With February every year comes snow, hope for spring, and prospect rankings. While I'm still working on my Indians top-50, most of the national writers began rolling out their rankings over the past couple of weeks. I don't always agree with the Keith Law's, Kevin Goldstein's and Jonathan Mayo's of the world, but it would be pretty silly to not at least read and try to get the most information possible out of all of their hard work. So let's take a look at what some of these guys think about the Indians system, and how it stacks up against other minor league systems around the game.

Overall, the Indians minor league system isn't an impressive collection of talent right now. Keith Law ranks the system 29th overall (out of 30 teams) in all of baseball.

Jonathan Mayo, responding to me on twitter asking him about his rankings, quipped that the system was so thin that I nearly made the top 20. Kevin Goldstein hasn't ranked the systems yet, but he indicated that his Indians top 20 was the, "… youngest, riskiest, most volatile Top 11 I've ever done."

Baseball America, always masters of the obvious,

points out that, “The Indians best prospects are years away from contributing…outfielder Luigi Rodriguez and shortstop Tony Wolters have played just 34 games in full season leagues.”
It’s pretty much what you’d expect from an organization whose two best hitting prospects graduated to the bigs, and three of their top pitching prospects were traded away in the deal for Ubaldo Jiminez. I’m not going to get too much into my overall thoughts on the system here because I’m saving that for my intro to the top-50 countdown, but I agree that the system is thin right now, and likely one of the bottom 5 in baseball at this time.

One thing that absolutely everyone agrees on (myself included) is that Francisco Lindor is the top prospect in the Indians system. Last year’s 1st round pick impressed talent evaluators around baseball before the draft as a high school shortstop, and then again in limited action for Mahoning Valley after he signed. Baseball Prospectus in particular loves Lindor, with Kevin Goldstein commenting that he could end up as an all-star shortstop. He describes his tools by saying that the switch-hitting Lindor has ”… ou tstanding bat speed. He shocked officials by pounding balls out of Safeco Field, and projects to have as much as average power down the road (15-18 home runs annually). He's a 55-60 runner who should steal a good number of bases, and all of that is wrapped in a package of advanced shortstop skills including impressive range, hands and arm strength, and off-the-charts makeup.
” Goldstein ranked Lindor as the #17 prospect in all of baseball.

BP’s Jason Parks is even higher on Lindor. After watching the young shortstop play in fall instructs, Parks was left drooling, literaly:

“Rarely will a 17-year-old (now 18) shortstop showcase the type of skills to make you feel confident in their future major-league success. After watching Lindor in the Fall Instructional League, I have very little doubt that he will develop into a very good major leaguer, one that can play a premium defensive position while providing above-average offensive production… I’m slobbering all over Lindor without apology. I put a note in his locker after class. I hope he checks the box marked ‘yes.’”

So that’s the good news. The bad news is that Lindor is the only Indians prospect to rank in the top-100 prospect lists. Pitcher Austin Adams makes Keith’ Laws “just missed” list, but that’s it. As we’ve already discussed, the system right now is young and volatile. Because of that, there isn’t much of a consensus around the industry as to just who the Indians top-10 prospects are right now. BP, BA and Mayo all have Lindor and Howard as 1/2, while Law has Howard 3rd and Austin Adams 2nd

. Adams meanwhile, is 4th on BP's list and 8th on both Mayo and BA's. Catcher Chun Chen ranges from 6th (Law) to 19th (BP). C.C. Lee is 4th on BA's list, but 18th on BP's. Catcher Alex Monsalve comes in at #9 on Mayo's list, but is nowhere on anyone else's top 20. Personal opinion has a lot to do with rankings regardless of the organization, but this year's Indians system has as wide of a range of opinions and rankings as I've ever seen. There are just so many young, raw and talented players in the system who have never played above Mahoning Valley that it makes for an extremely difficult system to rank. It will also make it a fun minor league season to follow (for me at least), because there are so many players that I've never even seen play who are considered top prospects in the organization. The system has ream boom-or-bust potential right now, and I'm going to enjoy seeing which way these kids end up going. It's a sure thing that not all of them will pan out, but regardless I think it will be a fun ride to watch them develop.

With all of this comes a cautionary tale about prospects, one that most people will be intimately familiar with. This player was drafted in 2007, and here's what Keith Law had to say about him in his 2008 prospect write-up, while ranking him as the #37 overall prospect in baseball:

"He had more raw power than anyone in the 2007 draft…has light-tower pull power, getting good extension through the ball, but he can get too pull-conscious and roll over on soft stuff away. He projects as a classic "three true outcomes" player -- drawing walks, hitting homers and striking out"

Kevin Goldstein was just as complimentary, ranking him #31 overall:

He has true impact potential offensively, with some scouts believing that he had the best power and the best pitch recognition in last June's draft. He has the patience to wait for a pitch to hit, the bat speed to let balls carry deep into the zone, the strength to power them out to all fields, and the hand/eye coordination to hit for average as well. He has the potential to be a classic No.

3 or No. 4 hitter for a first-division team.

Most Indians fans can probably guess who they were talking about, especially bearing in mind that I called this player a “cautionary tale.” The player of course is none other than our very own Matt LaPorta. My intent in digging up those old evaluations isn’t to show you that I think Goldstein and Law are idiots who can’t recognize a AAAA player when they see one, it is simply to reflect that prospect evaluation is far from an exact science. When I put "experts" in quotes, it's not because I don't believe that Law and Golstein are the best in their field; I absolutely do and I read everything they both write. It's just to reflect that even the experts call 'em wrong sometimes. I’m not even going to get into players like Adam Miller, elite talents who fell off the grid due to injuries. I’m talking about complete misses in terms of talent evaluation. Former AL MVP Dustin Pedroia appeared nowhere on these top-100’s during his time in the minors. Matt LaPorta was considered a top-40 prospect in all of baseball. So keep every prospect list you read this offseason (especially mine when it comes out) in perspective, because no one can really tell the future. Don’t get bogged down in whether LeVon Washington is ranked 5th or 15th. Take the information for what it is; an educated guess by people who love following baseball. Then get out to a few minor league games this year and make an assessment for yourself. I promise it is much more fun that way.

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