



Writing this week's View from the Porch while listening to Tom Hamilton is a thing of beauty. The soothing sound of the voice of the Indians Radio Network is cathartic. It's amazing to think that I began my day spending 10 minutes scraping a quarter-inch of ice off of each window on my truck and now I'm listening to Spring Training baseball.

With that in mind, here's my annual public service announcement: Please remember that Spring Training stats mean very little. Early in Spring Training, the pitchers are mostly working on fastball command and building velocity, which will both inflate their statistics and inflate the statistics for the hitters. Specifically, with the Cactus League in Arizona, hitters get to hit in dry, warm conditions, where the ball carries very well and infields are extremely fast from being baked in the sun all day and receiving moisture only from sprinkler systems.

Unfortunately, for most of us, it's hard to evaluate anything from Spring Training for ourselves. We have to rely on reports from those that are there, because Spring Training is all about the eye test. You can pretty much throw most of the numbers out, so the way that players look is what tells the story. Players are attempting to make adjustments and will use game scenarios to do that. There is an adjustment period for everybody and it will affect their numbers.

Now that my PSA is out of the way, there are some things that need to work themselves out in Spring Training. Unlike in years past, there are no battles for everyday spots in the lineup. Lonnie Chisenhall finally gets to go to Goodyear knowing that the third base job is his. Everybody knows their role and can focus on being ready for the season rather than winning a job.

There are some jobs up for grabs, mostly on the pitching staff. The everyday lineup will need to shake itself out and the final couple of bench spots are open. But, it's great to go into Spring Training without any major questions and with a lot of options for the few roster spots that are currently unfilled. Those and other things are part of my "Five Burning Questions" for Spring Training.

1. Who fills the back end of the rotation?

The rotation, in general, is the biggest question mark on the team. Three spots are accounted for with Justin Masterson, Ubaldo Jimenez, and Brett Myers. It's unclear how the rotation will shake out in terms of who is at the front or back of the rotation, but these three guys will get a turn once every fifth day.

But, who will fill the other two spots? Everybody, including Hamilton on Friday's broadcast, believes that Zach McAllister has an inside track at a rotation spot. Hamilton's exact words were that it was "likely McAllister's job to lose" for the fourth spot. I agree with Hamilton, as I expressed in last week's View from the Porch when I [broke down the starting rotation](#) .

There have been [glowing reviews](#) so far about Scott Kazmir, who has gotten his velocity back and seems to be healthy. There hasn't been a whole lot said about Daisuke Matsuzaka or Corey Kluber thus far. Trevor Bauer is obviously in the running, but

[this chart from MLBTradeRumors.com](#)

is going to be a factor. If the Indians wait to call Bauer up until sometime in mid-May, they will guarantee an extra year of contractual control, which will give the Indians control through 2019. If Bauer is kept in the minor leagues through late June, the Indians can avoid Super Two status in 2015 with Bauer. Super Two is a cutoff where players with less than three years of MLB service time can be eligible for salary arbitration. That would give Bauer four years of salary arbitration instead of three. If Bauer wins the job, the Indians are being proactive, so I don't think they would allow something six years from now to be a deciding factor, but it will be a consideration.

I already said that Spring Training stats don't matter, so how will the decision be made? Command and quality strikes should be atop the criteria. Pitchers have to throw strikes. Not every home run or double in Arizona is going to be a home run or double in Cleveland. But, strikes are strikes no matter what ballpark, unless Cowboy Joe West is the plate umpire. This is going to be based on who looks the sharpest. The coaching staff and the front office will

evaluate every bit of information available to them from the Spring Training appearances by those in the running and make an informed decision.

2. Who rounds out the Indians bullpen?

We don't know yet if the Indians will carry a 12-man or a 13-man pitching staff. With so much versatility among the position players, which I will discuss shortly, Terry Francona may opt for a 13-man pitching staff. The locks for the bullpen are all right handers – Chris Perez, Vinnie Pestano, Joe Smith, Cody Allen, and Matt Albers. The Indians will obviously carry at least one lefty, with that race between Nick Hagadone, Scott Barnes, and non-roster invite Rich Hill. Hagadone likely has an inside track in that race. We'll consider Hagadone a lock to make the club, bringing the pitching staff to 11.

