



Most of the changing culture at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario can be attributed to Terry Francona. Since the Indians hired Francona, sweeping changes have put the organization in a much better position than it was in at the end of the 2012 season. Ownership stepped up and put the necessary funds forward to help transform the team into a contender. The acquisition of proven Major League talent and a couple of infectious personalities have exponentially increased excitement and morale, both in the clubhouse and among fans.

Questions have always existed about how much a manager actually helps in-game performance. Baseball is not designed like football, where coaches on both sides call plays or like basketball where teams can make adjustments in their designed sets or change who is guarding who. Unlike football and basketball, which are games of X's and O's, baseball is a numbers game. The "eye test" will say that a player cannot hit the slider down and away, but the numbers give a value as to how bad that player is at hitting the slider.

And everybody has the numbers.

Give me 10 minutes at Fangraphs or Baseball-Reference and I'll find every matchup stat I need to find or every hole in a player's swing. Allocate hours upon hours and plenty of manpower to analytics and video staffs and there are no secrets in the game of baseball. Can a competitive advantage really be gained by in-game managerial decisions? Maybe, if the other manager falls asleep at the wheel. For every situation where Francona brings in his matchup lefty to neutralize the opposition's left handed hitter, the opposing manager will either pinch hit or do the same to the Indians later in the game. At that point, it's out of the manager's hands and it's up to the

player.

Most in-game decisions are no brainers. If a guy hits .335 off of left handed pitching, you should use a right hander against him. If a pitcher takes 1.6 seconds to get to the plate, you should give the steal sign to your above average baserunners. Managers can make judgment calls, like going with the “hot hand” or using a young pitcher early in the season in a crucial spot to show confidence in him, but, more often than not, the binder of information sitting on the top of the dugout bench makes the decisions.

The real value of a manager comes before and after the game. Managers are leaders of men. Men with all types of personalities. Their ultimate job is to keep morale high, on both a team level and on an individual level. Of course managers and coaches notice mechanical flaws in hitters or pitchers or give suggestions about being more aggressive with their fastball or staying inside the baseball and using the whole field, but most of those are pre- and post-game suggestions.

In that respect, Francona seems to be one of the best. The players (and fans) have fed off of Francona’s enthusiasm. Refreshed from taking a year away from the dugout to re-focus and become an observer of the game of baseball, instead of just the Boston Red Sox, appears to have had a profound effect on Francona. Every interview with Francona emanates excitement.

Underneath the passionate exterior that emphasizes the importance of maintaining personal relationships with the players is a guy who understands the “Moneyball” side of the game – sabermetrics. Francona worked alongside Theo Epstein, the former wunderkind general manager of the Red Sox, for his entire tenure in Boston. Epstein is widely regarded as one of the most progressive general managers in the game, made evident by the fact that Red Sox owner John Henry hired a 28-year-old kid to make the personnel decisions of one of baseball’s most storied franchises after Billy Beane turned down the job.

Francona is the total package as a manager and there have been so many anecdotes and quotes reported by scribes just from this Spring Training to illustrate his managerial brilliance. Here are just a few:

From Indians.com’s Jordan Bastian’s [interview with Francona](#) on March 26:

MLB.com: *Are you excited about the kind of offense you guys might have this year? There is a lot of speed in that lineup that could put pressure on the opposition, and the potential for more power.*

Francona: *There are still some things we need to clean up. I don't mind running, but we can't be out.*

One of the things I love about Francona is that he exudes knowledge of advanced metrics, but he can explain them in a very simple, direct way. Stolen bases, on average, are worth .195 runs. But, the average caught stealing costs .456 runs. From a risk-reward standpoint, the risk of getting thrown out is over two times greater than stealing a base. Francona knows that. He knows that he does not want to limit the skill sets of Michael Bourn and Drew Stubbs, but he also knows how detrimental making outs on the basepaths is. He wants the players to be who they are, while adhering to what the numbers say is best. More on the numbers further down in the article.

MLB.com: *Your brand of leadership seems to be a blend of being one of the guys, but knowing when and how to be their boss. How do you strike that balance?*

Francona: *As long as they're doing what they're supposed to do, there are no issues. I don't ever want to pretend that I don't like those guys. I do. I enjoy them. At the same time, they know they have a job to do. So as long as they do it, there are no issues. And if they don't, I'll tell them. It's really not that tough.*

Here's Francona keeping the job in perspective. He knows that players want to play for a manager that they respect and a manager that they can talk to. At the same time, if something needs to change, then it needs to be addressed. Francona has already created a positive rapport with the players and, as we all know, it's easier to take the news that you're doing something wrong when somebody knows how to properly address it.

From the [Castroturf blog](#) of brilliant MLB.com scribe Anthony Castrovince on March 18:

By now, there's really not much about Life Under Tito that hasn't already been said. Francona is really bringing the best out of this group simply because he relates to players so well, and that point has been hammered home quite consistently. There was one anecdote, though, that I thought spoke to that point quite well. It came when the Indians sent Mike McDade down after a strong camp and had to tell him, as so many others have told him, to be sure to watch his weight moving forward. Francona approached that conversation in a positive light.

