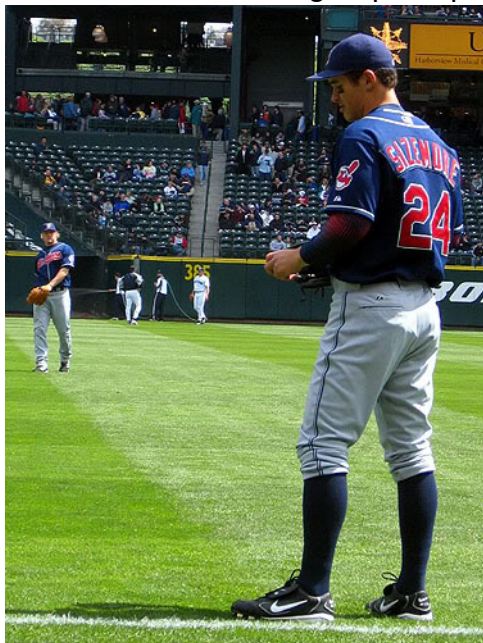


2007 Cleveland Indians Spring Training Preview: The Outfield and Bench

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Wednesday, February 28 2007 7:00 PM -

Grapefruit play kicks off today as the Indians take on the Astros at 1:05pm at Chain of Lakes Park in Winter Haven (WTAM 1100 is airing the game live). And with that, we finish off our four-part 2007 Indians preview as Tony wraps things up with a look at the outfield and bench. Grady's still in center, but he's flanked by a couple new players this year in David Dellucci and Trot Nixon. How does this group shape up? Who will provide the depth? Tony delivers the 411.



Grapefruit play kicks off today as the Indians take on the Astros at 1:05pm at Chain of Lakes Park in Winter Haven (WTAM 1100 is airing the game live). And with that, we wrap up our four-part 2007 Indians preview. Last week the [starting pitching](#) and [bullpen](#) were previewed, and on Tuesday the [infield](#) was previewed. Today, the outfield and bench wrap things up.

2006 Flashback: By the Numbers

(Major league ranks in parentheses)

In the infield preview we took a look back and compared the Indians performance offensively from 2006 to 2005, so this time around we will take a look back and compare the Indians performance defensively from 2006 to 2005.

In 2006, there is no question that the defense had a negative effect on the outcome of several games. The Indians finished the year ranked 12th (24th) in the American League (AL) with a .981 fielding percentage, had the 2nd (5th)

) most errors with 118, were 2nd

(3rd)

) in most stolen bases allowed with 128, and were 11th

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(26

th

) in

[defensive efficiency rating](#)

(.6917).

By contrast, in 2005 the Indians were 8th (17th) in the AL with a .983 fielding percentage, had the 7th (11th) most errors with 106, were 4th (7th)

in most stolen bases allowed with 108, and were 3rd

rd

(3

rd

) in defensive efficiency rating (.7251).

There is no hiding the Indians problems last year on defense, and all the numbers across the board show a pretty significant drop from 2005 to 2006. Most notably, their efficiency rating rank tumbled from 3rd (.7251) in the major leagues in 2005 to 26th (.6917) in the major leagues last year. Defensive efficiency is the rate at which balls put into play are converted into outs by a team's defense. Those that watched night-in-and-night-out last year know how many times the Indians gave the opponent extra outs even without making errors.

The 2007 Starting Outfield

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Compared to the infield, the Indians starting outfield has very few question marks. We know what kind of player Sizemore is, and we have a large sample size of historical statistics and splits to show what we can expect from Trot Nixon and David Dellucci. Probably the only question mark in the outfield is whether Nixon will be able to rebound from injury and be effective this season.

The Indians will employ two lineup platoons to start 2007, a David Dellucci/Jason Michaels combo where Dellucci will start in left field (LF) against right-handed pitchers and Michaels in LF against left-handed pitchers, and also a Trot Nixon/Ryan Garko platoon where Nixon will start in right field (RF) and Casey Blake at first base (1B) against right-handed starters and Garko at 1B and Blake in RF against left-handed starters. While it may seem like it, Blake is not in the platoon mix since he is in the lineup everyday, for now.

