We are two players into the year end Cleveland Indians minor league player awards as the Offensive Player of the Year was announced on Monday and the Pitcher of the Year was announced yesterday.

Today we continue the postseason awards with the announcement of the Reliever of the Year. With so many pitchers in the organization and starting pitchers getting most of the attention, it seems only fair to acknowledge and congratulate some of the fine performances in the bullpen in 2010. In the coming days the Defensive Player of the Year, Rookie of the Year, Comeback Player of the Year, Biggest Breakthrough, Biggest Disappointment and All-Tony Team will be announced.

Again, just a quick reminder that these awards are awarded 100% based on performance as prospect standing is not factored in. So just because a guy is or is not listed does not mean anything from a “prospect” status. These awards are simply for fun to hand out at the end of the year. Also, the Cleveland Indians in no way whatsoever had any input in these awards.

Reliever of the Year Nominees:

Rob Bryson (RHP – Lake County/Kinston/Akron)
7-2, 2.53 ERA, 33 G, 53.1 IP, 31 H, 5 HR, 21 BB, 80 K, 0.98 WHIP, 3.5 BB/9, 13.5 K/9

Bryson returned to form with a great 2010 season across three different levels of the organization, and is another player you will see later on as a candidate for Comeback Player of the Year. He dominated at Low-A Lake County to start the season (13.1 IP, 13 H, 2 BB, 21 K), moved on to High-A Kinston and dominated there (20.0 IP, 7 H, 8 BB, 38 K), and rolled right to Double-A Akron and pitched very well (20.0 IP, 11 H, 11 BB, 21 K). His strikeout to walk ratio of 3.81 was great, and he held opposing hitters to a .165 batting average on the year.

Cory Burns (RHP – Lake County/Kinston)
1-2, 1.96 ERA, 42 S, 54 G, 55.0 IP, 43 H, 2 HR, 14 BB, 1.04 WHIP, 2.3 BB/9, 13.3 K/9

Burns jumped onto the relief prospect scene with a memorable 2010 performance as Mr. Automatic in the ninth inning by closing out win after win for Low-A Lake County and High-A Kinston. He dominated the Single-A circuit with an impressive strikeout to walk ratio of 5.79, held opposing hitters to a .212 batting average, and had an excellent groundball rate (2.42 GO/AO). He finished the season 42-of-45 in save opportunities, and his 42 saves ranked 1st in the Indians organization by a mile. He also ranked 2nd in all of minor league baseball in saves.

Preston Guilmet (RHP – Lake County)
4-1, 2.25 ERA, 30 G, 11 S, 52.0 IP, 35 H, 3 HR, 10 BB, 79 K, 0.87 WHIP, 1.7 BB/9, 13.7 K/9

Without Guilmet locking down the final two to three innings of every game he pitched it is arguable that Low-A Lake County would not have won the Midwest League title this year. He opened the season in extended spring training and did not join Lake County until mid-May, but even though he got off to a late start he had one heck of a season. His 11 saves were 3rd best in the organization, he dominated hitters holding them to a .188 batting average, and had a ridiculous 7.90 strikeout to walk ratio.

Chris Jones (LHP – Lake County/Kinston)
6-5, 2.51 ERA, 38 G, 89.2 IP, 76 H, 4 HR, 29 BB, 85 K, 1.17 WHIP, 2.9 BB/9, 8.5 K/9

Jones made a successful full time transition to the bullpen in 2010, and looks to be one of the better left-handed relief options in the system going forward. He opened the season at Low-A Lake County and was great (22.0 IP, 16 H, 2 BB, 20 K) before quickly going to High-A Kinston in mid-May where he finished well (67.2 IP, 60 H, 27 BB, 65 K). He proved tough on lefties at Kinston (1.83 ERA, .203 BAA, 12.3 K/9). Overall on the season he held opposing hitters to a .226 batting average and allowed just four home runs in 89.2 innings.

Josh Judy (RHP – Akron/Columbus)
3-0, 2.94 ERA, 40 G, 49.0 IP, 54 H, 5 HR, 14 BB, 57 K, 1.39 WHIP, 3.3 BB/9, 11.5 K/9

Judy got off to a slow start because he was not healthy coming out of spring training and missed the first few weeks of the season, but once he got rolling he was back to his old self (Post All-Star: 2.25 ERA, .244 BAA). He gave up more hits than years past (9.9 H/9 2010, 6.5 H/9 2009, 7.3 H/9 2008, 6.4 H/9 2007), but by the same token he put up his best strikeout to walk ratio (4.07) of any season and did that at the highest level of the minor leagues.

Matt Langwell (RHP – Kinston)
4-2, 2.41 ERA, 45 G, 5 S, 56.0 IP, 44 H, 4 HR, 14 BB, 58 K, 1.04 WHIP, 2.2 BB/9, 9.3 K/9

Langwell may have had one of the best seasons among the Indians relief corps in the minors that went largely unnoticed. Coming off a very good 2009 campaign at Low-A Lake County (1.97 ERA, .217 BAA, 8.9 K/9), he was as good at High-A Kinston in 2010. All of his numbers were impressive as he had a very good 4.14 strikeout to walk rate, held opposing hitters to a .219 batting average, and had a 1.56 GO/AO. While I will acknowledge that holds are not a great stat, it should also be noted he finished 7th in all of minor league baseball in holds with 15.

