

Spring Happenings: Rouse In Line For Utility Job

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Friday, March 23 2007 7:00 PM -

Spring Training is winding down, as are many of the storylines Tony's been following for us from Winter Haven. This week he reports that the battle for the utility infielder job has been all but won, and by a guy not many people gave a chance to win it. Tony also reports on Peralta's solid spring, the starting rotation in the absence of Cliff Lee, and the batting orders that the team will use versus left and right handed starting pitchers. Lastly, Tony reports that Ryan Garko may not even make the team this year after averaging a RBI per game through almost 60 games with the team last year. Wha-wha-what?



Spring Happenings is a recap of the news and developments from the various media sources covering the Tribe and minor league affiliates this spring. Spring Happenings wraps up next Saturday March 31st, and then look for the regular Minor Happenings to return every Thursday starting on April 12th. Minor Happenings covers the important developments in the Indians farm system, and is only here at [The Cleveland Fan](#).

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Rouse Is the Man

Unless there is a huge surprise the final week of camp, it looks like the Indians will go with Mike Rouse as their utility infielder to start the season. And, deservedly so, as from what I saw in camp last week he is clearly the most deserving of the spot.

Rouse has played well this spring, both in the field and at that plate. To date, he is hitting .333 (11 for 33) with 2 home runs and 7 RBIs, and in the field he has played very well at second base and shortstop. He also has shown some wheels on the basepaths. The favorite entering camp was Hector Luna, but he has eight errors in 17 spring games, and is only hitting .241 (7 for 29) with 0 home runs and 1 RBI. Luis Rivas has played well in the field, but has not hit well in spring as he is hitting .176 (6 for 34) with 0 home runs and 4 RBIs. Joe Inglett has been removed from consideration for the job because of a bad hamstring that has

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kept him sidelined for a few weeks now.

Clearly, Rouse is playing the best defensively AND offensively, which makes him almost a shoe-in to win the utility job. Of course, I say almost because you never know what the Indians brain trust will do. They could find some off the wall reason to keep Luna or Rivas over Rouse, or they may make a trade to get a utility infielder. But, to start the season, if the Indians have any sanity, they will go with Rouse and see what he does before going the trade route. Rouse has earned the chance.

The big advantage Rouse has for him is he is rostered, and he is out of options. Something to consider is the Indians left Rouse on the 40-man roster this past offseason instead of protecting prospects outfielder Ryan Goleski and right-hander Jim Ed Warden from the Rule 5 Draft this past December. Knowing he was out of options, the Indians felt strong enough about him to keep him over protecting one of those two prospects, and Shapiro has stated this recently when he said "He's a guy we thought was worthy of a roster spot, and you know how much we value roster spots." Maybe Rouse was the favorite all along for the utility gig.

Taking The 5th, Or Drinking It?

Earlier this week, when the Indians sent down right-hander Adam Miller, Fausto Carmona was officially tabbed Cliff Lee's replacement in the starting rotation as the fifth starter. Apparently, Carmona must have been out celebrating too much the night before his start against Detroit. The day after Miller was sent down and Carmona was tabbed the fifth starter, Carmona proceeded to get blasted by the Tigers in giving up four runs on ten hits (five doubles) with two walks and a strikeout in five innings. If it weren't for the fact the Indians turned a club record six double plays in the game (four while Carmona was on the hill), his line might have been a lot worse.

Of Wickman And Wolves

Speaking of Carmona, former Indians closer Bob Wickman fired away at the Indians this past week, saying that Carmona would probably be the closer in Cleveland right now if the Indians had not "thrown him to the wolves" in Boston and Detroit last year. Wickman claims Carmona lacked the experience necessary to be ready for the closing duties in two tough environments such as that (agreed), and that had Carmona been eased into the role by closing out some two or three run saves, he may have faired better (also agreed).

The Indians did not particularly like Wickman's "wolves" comment, and one has to wonder if there is a little sniping going on between the Indians and Wickman here. Ever since Wickman agreed to a new contract with Atlanta last year to play one more season, the Indians have openly expressed their surprise with Wickman's decision, and not held back their thoughts on it.

Clearly the Indians had an understanding before trading him last July that he was not going to play in 2007, so they traded him to give him a final shot at the playoffs and get something for

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him. But, now that he changed his mind, the Indians may be a little upset since if they knew he would play in 2007 they would likely not have traded him and would have loved to have him back as the closer this season. Wickman's comment about Carmona are strange timing, and may be retaliation to some of the snide remarks the Indians have made about him this spring.