Barring injury, here is the Indians 2007 starting outfield. While there will be two outfield platoons, the listing here is based on who will see the most playing time as a starter:

LF: David Dellucci

CF: Grady Sizemore

RF: Trot Nixon

LF: David Dellucci

□

2006 Key Stats: .292 avg, 41 runs, 14 2Bs, 5 3B, 13 HRs, 39 RBIs, 1 SB

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Advanced stats: .369 OBP, .530 SLG, .899 OPS, 43 [RC](#) , 8 [WS](#) , 17.7 [VORP](#)

Dellucci was one of the Indians big signings this past offseason when he signed a three year \$11.5 million deal to come to Cleveland. While the signing did not bring much fanfare from Indians fans, the Indians were actually applauded by many national baseball pundits who considered the signing one of the smartest offseason moves by any team. Dellucci is a very muscular and strong left-handed hitter who has thrived in platoon roles in Arizona, Texas and Philadelphia, and he will bring his experience in that role and potent bat to Cleveland for the next several years.

Whether or not as a fan you subscribe to the platoon approach, what makes Dellucci such an attractive addition is how much of a good hitter he is against right-handed pitching. Last year, Dellucci hit .299 with a .904 OPS against right-handed pitchers, and hit .200/.842 in limited at bats (20) against left-handed pitching. When you look at his lefty/righty splits beyond last year and view them as a whole over the last three years from 2004-2006, Dellucci has hit .264/.366/.509/.887 (AVG/OBP/SLG/OPS) with 56 HRs and 156 RBIs in 949 at bats against right-handers.

By the same token, in the last three years he has only hit .185/.284/.321/.605 with 3 HRs and 9 RBIs in 81 at bats against left-handed pitching. His extreme splits to go along with only 81 at bats in total against left-handed pitching the last three years shows he is strictly a platoon player. Considering about 70% of the time the Indians will face a right-handed starter, Dellucci should be very effective in those games. In the games a left-hander starts, Jason Michaels will be a quality replacement (more on him below).

Dellucci also appears to have grown some as a hitter the last two years. While he has been a windmill at the plate over his career - 4:1 career at bat to strikeout ratio (AB/K) - of late he has shown an ability to take walks. In the last two seasons, he has become much more patient at the plate and ended up putting forth his two best on-base percentage (OBP) seasons with a .367 OBP in 2005 and a .369 OBP in 2006. In addition to the increased walks, Dellucci's power has increased substantially the last two years as he has put up career best slugging percentage (SLG) seasons with a .513 SLG in 2005 and a .530 SLG in 2006.

Over the last three years, Dellucci has been a hot starter, but has struggled some later in the season. Before the All-Star break he has hit .278 with a .904 OPS, and after the All-Star break he has hit .238/.803. To break it down further, his month-by-month AVG/OPS listing: .273/.890 in April, .314/1.067 in May, .249/.739 in June, .251/.835 in July, .285/.960 in August, and .191/.669 in September. Probably the most alarming thing with Dellucci is he had some trouble in key situations last season when he hit .185/.669 with runners in scoring position (RISP) and .034/.159 with RISP and two outs.

Dellucci should be a good addition to the Indians lineup, and he will also be a solid addition defensively and on the bases as well. Considering that Jason Michaels was the year-long starter in 2006, a Dellucci/Michaels combination using both hitters strengths should lead to a very significant increase in production from the LF position.

2007 Cleveland Indians Spring Training Preview: The Outfield and Bench

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CF: Grady Sizemore

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2006 Key Stats: .290 avg, 134 runs, 53 2Bs, 11 3B, 28 HRs, 76 RBIs, 22 SBs

Advanced stats: .375 OBP, .533 SLG, .908 OPS, 124 RC, 25 WS, 69.1 VORP

Sizemore was an All-Star for the first time last year, and he ranked 1st in the AL in runs (134),
7th in hits (190), 2nd in

total bases (349), 1st

st

in doubles (53), 2nd

nd

in triples (11), 1st

st

in extra base hits (92), and 3rd

rd

in strikeouts (153). About the only problem with him is the lofty ranking in strikeouts, but considering how much damage he normally does when he makes contact it is something the Indians and us fans can live with.

Sizemore had a great breakout campaign in 2005, hitting .289 with 22 HRs, 81 RBIs and an .832 OPS in 640 at bats. Last year, though, Sizemore became a superstar after significantly improving on those numbers. Last year, his batting average actually remained the same (.290), his RBIs did decrease from 81 to 76, and his stolen bases stayed the same at 22. However, what put him in the elite class is his ability to work counts and draw more walks (from 52 to 78) which resulted in an OBP increase from .348 to .375, and also his power increase which saw him go from 37 2Bs to 53 2Bs and from 22 HRs to 28 HRs for a SLG shift from .484 to .533. The resulting increases in OBP and SLG knocked his OPS from a good .832 to a great .908.

