We are now almost two weeks into the Fall Instructional League program the Cleveland Indians run every fall from mid-September to mid-October. New players to the system are getting acclimated to what spring training will be like this coming March as well as getting inundated with lots of instruction and drills.

Roughly 50 players are currently participating at the Indians player development complex out in Goodyear, Arizona. For catcher Alex Lavisky, the fall instructional program is a way to do some extra credit and sort of make up for lost time this year as after being drafted in the 8th round out of St. Edwards High School (OH) he did not sign until August 16th.

Since the day Lavisky signed he has had a crash course on getting accustomed to being a professional and learning the ins and outs of the organization. Upon signing he immediately went out to Arizona to play with the rookie-level Arizona League team and in five games was 3-for-15 with seven strikeouts. Once the Arizona team's season ended on August 28th, he went to Low-A Lake County as a non-rostered player for about two weeks. The idea was to get his feet wet and start building a rapport with players and coaches as well as get to know the area in Lake County since he is expected to open the season there next year as the regular catcher.

Now that he is back in Arizona and racking up those frequent flyer miles, Lavisky - who turns 20 years old in January - is out in the desert working on the process of adapting to the professional ranks.

"Yea, I'm just trying to get my feet wet, and get accustomed to the Indians organization," said Lavisky in a recent interview at Classic Park in Lake County. "I'm trying to establish routines and figure out what works for me and what doesn't."

What works for Lavisky are his catch-and-throw skills to go along with a bat that has some power potential. He also brings a lot of intangibles to the plate as he shows excellent maturity and leadership qualities. All that said, like every young hitter, he is working to get more consistent with his approach at the plate and making more consistent contact.

"Right now I think I need to improve a lot with my hitting," said Lavisky. "I swing the bat for some power, but I have to start taking it the other way. I take it to right field pretty well, but I need to start driving it there. That's the big thing for me is to stay on the ball, let it get deep, and try and drive it out of the ballpark to right field. That is the main focus, and I think a lot of that is going to be worked on [as we go through] Instructs and as I progress through the organization."

While the defense seems to be Lavisky's strong point, there is always room for improvement.

"I can always improve my catching," said Lavisky. "Receiving-wise I am pretty solid, but between blocking, catching and throwing, I think just working on everything as a whole is going to be a key for me as I progress throughout my career and everything."

About six weeks ago, all this talk of getting acquainted as a professional was in serious doubt of ever happening. Over the summer, Lavisky stayed in shape working out four days a week on his speed and strength and even played some summer ball in a local college wood bat league. The Indians actually wanted him to play so they could get a few more looks at him, and after watching him two times they contacted him about three weeks before the singing deadline to tell him that they had seen what they wanted to see. So, he stopped playing and just kept working out, hitting and throwing and awaited a contract offer.

It took awhile, but Lavisky and the Indians eventually agreed on a sizable signing bonus of $1 million, which was almost five times larger than the $150,000 slot recommendation set by Major league Baseball.

"They knew what my parents and I were asking for when they drafted me," said Lavisky. "They knew that something was going to get done, so we kind of just had to sit tight and be patient the first half of the summer and just kind of wait for everything to run its course with the commissioner and MLB to look over anything and the whole process that it takes every year. About a week before the deadline everything heated up with negotiations, and we figured it out a couple days before the deadline, but we just had to keep it a little quiet. But it worked out fantastically, and I was happy and my family was happy."

Lavisky had committed to play at Georgia Tech after turning down offers from schools like LSU, Arkansas, Florida, and several other southern schools. Over the years he had developed a liking to the Georgia Tech program. He went down to the Atlanta area as a youth and played for one of the most recognized youth baseball programs in the country at East Cobb, and it was there he came upon Georgia Tech. They were also the first school to offer him a scholarship.

It was a tough decision to turn his back on Georgia Tech, a school Lavisky had grown to like a lot growing up and one he felt offered a great opportunity as a student athlete. But being from the Cleveland area and being drafted from the hometown team was something that was just too good an opportunity to pass up.

"It was a tough decision as [Georgia Tech] was fantastic," said Lavisky. "Everything they did for me was amazing. Coach [Danny] Hall actually came up two weeks before the deadline and the Yankees were actually in town so Mark Teixeira (who went to Georgia Tech) was in town and we went and had breakfast with him. They pulled out all the stops, and they did everything in their power to try and get me to come down there, but it was too good a situation to turn down with the hometown team and with the stuff we were looking for. It was tough to turn down, but we had to do what we had to do."

As a high school draftee, Lavisky had all the leverage in the negotiation process, which is why the Indians essentially had to go so overslot to sign him. He had the option to go to a renowned academic school on a full scholarship and play baseball, so to pass on that it was going to take a lot. With his parents pushing so hard for school, the contract and a four year paid voucher to attend a school of his choice once his playing days are over helped ease their minds.