No Garko?□

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The Indians continue to waver on whether or not they will keep Ryan Garko on the opening day roster. Right now, it appears the Indians will definitely only keep one utility infielder (Rouse) and send the other utility candidates to Buffalo (Inglett, Luna, and Rivas), but now it appears the Indians may keep a fifth outfielder instead of Garko.

All camp it was mentioned that one of those other utility candidates would be the main competition for Garko to make the team, but Garko's main competition for a roster spot is outfielder Ben Francisco. Instead of two infielders on the bench, the Indians now may opt to keep a fifth outfielder instead of the second utility player or Garko. The outfield candidates to supplant Garko for the roster spot are Francisco, Franklin Gutierrez, and Shin-Soo Choo. However, Francisco has blown past Gutierrez, and since Rouse is a left-handed hitter it is unlikely they will go with Choo on the bench since he also hits left-handed. So, it appears to be a battle between Garko and Francisco for the final spot.

The Indians plan to make some roster cuts in the next day or so, which may more clearly define things. The decision on the final two bench spots is not expected to be made until this coming Friday when the Indians break camp.

Jhonny Be Good□

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Peralta continues to have an excellent spring. He is hitting .297 (11 for 37) with 0 home runs and 5 RBIs, but most importantly he has been impressive in the infield. For a lot of fans who watched Peralta in the field last year, he lacked focus and hustle, and never appeared willing to get dirty to dive for balls. However, so far this spring, Peralta has shown much better range, a spring in his step, much greater focus, and a willingness to get dirty. Several times already this spring he has dove for balls, and a few times resulted in great plays, like the play earlier in the week when he made a diving stop of a sharp grounder hit into the hole by Atlanta's Jeff Francoeur and scrambled to his feet to throw out Francoeur at first.

Indians General Manager Mark Shapiro often tabbed Peralta as the most important player to the Indians success in 2007. And, so far, Shapiro has raved saying "He's been probably the brightest spot of spring training." Shapiro acknowledges that Peralta has looked good in the field and with the bat, but also has been good with his conditioning, focus, and doing the extra work needed to improve. Shapiro now wants to see Peralta carry it into the season, and if he does the Indians will benefit from it big time.

Cliff Lee Update

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Indians left-hander Cliff Lee, sidelined by a right abdominal strain, has started his rehab. Lee played catch this past Saturday for the first time since being shut down over a week ago, and has since gone on a throwing program. On Wednesday, Lee's rehab continued as he played catch from 90 feet, and he played catch again on Friday this time from 105 feet.

Lee will continue to throw every other day, and the plan is to have him start throwing bullpen sessions in about a week. On the days he days not throw, Lee will continue to undergo rehab on his abdominal area. Lee will throw two or three bullpen sessions before the Indians break camp on next Friday, but he will remain in Winter Haven to continue his rehab before likely going on a minor league rehab assignment for four to five starts. Lee will start the season on the disabled list and is not expected back until late April or early May. He will likely miss five to seven starts.

Deal or No Deal

The Indians have started talks with Jake Westbrook's agent Michael Maas about a multi-year extension. This spring, the Indians have been tight-lipped about contract talks with Westbrook, Travis Hafner, and C.C. Sabathia, although Indians General Manager Mark Shapiro has mentioned that before they leave Winter Haven they will provide a progress report on negotiations with Westbrook and/or any other players.

Sabathia is on record as saying his agent Brian Peters and the Indians have not had discussions about a contract extension yet, but that he is not concerned about it since he is not eligible for free agency until after the 2008 season. No word on contract extension talks regarding Hafner, but there is word they may be close to an extension with him.

Fernando Needs More Work

The Indians love right-handed reliever Fernando Cabrera's potential, but know he has several things to work on before he can be a consistent reliever for them. One of Cabrera's biggest problems last year was walks (almost five per nine innings). To help him with this issue, the Indians had him play winter ball to fine-tune his mechanics by staying more centered on the mound and more relaxed in his delivery. Indians Pitching Coach Carl Willis is also working on adjusting where Cabrera holds his hands during his delivery to improve his command.

Normally, the Indians would send Cabrera to Buffalo to work on these things to finish him off; however, Cabrera is out of options and would have to be exposed to waivers (where he would surely be claimed) to send him to the minors. For now, Cabrera will need to work on finishing his game off at the major league level and in bullpen sessions on the side.

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Rotation Revision

Now that Indians left-hander Cliff Lee will start the season on the disabled list, Indians manager Eric Wedge tinkered with the starting rotation he had set to start the season. C.C. Sabathia and Jake Westbrook will still start the first two games of the season, respectively. However, Jeremy Sowers has now been moved up to the third game, Paul Byrd to the fourth game (home opener), and newly anointed 5th starter Fausto Carmona will start the fifth game.