Sizemore has proved to be human, however, as he continued to struggle against left-handed pitching last year. In 2005, while Sizemore hit .307 with a .902 OPS against right-handed pitching, he struggled against left-handers in hitting only .245/.660. Then, last year Sizemore improved significantly against righties hitting .329/1.002, but had marginal improvement against lefties hitting only .214/.717. Much like Travis Hafner has become equally dangerous against lefties and righties, for Sizemore to become a complete hitter he needs to become a better hitter against lefties and find a way to avoid being neutralized when facing them.

In key situations last year Sizemore hit .261/.787 with runners on base, .262/.794 with RISP, and .262/.892 with RISP and two outs. Defensively, Sizemore is considered one of the better center fielders in baseball, and could be a Gold Glove winner very soon. Also, considering the reckless abandon Sizemore plays with, it is amazing he is not out of the lineup more often. Sizemore was one of only six players in baseball to play in all 162 games last year.

The question remains, is the leadoff position the most ideal spot for Sizemore? When you have a player leading the league in extra base hits, that player is normally hitting either 3rd or 4th in your lineup and not leading off. As nice as it is to have a leadoff hitter who can quickly set the table for the middle of the order, down the road those extra base hits probably would be more

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beneficial to the Indians driving in runs rather than setting them up. With Hafner and Martinez hitting 3

rd

and 4

th

though, the need is not there for Sizemore to move down the order yet. If a leadoff option is found in the next year or so, Sizemore will probably be slid down to #3 in the order. Trevor Crowe is the guy who seems destined for this role, but will not be ready to assume this role (if at all) until sometime in 2008 at the earliest.

Sizemore is widely considered the best all-around player in the AL, maybe even in baseball. His combination of hitting, power, defense, speed and hustle have made him one of the fan favorites in Cleveland as well as nationally. Last year, Sizemore signed a six year \$23.45 million deal with a club option for a seventh year at \$10 million, which puts him under the Indians control through 2012 and makes him a centerpiece for this team for many years to come.

RF: Trot Nixon

□

2006 Key Stats: .268 avg, 59 runs, 24 2Bs, 0 3B, 8 HRs, 52 RBIs, 0 SBs

Advanced stats: .373 OBP, .394 SLG, .767 OPS, 54 RC, 10 WS, 8.0 VORP

The Indians signed Nixon late this offseason, almost out of nowhere, to a one year \$3 million contract that includes up to \$2 million in incentives based on plate appearances. For those wondering where "Trot" comes from, it is short for his middle name as his full name is Christopher Trotman Nixon. His son Chase chose the #33 that Nixon will wear as an Indian rather than the #7 he wore in Boston. Why bother mentioning this? Well, in an interesting bit of trivia, Nixon's son Chase was born on September 11, 2001. Nixon was actually in mid-air flying back to Boston for his son's birth when the attacks occurred on 9/11.

Nixon's best seasons were from 2001-2003 with the Red Sox, when he averaged .279 with 26 HRs, 90 RBIs and an .888 OPS over that three year span. After a career year in 2003 when he hit .306 with 28 HRs, 87 RBIs and a .974 OPS, Nixon's career was sidetracked in 2004 as he only played in 48 games because of a herniated disc. Since that injury in 2004, Nixon has been plagued with some minor injuries in 2005 and 2006 which limited his effectiveness, and he very well could be a player in decline. Of course, this is why General Manager Mark Shapiro was able to land him on such a cost-friendly deal in the first place.

Nixon is another player that has proven to be most effective in a platoon. During his time in Boston, he was often taken out of the lineup when a left-handed pitcher was on the mound, and this should only continue in Cleveland. His recent numbers back this all up, as last year Nixon hit .288 with an .805 OPS against righties and hit .204/.648 against lefties. Also, over the last three years, he has hit .297/.849 against righties and has hit .207/.620 against lefties.