"Let me put it this way, my mom really wanted me to go to school and she was very adamant about Georgia Tech from the start because she wanted me to get a good education in case all this did not work out," said Lavisky. "A degree from Georgia Tech would be a great fallback plan. But with the situation we had it was no guarantee it was going to work out the same way two years from now, so we kind of had to pounce on the opportunity that we had as offers like this don't come along too often."

Lavisky may be new to Indians' fans, but he is not new to the Indians and the organization as growing up he has crossed paths with several important people in the organization. In some ways it is almost like his being drafted and signing with the Indians was destiny.

"I played in all the inner-city leagues and all the Cleveland Indians charities ever since I was little," said Lavisky. "I grew up on the west side of Cleveland, so I played in rookie ball and all the sponsored charity events and recreation leagues by the Indians. I played in the rookie ball All Star game three years in a row down at Jacobs Field, and then my high school St. Ed's got to play down at the stadium a couple times. I have always been going to games down there and played there a lot growing up."

The Indians actually first came upon Lavisky where as a freshman catcher he caught pitcher Scott Moviel, a player the Indians were heavily scouting at the time. They kept tabs on Lavisky and followed him throughout his high school career, and over his senior year the interest from the Indians really started to heat up.

In an interesting twist, the starting second baseman on his St. Ed's team this past year happened to be sophomore Tommy Mirabelli, who is the son of Indians Director of Scouting John Mirabelli. Lavisky also has ties to Director of Amateur Scouting Brad Grant, former Indians catcher and now first base coach Sandy Alomar Jr., and the voice of the team Tom Hamilton.

"Mr. Mirabelli's son is a sophomore at Ed's and he started on varsity for us at second base," said Lavisky. "Also, one of the soccer players at Ed's (Pay Murray) his uncle is Brad Grant, and I did not know they were related until we started talking and everything. Brad actually knew some stuff about me through Pat since he interned down there. I played baseball when I was 11 and 12 years old with Sandy Alomar's son Marcus as he lived in Westlake. I played with

Nick Hamilton too, who is Tom Hamilton's son. So I have gotten to know everybody from afar at a young age. Everything kind of came full circle."

In the end, Lavisky was excited to sign with the Indians. But that excitement has been tempered now that he is in the thick of things now and is now another player in what is a deep system, though suddenly the catching position is looking deeper at the lower levels of the system. When he first went out to Arizona back in mid-August to play, he definitely had some butterflies his first game even though there is no fan or media presence at the Arizona League games.

"Yeah, I was kind of nervous," recalled Lavisky. "I had not played in awhile. I was expecting a lot of myself, but I realized it is going to eventually come around and that you can't walk before you crawl. I had to kind of just get in there, take a couple of pitches, and just get re-accustomed to everything because I had been sitting out about a month before then. I kind of just had to dial in and get everything back into game mode, but once that was over it was back to baseball and having fun."

Out in Instructional league for about four weeks, the focus is definitely on the task at hand and getting better. Lavisky and his fellow players really have no choice as going to the field to work out, practice, do drills, and play games provides about the only entertainment available to them while they are out there. With most players not having a car and the area around the ballpark still undeveloped, there is not a lot to do out in Goodyear yet.

"Yeah, there is definitely not much to do out there as you are kind of just in the desert," said Lavisky. "The scenery is gorgeous as you have the mountains and everything behind the fields, and they take good care of us out there. But it is just in the middle of nowhere, it is 45 minutes outside of Phoenix, and you can't have a car because everyone is flying out there. So you just play ball and go back [to your hotel] and kind of hang out."

Instructional League wraps up on October 14th, which is when the players will go home for the offseason and shut things down from a baseball perspective for a few months. Lavisky plans to take some time off to recharge the batteries, but knows that a lot is expected of him next year. With a full season at Low-A Lake County likely looming he is going to have to come into the season in the best shape of his life and as strong as he has ever been.

"I will come back from Instructs on the 14th or 15th, and then I will probably shut it down for a week or two," said Lavisky. "I probably won't pick up a baseball or bat, but I have to keep training and stay in shape for spring training. Once that starts coming around I will pick up the bat and ball again and start doing some long toss. If the snow doesn't kill me (laughs) I will see if I can get outside this offseason as much as possible and get my arm in shape for spring training. Getting outside is going to be the hardest thing."

Being from Cleveland, Lavisky knows how the weather forecast can change at a moment's notice and how brutal the winters can be. He also knows how cold and miserable the weather can be in the spring in April and May, something which may give him an advantage over players from warmer climates.

"Every year I think we miss the first two and a half weeks of the [high school] season between the rainouts and a foot of darn snow on the field," laughed Lavisky. "I think I have somewhat of an advantage being from around here and understanding the weird climate changes that happen in northeast Ohio."

Lavisky may have lots of experience with the harsh elements in the Cleveland area, but time will tell if he can weather the storm that is the player development process in minor league baseball where so many fail while so few succeed.

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