As Antonetti recalled: "His message was, 'You're a really good player, you can do so many great things, you're great hitter from both sides of the plate. We think you have a lot of potential. And you've heard it before, but you need to take care of your body to take advantage of your potential.'" "When players get instruction from Francona, they know he's coming from that positive place. "Inevitably, in any relationship, you're going to have those moments where you have to have tough conversations," Antonetti said. "It's more constructive to have those conversations once you already have a relationship in place. Terry works really hard to establish those relationships. And it comes from a genuine place. He really is a caring person. He cares individually about every guy in that clubhouse, and I think the players feel that. So that gives him the ability and platform to, when something needs to be addressed with a guy, he can talk to them and say, 'Hey, I love you, but these are things you need to do to get better' or 'You didn't run that ball out' or 'Walk me through what you were thinking in that situation on the bases.'"

Another example of Francona's way of approaching players and situations. Here, you have a tough situation, with a player being sent to minor league camp. McDade entered camp knowing he had very little chance to make the team, but Francona planted the seeds in his mind that the organization thinks highly of him and to focus on getting better rather than sulking in the minors.

Furthermore, McDade is a kid that the Indians acquired this offseason. He's new to the organization and wants to be on the front office's radar. Francona, as an extension of the front office, let McDade know that they see potential. They see ability. It takes a smart, calculated manager to use the right words, and that's what Francona did.

From Pat McManamon of Fox Sports Ohio [on Terry Francona](#) from March 26:

One of Francona's beliefs is to utilize the strengths of a player instead of harping on his

weakness. He looks at Chisenhall and sees a guy who takes his swings and makes contact.

“Lonnie’s not going to probably be a high on-base guy for us because he’s so aggressive and he’s got such good eye-hand coordination, what he swings at he hits,” Francona said.

The solution to take advantage of those strengths?

“If we can just get him to swing at good pitches, he’s going to be just fine,” Francona said.

As stated above, Francona knows the sabermetric side. Everybody is in agreement that walks are good. In this Moneyball era of baseball, with an emphasis on working counts, drawing walks, extending at bats, and not making outs, too many teams have tried to turn good hitters into excruciatingly patient hitters. Organizational philosophies have tried to over-adjust players to become on-base machines at the expense of making solid contact early in the at bat. Good hitters who don’t walk are almost treated like they have leprosy, because walks represent sure-fire baserunners, while balls in play are still outs 71-73 percent of the time on average.

Chisenhall has the potential to be a good hitter. He has a tremendous line drive swing, with a decent power, and has shown the ability to put bat to ball in the minor leagues. Some organizations may look down on Chisenhall because he doesn’t walk. Instead, Francona wants Chisenhall to be who and what he is. Instead of outright saying, “We want you to take more pitches,”, Francona puts it in the context of pitch recognition and swinging at strikes.

What seems just as significant was that Brantley was given the OK to swing [with a 3-0 count]. A lot of managers put the take sign on, trying to get guys on base. Not Francona.

“I love when you got men on base and you got a good fastball hitter hitting,” he said. “The idea is to put guys into position where they can do some damage.”

It’s not like it happens often.

The last two seasons, the Indians did not have a single hit when the count was 3-0. Players had 240 plate appearances, and walked 232 times -- a hint of the strategy. The last time the Indians hit a home run on a 3-0 count was Aug. 24, 2009, when Travis Hafner drove in the first three runs of a 10-6 win.

"I've never understood why so many people just automatically take," Francona said. "If you're a smart enough hitter and you're just able to say to yourself, 'OK, I'm going to get a certain pitch in a certain spot, I'll take a free swing.'

"A lot of times when a guys swings three-oh and fouls the ball back, because they took a good healthy swing they feel better about the next swing. I think it's great. I think it breeds confidence."

"I just think that too often you take the best hitter's count that could possibly be, and you take the bat out of the hitter's hands," he said.

The thought of swinging at a 3-0 count in today's OBP-crazed game seems preposterous. There's a method to this madness. Let's take away the obvious fact that runners could advance an additional base on a single as opposed to a walk.

2012 MLB results in 3-0 counts: 3,828 plate appearances, 3,544 walks, 270 at bats (so, 270 times a ball was put in play), 94 hits (.348 avg), 17 doubles, three triples, 30 home runs. More than half, 50 out of 94, of the hits went for extra bases.

From a chart from Tom Tango that [covered run expectancy from 1999-2002](#), the average number of runs scored from a walk is .330, from a single is .474, from a double is .764, from a triple is 1.063, from a home run is 1.409. Yes, walks are valuable. Hits are more valuable. Again, like I said above about Chisenhall, a walk is a guaranteed baserunner, while a ball in play is not. But, hitters make better contact ahead in the count, thus improving their chances of getting a hit when putting a ball in play. These numbers have likely changed a little bit since Tango's findings, but the concept remains the same.

Furthermore, if the batter swings and misses or fouls off the pitch, the count moves to 3-1, another good hitter's count. In 2012, here's what batters did on 3-1 pitches: 8,351 plate appearances, 4,335 walks, 3,961 at bats (so, 3,961 times a ball was put in play), 1,401 hits (.354 avg), 295 doubles, 22 triples, 266 home runs. Forty-two percent of hits went for extra bases.

Terry Francona is a baseball man. He's the perfect blend of old school and new school. He's fiercely passionate and full of perspective. His players will respect him and he will respect them because he knows how hard it is to play the game at the Major League level and he saw it as a player and as a son. The Indians are gearing up for battle and they have the right man to lead them.