Not only is Nixon very effective against right-handed pitching, but he is also a notoriously fast starter, which is something the Indians could use considering they consistently get off to awful

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starts in April and May. In the last three years he has averaged a .297/.916 April, .307/.880 May, and a .323/.893 June. Overall, before the All-Star break the last three years he has hit .295/.852. However, after June and the All-Star break it is a different story as in the last three years he has hit .242/.665 in July, .280/.816 in August, and .248/.748 in September, while his post All-Star game numbers slip to .251/.720. Also, of note, in key situations last year Nixon hit .262/.768 with runners on base, .237/.730 with RISP, and .250/.793 with RISP and two out.

Defensively, Nixon has average speed, but he takes excellent routes to balls and reads the ball well off the bat. Nixon was also a favorite son among Red Sox fans as they consider Nixon the inspiration for their expression "Boston Dirt Dogs" (i.e. a "scrapper"), which is a player who hustles, goes all out, and is not afraid to get dirty to win a game. Nixon was also adored by Red Sox fans for his volatile temper and dedication to his teammates. Fans in Cleveland already adore Sizemore for this style of play (sans the volatile temper), so if Nixon can stay on the field he could become a fan favorite here as well.

But, it is hard to get a true grasp of what purpose the Nixon signing serves since Shin-Soo Choo provides just about everything Nixon does offensively and defensively. Also, Choo is much healthier as word in camp is Nixon will not be ready for game action until mid-March. The decision to sign Nixon in lieu of going with Choo as the left-handed hitting portion of the RF platoon may be yet another case of Shapiro getting antsy and becoming overly concerned with having so much youth on the roster. In any case, Nixon will be the regular starter in right-field unless injuries or performance issues crop up, and if they do Blake or Choo would move into his role almost seamlessly.

Buffalo Bound: Franklin Gutierrez, Ben Francisco, Shin-Soo Choo

The 2007 Bench

□

While the starting lineup is pretty much set, there are some question marks as to who will round out the bench and break camp with the team. Since the Indians will break camp with 12 pitchers, and the lineup consists of 9 regulars, there are only 4 spots open on the bench. Jason Michaels and Kelly Shoppach have jobs locked up, but there are two other spots up for grabs on the bench.

One of the two remaining spots should be a lock to go to Ryan Garko, which leaves a handful of guys fighting for the final spot on the roster to be the Indians utility infielder. The player to win the utility infield job is only speculated here, but all contestants for the job are discussed. Barring injury, here is the bench that should head north with the team:

4th outfielder: Jason Michaels

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1B/C/DH: Ryan Garko

Backup catcher: Kelly Shoppach

Utility infielder: Mike Rouse

4th Outfielder: Jason Michaels

□

2006 Key Stats: .267 avg, 77 runs, 32 2Bs, 1 3B, 9 HRs, 55 RBIs, 9 SBs

Advanced stats: .326 OBP, .391 SLG, .717 OPS, 63 RC, 9 WS, -1.7 VORP

The Indians traded for Michaels last offseason, sending reliever Arthur Rhodes to Philadelphia in exchange for him. Michaels was given a new start in Cleveland and was given his first shot as an everyday outfielder in the majors, but he did not take advantage of it and had a disappointing year offensively. Going forward, Michaels probably lost any future chance at a full-time outfield gig with the Indians or anyone else as a result of his sub-par season, and pretty much has pigeon-holed himself as a 4th outfielder now for the rest of his career.

What intrigued many about Michaels prior to coming to the Indians was his ability to hit left-handed pitching well. Even in a down year last year, Michaels still managed to hit .291 with a .799 OPS against lefties while hitting only .252/.666 against righties. His three year average from 2004-2006 against lefties is a solid .300/.829, but not very good against righties at .267/.720.

Another one of Michaels hallmarks before coming to the Indians was his ability to work counts and take walks, but he did not do that in 2006. In 2004 he had 42 walks in 299 at bats (7:1 AB/BB) and in 2005 he had 44 walks in 289 at bats (7:1 AB/BB), but last year he only had 43 walks in 494 at bats (12:1 AB/BB). He ended up the year with the same amount of walks as the previous two seasons, but with almost 200 more at bats. Michaels also came off a season in 2005 with the Phillies where he had a 44:45 BB/K ratio, but that spiked to a 43:101 BB/K ratio in Cleveland last year. So, not only did his walk rate decrease, but the strikeout rate increased going from one strikeout every 6.4 at bats in 2005 to one strikeout every 4.9 at bats in 2006. 2006 was just not a good year for Michaels.

