"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.

Here is the second part of last week's Minor Happenings (first part is here). As mentioned, the second part is just focused on taking a look back a little on the first half of the season and where the farm system stands today. Even though it is the All Star break in the big leagues as well as Double-A and Triple-s, there are only roughly eight weeks left in the minor league regular season, so the end is (already) hear.

I recently had a chance to sit down and talk to Indians' Farm Director Ross Atkins about he first half of the season, and the comments from that chat are below in Q&A style.

Q: In general, what are your thoughts in general on the system at the half way point?

Ross Atkins (RA): I think with how we evaluate ourselves everything is always [about] how are we helping the major league team? There have been some disappointments obviously, and there have been some positive signs with Carlos Santana, Frank Herrmann and some of the pieces that have transitioned smoothly. It certainly has been nice to see Matt LaPorta's recent success. I think secondarily we look throughout the system and ask ourselves if guys are realizing their potential or at least are on a path to do so. Lastly, to make sure we feel good about everyone's plan and the things that we can control. The same things that we ask the players to do with controlling what they can control, we also challenge ourselves to do. Regardless of our major league team performance, there is always going to be successes and failures and frustrations throughout the game. When you have six teams and 185 players running around you are going to find yourself on both sides of that spectrum. But for the most part we feel very good about the hard work that our players and staff have put in, and we feel like everyone is focused on the process and focused on realizing their goals and organizational goals.

Q: Have there been any particular areas of the system you were encouraged by in the first half?

RA: I would say upper level offense, and lower level pitching, if you are speaking generally. Specifically, we have been encouraged throughout the system a lot by the progress with our bullpen pitchers and the relief options that we see growing and developing throughout the system. We have also seen more velocity from more than one or two pitchers in our system which is certainly encouraging.

Q: You seem to be moving guys through the system faster this year, is this a change in philosophy? Or is this simply because since the system is considered so talented, that the talent is just dictating the movement?

RA: You know what, that's a little bit of a misconception. That has not been us, it has been the players. We have had performance dictate that these guys don't belong at those levels anymore. We have always had that philosophy that we want players to be challenged and at the same time we want them to be in a position to have success. I think that our managers, our pitching coaches, our hitting coaches, and our coordinators have done a very good job in putting these players into positions to have success while challenging them towards their plans. We always try to balance those two things, and once we feel as though a player is no longer being challenged and is ready for a new one we move them. The players control that. It is not us having made a conscious effort to all of a sudden be more aggressive.

Q: Are there any specific players who in the first half are a little bit further along than expected?

RA: Cord Phelps, Tyler Sturdevant, Bryce Stowell and Chun Chen. All [four] of those individuals have outpaced the development timeframe that we initially predicted. They are making strides not necessarily at the level that they are at, but they are making strides that we did not necessarily see coming. So we may not have been talking about them much earlier. It is not that we are surprised by their performance, as typically we are surprised when guys don't perform. It is more along those lines where we are expecting these guys to perform and expecting them based on identifying ability as amateurs based on the environment that they are in and the challenges we have put in front of them we are expecting.

Q: What can we take from Triple-A Columbus third baseman Jared Goedert's performance so far this year?

RA: I think the interesting thing with Jared is that he injured his shoulder [in 2007] at a time when we were moving him through the system at a time similar to how we would be moving him this year. He was outperforming the league and the best hitter in the league at the time. At the time he was having some pain in his shoulder and we were also asking him to play some second base and it compounded and turned into an injury. Whether or not it was second base or the increased throwing it is hard to say, but I think it just took this long to get his swing and confidence back. I think initially what it took was a lot of time working through pain and finding exactly where he could swing the bat without pain, and then getting to the point where he was pain free enough to have the most efficient and productive swing possible. I think it was just the time that it took because he came into spring training [this year] and our hitting coordinator and hitting coaches all said to a man, 'wow, Jared has his swing back". Sure enough, five games into spring training he had several home runs and was having great days and he has just continued that from day one of the season.

Q: Is Triple-A Columbus middle infielder Josh Rodriguez a major league option for the Indians?

RA: Yeah, absolutely. He is certainly an option. He is another good example [of a player finally healthy and now performing] as he was off to a great start last year playing second base

everyday in Akron, he hurt his hamstring, we tried to get him back, he re-injured it, and he missed the whole year. If you look at his numbers with his start [last year], he was going to have this year last year if he had not gotten hurt.

Q: Double-A Akron lefties Kelvin De La Cruz and Nick Hagadone have struggled with their command this year, especially lately. Is this something they are still working through after coming off injury, or will they never truly be very good command pitchers?

RA: Yeah, I think so. Both are coming off injuries. One is coming off Tommy John and one is coming off a UCL sprain and a shut down. I think both are making progress. We expected small setbacks in feeling their way back into the pitchers that they were. I think the last thing always to come in those cases is command, so I think that is what we are seeing in both cases. We also don't expect De La Cruz and Hagadone to be plus command guys as they are plus stuff guys. So we don't have these grandiose expectations that they are going to be the next Tom Glavine. They are going to be different pitchers and themselves. They are going to have to command the ball better, but they won't have to have well above average command to compete in the major leagues as their stuff is that good.

