez and Carlos] have similar skill sets in that the bat-to-ball and hands are similar. I think Victor very much became a leader for the Cleveland Indians, and whether or not that happens for Carlos is hard to determine. He has the ability to do that, but the perseverance and discipline is another thing. One area where Carlos clearly separates himself from Victor is his arm as he has an above average arm and is extremely athletic behind the plate. The bat-to-ball and power and how it plays out into his future OPS, we will see."

On Jason Donald: "He is comfortable defensively and extremely confident in the middle of the diamond. The bat has really been impressive as he is driving the ball with authority to the gaps and he is using the whole field. He is actually concerned that he has been hitting so much to right field that he is wondering if he should be pulling the ball more and our hitting coach reminded him that he is also hitting it out of the ballpark to right field. He is stealing bases, running the bases well, and is a hardnosed player that is easy to like. It is hard to say [when he gets to the big leagues]. There are the variables of performances in the major leagues and performances in the minor leagues. You look at the performance of guys who are having some struggles in the major leagues now and look at how they performed in Triple-A and factor that in. There is a clear difference from the minor leagues to the major leagues. I think we would like to see a more sustained success rate at that Triple-A level as he has only been there for roughly over 300 combined plate appearances between 2009 and 2010."

On Cord Phelps: "He and Jason Donald may be two of the hardest working individuals in our system. We have to pull back on those two guys, whether it be time in the weight room, time in the cage, or time on the tee. We are glad to see that hard work is paying off for both of them.

Cord is really handling the bat well. We have challenged him to use his discipline from both sides of the plate to his advantage and make sure he is taking advantage of mistakes and driving the ball, and he has done that this year. He is hitting the ball out of the ballpark, off the wall, and using the entire field. Last year he had three errors on the entire year and he has picked up right where he left off there. Offense is going to dictate his plate appearances as there are not a lot of guys who are just solely defensive minded second baseman. So he is going to have to perform offensively all the way through and everything is telling us he will."

On Alex White: "He is really a class person and has a strong draw. He is getting people out with a mid-90s fastball, splitter and a developing slider. We see him as a starter and we want to see him develop into that frontline major league starter for us."

Second Option

With Luis Valbuena continuing to struggle in Cleveland both at the plate and in the field as well as Mark Grudzielanek very long in the tooth, the second base position may be the most wide open position in the organization at the moment. Thankfully, the

Indians have Triple-A Columbus infielder Jason Donald waiting in the wings and making a strong case to be considered at second base in the very near future.

Donald, 25, is as close as a player can be to the big leagues. In fact, if the Indians were contending this year and not instead trying to get long extended looks at players on their roster to thoroughly evaluate them, he may already be in Cleveland playing second base. He has displayed very good plate discipline so far this season and hit the ball with authority to all fields. He is off to a solid start to date with Columbus where in 33 games he is hitting .298 with 2 HR, 17 RBI, 9 stolen bases, and an .876 OPS, though he is currently in the midst of a mini-slump where in his last nine games he is hitting just .200 (7-for-35).

In addition to Donald's very good start offensively, he has shown very good range at both shortstop and second base and has played error-free ball in the field. For now though there is no doubt the Indians are concentrating their efforts on making him more comfortable at second base as in 33 games he has now played 24 games at second base and 9 games at shortstop, where going into the season he was expected to split time at the two positions. Last year was the first time he ever played second base so he is still learning the position, but he has adapted quickly in picking up the nuances of the position with his positioning, the double play pivot, and adjusting to the different way balls come to him on the right side of the infield.

Donald's value to the Indians is not only that he may become their everyday second baseman in the near future, but he can also play shortstop at the major league level so he can always be an option there down the road. Plus, if he struggles as an everyday player he can be used as a utility player as a fallback option. Through it all he now appears to be on the verge of breaking into the big leagues at second base, which in fact may be the first major change we see on the roster which could come very soon, though not expected until after June 1st.

Second In Line

The Indians have a unique advantage at the moment where they not only have Jason Donald waiting in Columbus for his chance at second base in Cleveland, but they also have another second base option who is quickly jumping into the big league discussion in the near future: Double-A Akron's Cord Phelps.

Phelps, 23, has quickly jumped onto the big league scene after being selected less than two years ago in the 3rd round of the 2008 Draft out of Stanford University. He is a well rounded second baseman who is not only a solid offensive performer, but he shows good athleticism on the bases and in the field which allows him to be a good base-runner and above average defender. At the plate he is an aggressive switch hitter who has very good bat-to-ball ability, uses the whole field well, and has excellent plate discipline skills and gets on base at a high

level. In addition to all that he is an extremely smart player on and off the field (studied engineering in college).