Surprisingly, Michaels was 5th in fielding percentage among all major league left fielders (.991), 10th in range factor (1.96), and 9th in zone rating (.864). But, these numbers are a little deceiving as more was expected out of Michaels defensively. Michaels was not only a step down offensively from the 2005 Philadelphia version the Indians traded for, but his defense declined as well as evidenced by his RATE, FRAR, and RAA going from 119-2-1 in 2005 to 93-1-(-8) in 2006.

With Michaels now no longer an everyday player, his ability to hit left-handed pitching can now be used more effectively and he will be used in LF and replace David Delluci when left-handed pitchers start. Bottom line: a starter Michaels is not, but a good right-handed platoon option and 4th outfielder he is.

1B/C/DH: Ryan Garko

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2006 Key Stats: .292 avg, 28 runs, 12 2Bs, 0 3B, 7 HRs, 45 RBIs, 0 SBs

Advanced stats: .359 OBP, .470 SLG, .829 OPS, 33 RC, 6 WS, 8.0 VORP

After an amazing debut in August and September last year when he had 45 RBIs in 50 games, most fans probably felt Garko would go into the 2007 season as the Indians starting 1B. The Indians are a bit leery on handing Garko the job mostly because they probably want to avoid going into the season with so much youth at every position. With the still-green Andy Marte installed at third base, the questionable Peralta at shortstop, and Barfield at second base, adding Garko to the mix at 1B to start the season might be asking for too much from a young infield.

Prior to getting called up late in the year last season, Garko had a very so-so year at Buffalo. A lot of this, Garko even admitted, was a hangover effect from being sent back to Buffalo and a feeling that he needed to do something different to impress the Indians brass by hitting for more power. He struggled at Buffalo, hitting .247 with 15 HRs and 59 RBIs in 364 at bats. Still, when you combine his Buffalo and Cleveland numbers from last year, he had a good season hitting .262 with 22 HRs and 104 RBIs in 549 at bats.

In limited time, Garko was okay against right-handed pitching last year hitting .281 with an .800 OPS, but he handled left-handed pitching very well by hitting .333/.938. Seeing how effective he is against left-handed pitching makes him an ideal player to put in the lineup against left-handers at 1B while Blake moves to RF to replace Nixon. Also, situationally, Garko hit .314/.847 with runners on base, .353/.912 with RISP, and .441/1.176 with RISP and two outs. His remarkable performance in such situations, even for such a small sample size, is a big reason he could be a key bat off the bench late in games.

Having Garko start right out of the gates might put too much pressure on him from the outset, so having him used in limited duty early on and allowing him to get his feet wet on the season before they install him as the regular everyday 1B may actually be the right decision. The wrong choice, though, would be to send Garko to Buffalo since the Indians do not have another right-handed bat like his to use off the bench, plus sending him to Buffalo may send the wrong message to him and other young prospects. Garko's defense is another concern with club officials, but if he can show that he can at least be steady defensively at 1B and continue to be a good run producer, there is no question he will be given more playing time.

It is not out of the realm of possibility that Garko will eventually be the starter at 1B sometime this season. By mid-season, this could definitely be the case. But, for now, Garko will most likely be the regular starter against left-handed pitching at 1B and be a key right-handed bat off the bench to use late in games for matchup purposes when teams bring in lefties to face Dellucci and Nixon.

Backup catcher: Kelly Shoppach

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2006 Key Stats: .245 avg, 7 runs, 6 2Bs, 0 3Bs, 3 HRs, 16 RBIs, 0 SBs

Advanced stats: .297 OBP, .382 SLG, .679 OPS, 13 RC, 3 WS, -0.6 VORP

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Shoppach rolls into the 2007 season ready to be Victor Martinez's caddy once again at catcher. Last year was Shoppach's first extended stay in the big leagues as he was with the club all year, although you would never have known considering how sparingly he was used. Just like Josh Bard before him, getting playing time is tough to do when you have an All-Star hitting catcher in front of you. Shoppach was held to 110 at bats last year, and the hit and miss playing time probably had a negative effect on his offensive performance.

While Shoppach could arguably start for almost half the teams in baseball, Shoppach provides a nice defensive alternative to Martinez. When the Indians obtained Shoppach from the Red Sox last offseason, he was known as a catcher who was very good at controlling the running game in the minors. Last year, he lived up to that billing as he threw out 36.7% of the base-runners who attempted to steal, which is an above average figure. He also was very good defensively behind the plate.