The Triple-A Buffalo rotation is still supposedly not set, but Farm Director Ross Atkins was on the radio earlier in the week and hinted that the rotation to start the season will be Adam Miller (RHP), Brian Slocum (RHP), Rafael Perez (LHP), Jason Stanford (LHP) and Jeff Harris (RHP). Left-hander Aaron Laffey, and right-handers Sean Smith and Dan Denham could still figure into the rotation, but Denham most likely will be a long man in the Buffalo bullpen and Laffey and Smith will most likely be in the Double-A Akron rotation with Chuck Lofgren, Scott Lewis, and JD Martin.

Lineup Pretty Much Set

Here are the two lineups the Indians plan to use to start the season against left-handed and right-handed starting pitchers:

Against right-handed starters: (1) Grady Sizemore, (2) Trot Nixon, (3) Travis Hafner, (4) Victor Martinez, (5) Casey Blake, (6) David Dellucci, (7) Jhonny Peralta, (8) Andy Marte, and (9) Josh Barfield.

Against left-handed starters: (1) Sizemore, (2) Jason Michaels, (3) Hafner, (4) Martinez, (5) Blake, (6) Ryan Garko, (7) Peralta, (8) Marte, and (9) Barfield.

The first seven are set, but the Indians are still toying with the last two spots in the order and trying to decide whether they should go Marte-Barfield or Barfield-Marte. Putting Barfield ninth in the order may be best, as he would be a table-setter for Sizemore and give Sizemore more RBI opportunities. It also allows the Indians to bunch together their two fastest runners.

Here We Go Again

Cue up the Whitesnake.

Once again Indians first base prospect Michael Aubrey has been sidelined with an injury. And, once again it is an injury involving his legs. In Aubrey's last spring training game with the Indians before being sent down to minor league camp, Aubrey pulled his hamstring. Since that game, about 10 days ago, Aubrey has not played or taken part in any minor league games or practices. According to Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins, Aubrey will not be back for at least two to three weeks. That puts him in line to start the year on the Akron disabled list, which is a place he is all too familiar with. Not a good start to the season for Aubrey, in what many consider a make or break year for the very brittle but highly regarded first baseman.

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Cabrera to Akron

Indians top shortstop prospect Asdrubal Cabrera will start the year in Double-A Akron. Starting Cabrera in Akron is not necessarily a sign that his stock has fallen in the organization. First, the losers of the utility battle in Indians camp will likely be assigned to Triple-A Buffalo. That means as many as three middle infielders will be assigned to Buffalo, and the Indians will want to play them often to keep them fresh since the utility role is likely to be in constant change all season with the Indians. It is likely that Hector Luna, Joe Inglett and Luis Rivas will be in Buffalo, although Rivas can opt out of his minor league deal on March 28th if he feels he can get a better chance with another club

Second, in his minor league career Cabrera has never played in Double-A as the Mariners forced him through their system in Seattle by having him go right from Single-A to Triple-A in 2005. Third, it is possible the Indians may want to give Joe Inglett as much work as possible at shortstop, a position he needs to improve on before he can be finally claim rights to the utility infield gig he will probably hold for several years with the Indians.

Still only 21, Cabrera could use a half a year in Double-A to work on his offense before being moved back up to Triple-A midseason where he can hopefully finish things off and be ready to contribute to the major league squad sometime in 2008. Cabrera is considered one of the better defensive shortstop prospects in baseball, but if he ever envisions being a starter at the major league level his approach at the plate needs to improve.

Focus Shifted Left And Right

Grady Sizemore is firmly planted in center field with the Indians for the next six years because of his multi-year contract and also because he is an All-Star center fielder. Knowing this, the Indians now have to rethink their philosophy in the outfield in their farm system. The Indians are loaded with a lot of center field prospects with players like Trevor Crowe, Brian Barton, Franklin Gutierrez, John Drennen and others. Going forward, the Indians now will need to work in these players into the corner positions in the outfield since that is their only career path at this time with the Indians, but they will still play some center field to keep those skills sharp.

The Sizemore Effect will mostly affect how the Indians use their outfielders in the upper levels of their system in Double-A Akron and Triple-A Buffalo. In Buffalo, the Indians plan to use a four-man rotation in the outfield with Shin-Soo Choo, Ben Francisco, Brad Snyder, and Franklin Gutierrez. Of course, this could change if one of Francisco, Choo or Gutierrez makes the Indians opening day roster, where then possibly a Brian Barton may enter the Buffalo picture. The Indians plan to play the two best of the four outfielders in Buffalo at the

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corner spots, and those two players will get most of the playing time at those two corner spots.