Who else makes it? Outside of Barnes and Hill, the other candidates include Bryan Shaw, acquired in the Trevor Bauer trade from Arizona, Frank Herrmann, and David Huff. If Francona opts for a 12-man staff, five guys are in the running for one spot. Outside of performance, another factor that could cut the list down would be if Francona prefers to have a second lefty in the bullpen. That would give Barnes an inside track.

If Francona prefers to use a 13-man pitching staff, any one of those guys could make the club. With the seven bullpen arms mentioned above, the team does not have a long reliever, so Huff or Hill may be called upon to assume that role.

Either way, regardless of who the final addition(s) is (are) to the bullpen, the Indians bullpen will be a strength of the team.

3. Outside of Mike Aviles and Lou Marson, who makes the team in a reserve role?

Again, like the final bullpen spot(s), there are a lot of possibilities here. Mike Aviles can play 2B, SS, 3B, and OF. Lou Marson will be the backup catcher. After that, the Indians will have one or two roster spots open for others. Francona has a ton of options with his nine everyday players, so he could possibly give a roster spot to Jason Giambi. With three center fielders in the

outfield, Nick Swisher, who can also play the outfield, at first base, Mark Reynolds, who can play first base and third base, as the designated hitter, and Carlos Santana, who can also play first base, it's unlikely that a player who cannot play a middle infield position or an outfield spot will make the team.

However, Giambi could make the team. For one thing, adding another veteran to a relatively young ballclub is a good idea. For another thing, Drew Stubbs's platoon splits against right handed pitchers are terrible, so against a righty, Francona may want to use Swisher in right, Reynolds at first, and Giambi at DH. He still gets on base at a decent amount and has some power.

The fourth outfielder spot is definitely interesting. In-house candidates include Tim Fedroff, who had an excellent 2012 season splitting time between Double-A Akron and Triple-A Columbus, with a .316/.394/.485/.879 slash line, could make enough of an impression to make the club. Speedster Ezequiel Carrera will get a long look. Ryan Raburn and Ben Francisco, both signed to minor league deals, could also factor in. Raburn can play 2B and 3B, so his versatility could benefit him. Jeremy Hermida also signed a minor league deal and could have an outside chance.

4. Will a new coaching staff be able to help Ubaldo Jimenez?

Like I [discussed two weeks ago](#) , Ubaldo Jimenez's biggest problem has been a dramatic drop in velocity. There's a chance that Jimenez's velocity drop has something to do with his mechanics, which Francona and pitching coach Mickey Callaway have reportedly been working on with Jimenez. Will mechanic adjustments be enough to make Jimenez a serviceable pitcher?

The Indians will hit and will win close games. It's the rotation that they need to overachieve and Jimenez would be a big part of that. If he is able to get to league average in most stats, to the point where he's not hurting the Indians, then they'll be in better shape.

Even if Jimenez fixes his mechanics to the point where he has some level of command and can throw strikes, 92 mph down the middle will still get hit a long way. That's the problem that he's facing more than anything. He doesn't know where the ball's going and it's not getting there as fast as it used to. At 96, he has margin for error and gets hitters to swing at borderline pitches.

At 92, hitters lay off borderline pitches and punish mistakes.

The reason this is down my list of questions is because I'm automatically assuming that we don't see a lot of measurable improvement. Hopefully Jimenez proves me wrong.

5. Can the Indians leave Goodyear healthy?

This is always a concern. The Indians are better equipped to handle injuries with their depth and positional versatility, but they don't want to have to use it. The Indians have been relatively lucky in most years, dealing with some month-long injuries here and there and some Grady Sizemore injuries, but this would not be the year to have to deal with long-term injuries. If the Indians want to make noise in the playoff chase in the American League, they'll have to play consistent all year and stay healthy.

With the additional week of Spring Training thanks to the World Baseball Classic, players can take their time getting into game shape and ease their way into the season. That should go a long way into helping the conditioning, plus the Indians have jettisoned guys like Hafner and Sizemore, who were walking injury risks.

Spring Training is a great thing because baseball's back and the season is on the way, but don't read too much into statistics and wins and losses. It's all about the eye test and about getting ready for the season and making sure everything is in good working order. The position battles are still fun to keep an eye on and might have a big impact on the club this season.