

Spring Happenings: Indians Close To A Deal With Hafner And Westbrook?

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Friday, March 30 2007 7:00 PM -

In the final installment of "Spring Happenings", Tony reports on the current status of contract talks with Indians manager Eric Wedge, left-hander C.C. Sabathia, right-hander Jake Westbrook, and designated hitter Travis Hafner. Tony also hits on the latest updates on the C.C., Cliff Lee, and Matt Miller injuries ... and examines the final roster moves made by the team go get down to 25 guys. Tribe season starts Monday!!!



Spring Happenings is a recap of the news and developments from the various media sources covering the Tribe and minor league affiliates this spring. With spring training finished, this is the final edition of Spring Happenings. Look for the return of Minor Happenings tomorrow (4/1) before it returns to its regular time slot 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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Contract Updates□

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Here is the current status on contract talks for Indians manager Eric Wedge, left-hander C.C. Sabathia, right-hander Jake Westbrook, and designated hitter Travis Hafner:

Wedge: Indians General Manager Mark Shapiro says that he is not going to discuss Wedge's contract until after the season. The Indians hold two club options on Wedge for 2008 and 2009, but do not plan to make any decisions on picking up those options or extending Wedge until they see this season play out.

Sabathia: The Indians have shelved contract extension talks with him until next spring.

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Sabathia's contract talks were the most difficult of the three, not because Sabathia is not open to talking, but because both sides are having a hard time determining his market value.

Hafner: Contract negotiations are still ongoing. Of the three free agents, Hafner is the most likely to res-sign, and do not be surprised if he does sometime in the next month.

Westbrook: Negotiations are still ongoing with Westbrook's agent Michael Maas about a contract extension. At this point there is nothing new since both camps have been very quiet about whether or not there has been any progress in the talks, but the Indians and Maas are close enough to a deal where Shapiro and his staff will continue talks into the season.

The news that Sabathia's contract talks have been suspended is not very surprising given Sabathia's ability, age and performance. With Sabathia two years away from free agency, it is hard to pinpoint his market value, especially after some of the inflated contracts this past offseason to middle-of-the-road pitchers. But, Sabathia did offer a glimmer of hope this week when he talked about spring training moving to Arizona in 2009 when he said "I can't wait until we move. That, and it's closer to my house." Sabathia is only signed through 2008.

The news on Hafner and Westbrook is very encouraging. Shapiro has always mandated that he would not extend contract talks into the season unless he felt there was momentum toward a possible deal. This happened in 2005 when the Indians signed catcher Victor Martinez, Hafner and Sabathia all to multi-year contract extensions. Don't be surprised if one of Hafner and Westbrook are inked in April.

Pppppffwwwwwwooooooooo...

That was the sound of a large collective sigh of relief by several Indians fans, players, and officials when C.C. Sabathia was deemed ready to go for the season opener on Monday against the White Sox. On the second pitch of the game, Sabathia took a vicious hit to his pitching wrist by a line drive off the bat of Toronto's Reed Johnson on Wednesday, and initially everyone feared the worst that Sabathia would be out for half the season with a broken arm or hand. Sabathia was immediately taken to the hospital for X-rays, and they were negative. Thankfully, Sabathia ended up with just a bad bruise, and after a 52-pitch bullpen session Friday morning, was pronounced as ready to go for Monday's opener in Chicago.

Sabathia has had a hard time staying healthy in spring training. In 2002, 2003 and 2004, he was sidelined for a week with strep throat. In 2005, he strained a muscle in his rib cage before

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his first spring training game and missed the first two weeks of the season, and last year strained a muscle in his rib cage during the third inning on in the season opener and was out until the first week of May. Sabathia labeled his problems with staying healthy in camp to "The Winter Haven Curse."