Q: Has High-A Kinston right-hander Joe Gardner taken a couple of jumps in his standing in the organization after his fine first half and professional debut?

RA: Yeah, he has been great. It is his first pro season so there is not a lot to compare it to when you are talking about whether he has made jumps this year. He has definitely had a solid year. He misses bats and puts the ball on the ground. He has done a great job of taking care of his body and putting himself in a good position to repeat his delivery. Now for him the key will be solidifying his secondary pitches and making sure he is making those strides in each bullpen and each start and making each start for the rest of the season.

Q: How has the conversion to second base gone to date for Double-A Akron's Jason Kipnis?

RA: He has been fantastic. He really has as he has made every play that we asked him to make. We have seen him in every situation. There is still growth there with positioning. Not just positioning pre-pitch, but positioning on team fundamental plays. They are not limitations,

they are just things that he has to become more innate and more instinctual for him. It takes time and is hard to expedite that. We feel like we did everything we could in the offseason to expedite that and now he just has to go out there and play. He has done an unbelievable job, and definitely solidified in our minds that he is a major league average defender second baseman. He has made every play. It is just a matter of the execution of a cut off and relay, an infield bunt situation. It is just being at the right place at the right time and where and when to cover and how. Those things that the speed of the game dictates that you put yourself in the positions at certain times that you really have to play everyday to learn those limits. That's what he is going through now. But athletically he can make every play that we can ask him to possibly make. I think on the low side he is an average major league defender, and he has a chance to be more because of his athleticism and first step quickness.

Q: Probably one of the biggest disappointments in the first half was High-A outfielder Abner Abreu. Is he still recovering from his shoulder surgery from last summer, or was there anything else leading to his rough start to the season?

RA: There is a part of us that are hoping that some of that is him recovering from his shoulder injury similar to Jared Goedert. You are still going through that process of trying to determine where your swing is exactly, where it is the most efficient and where it feels good on your shoulder. And that takes times especially for a young hitter, and a young physical human being as well. He is also very young with his physical development. He has shown the flashes of being that star caliber player, and I feel very good about this second half for him if he can get over the small hiccups that a player usually has from shoulder surgery.

Q: About two to three weeks ago you mention that righties Hector Rondon and Jason Knapp would be available by early August, and righty Adam Miller potentially at the end of the season or maybe Instructional League in October. Is this still their outlook at the moment?

RA: Correct.

Award Outlook

Here is a quick look at how things are shaping up at the All Star break for the year end Tony

Awards (2009 Tony Awards). Note, this is a quick overview, so if I missed mentioning anyone as a candidate it was likely accidental:

Offensive Player of the Year:
Right now, Triple-A Columbus third baseman Jared Goedert is running away with this award. Catcher Carlos Santana would have been up for it too and likely a lock, but now that he is in Cleveland it is time to look elsewhere. Really, there is no one else having nearly the great statistical season at the plate as Goedert, so it appears his to lose at this point. Chun Chen is also a candidate.

Pitcher of the Year:
The competition is a little bit more fierce in the pitching department as many pitchers are vying for Pitcher of the Year honors. Alex White, Joe Gardner, Josh Tomlin, T.J. McFarland, and Matt Packer all are definitely up for consideration. A lot can change these final two months of the season, but right now if I had to name one pitcher who is a nudge ahead of the others it would be Tomlin because of what he is doing at the highest level of the minors in Triple-A to date.

Reliever of the Year:
There have been several very good relief performances in the first half of the season. The best performances to date belong to Bryce Stowell, Tyler Sturdevant, Cory Burns, Vinnie Pestano, Rob Bryson, and Chris Jones. The one who really stands out above them all so far though is Stowell.

Rookie of the Year:
Considering the short season leagues just got started up and almost all of the rookies are playing at those levels, it is hard to choose who may be playing themselves up to this award at this time. It may not matter though as Alex White and Joe Gardner, who both did not pitch last year, are the clear frontrunners for the award.

Comeback Player of the Year:
This also appears to be a two horse race between Jared Goedert and Josh Rodriguez. Both are having fantastic seasons, and at this point Goedert would appear to have the edge. Rob Bryson is another guy to consider.

Biggest Breakthrough:
There have been lots of encouraging, unexpected performances to date which will surely help the stock of a lot of players. Jared Goedert, Josh Rodriguez, Joe Gardner, Bryce Stowell, Matt Packer, Chris Jones, T.J. McFarland, and Chun Chen look to be the candidates so far. I'd say that Stowell may have the edge here so far because of how he has gained so much velocity and is dominating this year.

Biggest Disappointment:
Injuries aside, the biggest disappointments for guys that are not hurt would be Beau Mills, Carlos Rivero, Jeanmar Gomez, and Abner Abreu. Mills has picked it up of late, but he is still the biggest disappointment so far this season (Abreu right behind him).

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 .