However, Shoppach's history of being a strikeout machine at the plate also held true, as he struck out 45 times in 110 at bats (2.4:1 AB/K), which probably put Russell Branyan out of the windmill business. Situation-wise, Shoppach hit .289/.819 with runners on base, .292/.870 with RISP, and .154/.421 with RISP and two outs.

Last year, Shoppach hit only .213 with a .529 OPS against right-handed pitchers, but he hit a very good .314/.997 against left-handers. While the sample size is small, it should be noted and playing Shoppach almost strictly against lefties might be the best way to rest Martinez and minimize the drop in production from Martinez to Shoppach in the lineup.

Utility infielder: Mike Rouse

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2006 Major League Stats: .292 avg (24 ABs), 0 HRs, 2 RBIs, 1 SB, .763 OPS

2006 Minor League Stats: .258 avg (345 ABs), 6 HRs, 47 RBIs, 4 SBs, .724 OPS

(Advanced stats not worth listing since he has such a small ML sample size)

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One of the only battles in camp this year is who will win the utility infield role, as five candidates are in camp battling for the job: Mike Rouse, Keith Ginter, Joe Inglett, Hector Luna, and Luis Rivas. Each of the five candidates in camp have different strengths (and a lot of weaknesses), and there really is no sure-fire answer among them for the utility infield position. As a result, we are likely to see many different players throughout the season fill this role. Also, it is my belief that the Indians may actually make a trade for a utility player at the end of camp, or claim one off of waivers.

I know I just tabbed Rivas the sleeper [last weekend](#), but after thinking about it further, if I had to pick a potential winner from the five guys in camp fighting for the spot, Rouse would be the guy. Rivas would be just slightly behind him as the next favorite, followed by Luna, Inglett and Ginter.

Ginter is a non-factor as he is more a corner infielder and is being looked at to play 2B and 3B. He will open the season most likely as the Buffalo third baseman. Rivas provides the defense and speed the Indians are looking for, but he is awful offensively. Inglett can play anywhere on

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the field but catcher, is a good hitter, and plays hard, but he doesn't play shortstop at the defensive level the Indians have demanded this offseason. And, while Luna was pegged as the preseason favorite to win the job by many, the Indians did not seem to be too high on him as they tried very hard this offseason to find a utility player to replace him with, which was not a vote of confidence for him. He also came to camp out of shape and is supposedly in Eric Wedge's doghouse.

With all that said, it looks like Rouse might be the guy to watch. Rouse hits for a decent average, has okay pop, gets on base, and has decent speed. He doesn't have a lot of range at shortstop and has an average arm, but he is fundamentally sound. He only has eight games of experience at the major league level (all last year), and in 578 career minor league games Rouse has hit .275 with a .770 OPS.

The Indians picked up Rouse off of waivers last September from Oakland. The Athletics actually did not want to lose Rouse on waivers as they have openly expressed they gambled putting him on waivers with the hopes he would clear so they could re-assign him to Triple-A. The reason he was put on waivers is the Athletics were caught in a roster crunch since infielders Antonio Perez and Mark Ellis were healthy, so there was no spot on the 25-man roster for Rouse. He could have just stayed on the 40-man roster, but the A's wanted to squeeze in another pitcher on the 40-man roster, so that is when they gambled with putting Rouse on waivers. If Rouse does not make the opening day roster, he will go to Buffalo and fill a utility infield role.

Bottom line, the pecking order of needs the Indians have set forth for the utility infielder job is defense first – primarily at shortstop with the ability to handle third base and second base. It is uncertain whether speed or offense are second or third on that pecking order. Rivas and Rouse are probably the two favorites for the job. Of the candidates, Rouse is probably the second best defender, but it will be interesting to see which secondary requirement the Indians hold more dearly: the experience and speed of Rivas, or the bat of Rouse.

Coming Soon

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Next Week: Q&A on the Indians with [Dayn Perry](#) of *Fox Sports* and *Baseball Prospectus*

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The rest of March: Spring training reports live from Winter Haven all week from Monday 3/12 to Saturday 3/17, Q&A's with *The Hardball Times* [Jeff Sackmann](#) and *Baseball Prospectus'* [Kevin Goldstein](#), and in depth team previews for Buffalo, Akron, Kinston and Lake County.