Matt Miller Shelved Again

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Once again, Indians reliever Matt Miller is sidelined due to an injury to his throwing arm, and he will start the season in an all too familiar place, the disabled list. Over the last two seasons from 2005-2006, Miller has spent a considerable amount of time on the disabled list for various arm injuries. After he impressed in his debut as an Indian in 2004, Miller just has not been able to stay healthy, pitching in only 37 total games the last two years. The injury was bad timing for Miller, as he was having an outstanding camp. In seven appearances Miller struck out 16 batters in 7.1 innings, and held opposing hitters to a .179 average.

Miller hurt himself when warming up to come into a game last week, and felt a twinge in his forearm. Initially, the Indians thought it was a cramp and shut him down for a day. But, when he tried to throw on Monday, the discomfort remained so he had an MRI done which showed a mild to moderate strain of the medial forearm. The plan is to shut him down for about another week and then start him on a throwing program at Jacobs Field. He is expected to have a three to four week rehab, and return to the Indians in mid-to-late April barring any setbacks.

Mastny Makes Team

In light of Miller's injury, against what seemed long odds coming into spring training, right-hander Tom Mastny made the Indians opening day roster. When free agent reliever Keith Foulke retired just before camp opened, and when Matt Miller went down with a forearm strain earlier in the week, the door swung open wide for Mastny to make the team. The Indians chose Mastny over Juan Lara because they saw more immediate value in him as a reliever than Lara, and Mastny can also pitch more innings in case the Indians need a long man. Mastny finished the spring with an 0-0 record and 1.80 ERA in 15 innings pitched.

Before coming to Cleveland last year, Mastny posted a 1.09 ERA in 12 appearances at Double-A Akron and a 2.61 ERA in 24 appearances at Triple-A Buffalo. Mastny impressed Indians officials and fans last season in his first tour with the club. When the Indians struggled to find a closer, Mastny actually helped settle the situation last year and went five of seven in save opportunities. Overall, he posted an 0-1 record with a 5.51 ERA. What makes Mastny such a good reliever is he has a decent fastball, but he has an above-average curve to compliment it. Most importantly, he throws strikes.

Rouse Routs

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The Indians waited until the last few days of camp to officially tab Mike Rouse as the winner of the utility infielder competition. But, really, the competition was over weeks ago. Joe Inglett never got untracked and was sidelined with an injury most of camp, and Hector Luna showed up out of shape and booted the ball all over the field for eight errors in 17 games. Rouse's only

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other competition was Luis Rivas, who did start fast the first week of games, but faded fast. Meanwhile, Rouse played like a man possessed. He was brilliant in the infield making several diving plays and nifty plays around the bag, and he hit the snot out of the ball by hitting .346 (18 for 52) with 2 home runs and 11 RBIs in 19 games.

Rouse was claimed off waivers last September from the Oakland A's, and he hits left-handed. Given that the Indians starting infield all hits right-handed, Rouse will be a valuable bench player to fill in and give the offense a different look at times.

Garko Wins Spot

As if this should have ever been in question, Indians first baseman Ryan Garko officially made the opening day roster this week. It ended weeks of needless speculation of whether or not he would make the team. The Indians probably played it more up as a competition to get the most out of Garko in camp, because surely unless he got hurt or played very bad in camp, he should have been written in pen into the opening day roster before camp even started.

Said Garko, "I thought I did enough last year. I don't think I've got anything left to prove. I can play in the major leagues." And, he is certainly right. It is time to prove himself one way or the other at the major league level. And, he can work at refining parts of his game like his defense with the Indians up here and not in Buffalo. It was actually a breath of fresh air this week to see the Indians not hedge on a young player for once as in past camps players like Brandon Phillips and Grady Sizemore were sent down or traded because they opted for veterans. Garko will start the season as the Indians primary right-handed pinch hitting option off the bench, and should start at first base most times when left-handed starters face the Indians.