Down in Akron, Trevor Crowe will stay play his natural center field position, but he now will be rotated around to left and right field. Also, as mentioned, Brian Barton will likely be moved around the outfield in Akron if he does not make the Buffalo roster.

New Players Join Tribe Hall of Fame

The Indians announced four new inductees into the Indians Hall of Fame this week. The 2007 class is right-handed pitchers Charles Nagy, Mike Garcia, and Jim Bagby Sr., and first base and designated hitter Andre "Thunder" Thornton. They will be formally inducted into the Cleveland Indians Hall of Fame this summer over Hall of Fame Heritage Weekend August 10th through the 12th. The ceremonies are expected to be held in the new Heritage Park complex located right behind the centerfield wall at Jacobs Field. The addition of Nagy, Garcia, Bagby and Thornton brings the total number of Indians enshrinees to 31.

From the What Are They Thinking Department

A few years ago, the Indians approached Port Charlotte, Florida about a move to their spring training complex if they made around \$9 million in improvements. Port Charlotte told the Indians to go pound sand and would not approve the \$9 million in improvements, so the Indians looked elsewhere. So, what does Port Charlotte do? They recently approved \$27 million in improvements to get the Tampa Bay Devil Rays to move there in two years.

The National Bandwagon

All offseason, pundits like Peter Gammons, Rob Neyer, Dayn Perry, Buster Olney and others made claims that the Indians are serious World Series contenders. With magazines and various other publications now putting out their baseball preview issues, a lot of those claims are now being put into fine print.

[Baseball America](#) recently claimed in their baseball preview that the Indians will win the American League (AL) Central, but lose in the playoffs before making the World Series. Also, [Sports Illustrated](#) predicted the Indians will win the AL Central, but lose to the Yankees in the first round of the playoffs.

As more and more baseball previews come out in the next week before the season starts, expect the preseason accolades for the Indians to continue. Everyone knows this team is good and should win, now they have to show they can do it.

Politte Progress

Right-handed reliever Cliff Politte was signed to a minor league contract just before spring training started. Politte is still recovering from rotator cuff surgery last August, and is currently

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rehabbing the injury. The Indians assigned Politte to the minors last week, although he has yet to throw a pitch nor make an appearance at the complex. Politte has not started throwing the baseball yet, and is still only doing the physical rehab necessary to get to that point. Once Politte is ready to start baseball activities, he likely will go to extended spring training in Winter Haven to build arm strength and then go on a minor league rehab assignment. If all goes well, he could join the Indians sometime mid-summer.

Infirmary Report

Something that went unreported in camp the past few weeks is apparently Jason Davis was sidelined the last week or so with soreness in his throwing shoulder. Fortunately for Davis, he is now in the bullpen so the time missed should not have an affect on him making the Indians opening day roster. Davis threw in bullpen sessions on the side, but did not appear in a game for 12 days. Davis returned this past week, pitching Tuesday against the Devil Rays and Thursday against the Tigers throwing three combined shutout innings.

Indians utility infielder candidate Joe Inglett continues to be plagued by a sore left hamstring. Inglett's return date keeps getting pushed back, as this past Tuesday he was supposed to suit up and play, but could not get it going. The new targeted return for Inglett is this Monday against Tampa Bay. But, any visions Inglett had of making the team as a utility infielder have evaporated. Once Inglett is healthy, he will go to Buffalo and probably rotate around the infield as the Indians keep him sharp as Plan B or Plan C this year for the utility gig.

Random Happenings

Indians catcher Victor Martinez catches a lot of flack because of his poor throw-out percentage of base-stealers. According to the Indians, his arm is not the real problem, it is his feet in that he has difficulty maintaining proper mechanics when he rises from his crouch to throw to second or third base. ... According to Indians manager Eric Wedge, right-hander Tom Mastny and left-hander Juan Lara will be the Indians top two bullpen depth options they turn to in the minors. ... On Friday night, Casey Blake made his first appearance in right field this spring. ... Some may not know, but former Indians catcher Tim Laker retired last year and is now a coach in the Indians farm system. Laker will make his minor league managerial debut this summer for the Indians short-season affiliate Mahoning Valley. ... 2006 high draft pick right-hander Steven Wright will start the year in the rotation for the Indians Single-A affiliate Lake County. ... The Indians sent six players to the minors this week: right-handed pitchers Adam Miller, Jeff Harris and Brian Slocum, as well as outfielder Trevor Crowe, catcher Wyatt Toregas, and left-handed reliever Tony Sipp. ... Baseball America's Chris Kline has a nice write-up on some top tribe pitching prospects [here](#).