Currently, in 30 games Phelps is hitting .369 with 2 HR, 17 RBI, and a .936 OPS and is leading the Eastern League in hitting. While he is clearly below Donald on the depth chart this year and possibly next, if Donald were to stumble the Indians have a very good Plan B in Phelps waiting in the wings who should spend a lot of time in Double-A and Triple-A this season and next waiting for his chance.

De La Cruz-ing

As seen this past week, there were a lot of moves made by the Indians throughout the system with regard to their starting

rotations and bullpens. One of the bigger moves was the promotion of left-hander Kelvin De La Cruz to Double-A Akron.

De La Cruz, 21, got off to a shaky start this year at High-A Kinston where in his first two outings he allowed eight runs (six earned) in 9.2 innings. After those two starts he settled in, made some adjustments to his pre-start preparations, and began to dominate where in his other four outings he allowed just six runs (five earned) in 24.1 innings. In his last start at Kinston he carried a one-hit shutout into the 9th inning having retired 20 straight batters going into the inning, though ended up allowing two runs in the inning before leaving with one out. His performance in that outing was all the Indians needed to see to declare him ready to be promoted to Double-A and he was promoted him last week.

De La Cruz made his 2010 debut at Double-A Akron on Monday going six strong innings and allowed two runs on five hits, one walk and had seven strikeouts. His showing to date is good to see and he looks finally 100% recovered from the arm troubles he battled through last year,

and could be in line for a big season. In seven combined starts between Kinston and Akron he is 2-3 with a 2.93 ERA and in 40.0 innings has allowed 27 hits, 9 walks, and has 35 strikeouts.

Gardner Stays Hot

Another big pitching move this past week was the promotion of Low-A right-hander Joe Gardner to High-A Kinston. With De La Cruz moving on to Akron, it opened the door for a pitcher from Lake County to move up and Gardner was the first (and obvious) choice.

Gardner, 22, dominated the Low-A circuit at Lake County, a league a college pitcher at his level and ability should dominate. In six starts for Lake County he went 1-0 with a 3.24 ERA, but most impressive was his .185 opponent batting average, 38:11 strikeout to walk ratio, and ridiculous 13.68 K/9 and 6.40 GO/AO ratios. His fastball has had a lot of life this year as it has consistently sat at 90-93 MPH though has touched as high as 95 MPH a few times. The Indians really like him as a starting pitching prospect because in addition to his above average fastball they believe both his changeup and slider will at least become major league average pitches.

The Low-A circuit typically has a more inexperienced, raw collection of Latin and high school bats breaking into full season ball for the first time or some of the organizational filler college bats, so the Indians quickly moved Gardner up to High-A Kinston where he will face a much stiffer challenge facing much more advanced hitters and high profile college players from the last two drafts. He is off to a great start in Kinston as on Sunday he pitched five shutout two-hit innings with two walks and four strikeouts, all while being on a strict pitch count since he was pitching on three days rest. He once again got hitters to pound the ball into the ground as he induced ten groundball outs, and considering four of the other five outs were via strikeout, he only allowed one recorded out to reach the air (10.00 GO/AO).

Rodriguez Adapting To New Role

Two years ago at this time Double-A Akron infielder Josh Rodriguez was thought to be on the fast tack to the big leagues and was one of the Indians best young prospects. Fast forward two years, and he is now a prime example of how injuries and

inconsistent performance can quickly sidetrack a promising career.

To stay on top of the prospect world you have to keep performing or at least continue to have upside, but probably the most important thing is you have to stay healthy. For Rodriguez, 25, his health issues last year not only kept him out of over 100 games, but it also allowed fellow infielder Cord Phelps to close the gap and replace Rodriguez as an everyday infield option at Double-A Akron this year. In addition to that, with Rodriguez struggling the past two years and no other real options in the middle infield at the upper levels of the minors the Indians went out and picked up infielder Jason Donald in the Cliff Lee trade last July.

These days Rodriguez is healthy, but his playing time has been cut and he is now looking to stick as a utility player. So far this season he has appeared in games at shortstop, second base, third base and the outfield. His transition to a utility role started when he went out to the Arizona Fall League this past offseason where he started to play some outfield as well as show some versatility in the infield. He has shown the ability to play all of the positions well, so at this point it will be whether he can remain healthy and show some consistency as a hitter.

To date Rodriguez is hitting .286 with 1 HR, 9 RBI and an .846 OPS in 17 games for Akron. His reduced role is unfortunate, but if he can continue to show some promise as a hitter and stay healthy, he still has a shot to get to Triple-A Columbus at some point this year and potentially could still reach the big leagues some day in a utility role, a role many had him pegged at initially anyway.

Be on the lookout for the second part of Minor Happenings sometime this weekend.

Follow Tony and the Indians Prospect Insider on Twitter @tlastoria . His new book the 2010 Cleveland Indians Top 100 Prospects & More is also available for purchase on Amazon.com or his site .