Chen Lee (RHP - Akron)
5-4, 3.22 ERA, 44 G, 72.2 IP, 59 H, 6 HR, 22 BB, 82 K, 1.12 WHIP, 2.7 BB/9, 10.2 K/9

Lee's season was really a tail of two halves. In the first half of the season he lacked much life on his fastball and it showed (4.56 ERA, .268 BAA), but the life returned in the second half and he was dominating (0.71 ERA, .115 BAA). There are many around the game who think he may be the best relief prospect in the Indians system, and he certainly showed that in the second half of the season. Overall, he held batters to a .219 batting average, had a 1.58 GO/AO, and a good 3.73 strikeout to walk ratio.

Vinnie Pestano (RHP – Akron/Columbus)
2-3, 1.81 ERA, 57 G, 17 S, 59.2 IP, 47 H, 2 HR, 16 BB, 77 K, 1.06 WHIP, 2.4 BB/9, 11.6 K/9

Pestano was one of the great stories of the season considering where he was from a health perspective in January with arm troubles and then getting his first big league callup in September. He deserved it with a super performance this season which began at Double-A Akron (13.1 IP, 12 H, 2 BB, 18 K) and carried on to Triple-A Columbus (46.1 IP, 35 H, 14 BB, 59 K). He allowed just two home runs in 59.2 innings, held opposing hitters to a .210 batting average, and finished 2nd in the organization in saves (17).

Bryce Stowell (RHP – Kinston/Akron/Columbus)
3-1, 2.14 ERA, 42 G, 7 S, 67.1 IP, 42 H, 4 HR, 36 BB, 102 K, 1.16 WHIP, 4.8 BB/9, 13.6 K/9

Stowell had a great season across three different levels, and will certainly be a candidate for the Biggest Breakout award. He is now billed as the organization's hardest thrower after he hit 100 MPH in his final appearance at Double-A Akron. While he struggled in a late call to Triple-A Columbus and strained his elbow (19.2 IP, 11 H, 17 BB, 28 K), he was dominating at High-A Kinston to start the season (25.1 IP, 16 H, 8 BB, 41 K) and unhittable at Double-A Akron as he did not allow a run in 14 appearances (22.1 IP, 15 H, 11 BB, 33 K). On the year he held opposing hitters to a .183 batting average.

And the 2010 Tony Award goes to…Cory Burns

It was a very impressive year for the relief corps throughout the Indians organization as several other relievers had very good seasons that did not make this listing. One thing in particular that is very encouraging is some of the very impressive K/9 rates and also K/BB walk rates. But in the end, the clear top performer was Burns. He may not be as much of a prospect as a Stowell,

Lee or Bryson, but he outperformed all of them. It also doesn't hurt to rack up 42 saves in the minors, a stat that doesn't mean a whole lot from a prospect standing, but is one heck of a sexy stat.

Burns probably has a bad taste in his mouth after the way his season ended when he was unable to close out a Game 3 win for High-A Kinston in the Carolina League playoffs which eventually turned into a series and season ending loss for them. However, that rough night aside, in the end he left a good taste in the mouths of many people. Who wouldn't be salivating at the prospects of a closer who started the season a perfect 27-for-27 saves, and finished the season 42-for-45 in saves with a 1.96 ERA in 54 combined games between Low-A Lake County and Kinston?

The 22-year old Burns finished first in the Carolina League with 30 saves, almost two times as many as the second ranked player in the league who finished with 17 saves. More impressively, he did it over the course of just three and a half months as he spent the first month and a half of the season in Lake County before he was called up to Kinston in mid-May. On top of that, he finished second in all of minor league baseball in saves, second only to Jonathan Albaladejo of Scranton-Wilkes/Barre who had 43 saves.

Looking at that high save total, .212 batting average against, and his 81 strikeouts in 55.0 innings (13.3 K/9), it would appear that Burns has some overpowering stuff from the right side. But this is not the case, as his repertoire is actually not dominating at all with a low 90s tailing fastball, a good changeup, and a biting knuckle-curveball. His changeup is very effective against left-handers, but it is his knuckle-curve that really showed development this year and is a very effective pitch against right-handers because of his low arm slot and the way it darts away from them. His success has mostly come from his ability to command and control all of his pitches, the good movement on all of his pitches, and a very unorthodox delivery which creates a lot of deception.

Burns' tornado-like delivery is not patterned off of any one pitcher; it is more a hybrid delivery which combines a lot of attributes from pitchers like Hideo Nomo, Luis Tiant, and others. He used to throw straight over the top four years ago as a college freshman at the University of Arizona, but after a rough first year there he tinkered with a change in his arm slot to low three quarters and pitching exclusively out of the stretch and he had much more success in his sophomore and junior seasons. When he returned to Arizona for his senior season, he was put into the starting rotation and the change necessitated the addition of a windup back into his delivery since he had only thrown from the stretch for two years, and that is when the "Tornado" was born.

Burns' delivery looks like something you would see in a Japanese league with how he pauses in the middle of the delivery, rotates his back to home plate, and then fires the ball home all without ever looking at the hitter or showing them the ball until the last possible second. He varies up the time he pauses in his delivery which along with his arm slot and the way he hides the ball creates a lot of deception, and as a result gives the hitters fits. Hitters just are not comfortable when they stand in the box against him. Not because they are afraid of upper 90s heat, a knee buckling curveball, or a devastating splitter, but because he upsets their rhythm with the pause in his delivery, can throw three quality pitches coming out of the bullpen, his low arm slot, and of course his funky motion.

It was a great year for Burns, and a player I am very interested to see how he handles the big move to Double-A next year.

Up Next: Defensive Player of the Year

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