Cliff Lee Update

The Indians had left-hander Cliff Lee throw off a mound this past Tuesday for the first time since his injury earlier in March. Lee had a session of 120-foot long-tossing followed by 20 throws off the front of the pitcher's mound, and he was pain free. Lee followed that up on Thursday when he threw his first bullpen session since being shut down over two weeks ago, and in the session threw 25 pitches without feeling any pain. Today, Lee will throw a 40-pitch bullpen session before the Civil Rights Game in Memphis, and if all goes well he will head to Cleveland to continue his rehab at Jacobs Field. Once Lee is ready for game action, he will go on a rehab assignment by making a few starts at one or both of the Indians local affiliates at Lake County and Akron. The Indians say Lee is right on schedule, and expect him to be back mid-to-late April.

Looking for Relief?

The Indians have been burning up the phones looking for another reliever for their bullpen. The Indians are confident in their middle and long relief, but have been concerned about late

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inning relief since Keith Foulke unexpectedly retired on the eve of camp. The Indians recently talked to the San Francisco Giants about the availability of closer Armando Benitez, but were told he was not available. They also were interested in the Diamondbacks Jorge Julio before he was traded to Florida.

The Indians also were talking with the Texas Rangers about a deal that would include one or both of Ben Francisco and Shin-Soo Choo plus minor league right-handed pitcher Bear Bay for an unknown player. The deal was supposedly close to being finalized, but ended up only being Bear Bay for the infamous player to be named. Speculation from this corner is the deal was for Otsuka or another Rangers reliever, but when Eric Gagne was sidelined, the Rangers backed out and the smaller deal for Bay is what resulted.

The Indians did add more experience in the bullpen this week, signing right-handed pitcher Mike Koplove to a minor league contract. The Indians signed him after he was released by the Florida Marlins. In 217 appearances over his career he has compiled a 15-7 record and two saves with a 3.76 ERA. Koplove's best years were in 2002 (6-1, 3.36 ERA) and 2003 (3-0, 2.15 ERA), but he only managed to pitch in two games for Arizona last year. Koplove is a side-armer, and he is expected to start the year in Buffalo.

Sowers Set Free

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The Indians were very cautious with Jeremy Sowers last year after they called him up to Cleveland. The Indians closely monitored his total innings pitched on the season, and once he got to a number they felt put him at risk for injury, they shut him down with a few weeks to go in the season. This year, the shackles are off, and Sowers will have no innings pitched limitations. The reason the Indians shutdown Sowers so early last year is many young pitchers put themselves at risk for a serious injury when they undergo a dramatic increase in their innings pitched at the start of their career. In his first season with the Indians in 2005, Sowers pitched 159 innings at Kinston and Akron. Last year, the Indians shut him down at 185 innings (Buffalo and Cleveland combined).

No Borowski In the 9th?

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Indians closer Joe Borowski got some work in the ninth inning this week for the first time this spring, and picked up his first save. No need to worry though, as teams usually do not have their closers pitch the ninth inning in spring training, and instead opt to have them pitch in the middle innings to ensure they face major league hitters before bench players are inserted. Lineups the last week of spring training more closely resemble what they will be in-season, and players begin to play the entire game, so Borowski got a ninth inning save opportunity this week.

Sianara Winter HavenThank God

Winter Haven was not kind to the Indians pitching staff this year. Keith Foulke retired before camp broke, Cliff Lee went down with an abdominal injury, Matt Miller suffered a forearm strain, and C.C. Sabathia almost was lost for half the season with a broken arm when he was hit by a

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line drive off the bat of Toronto's Reed Johnson this past week. Not only are the pitchers happy to be leaving, but one position player in particular has to be happy to see spring training over and the regular season about to get started. That would be Grady Sizemore. Sizemore had an awful spring at the plate, hitting .117 (7-for-60) with two home runs and seven RBIs with ten strikeouts. Even still, Sizemore looks to be in great shape, and he doesn't appear to be letting his struggles this spring affect him. Sizemore is considered by many as a legit preseason AL MVP candidate.

The Pronkinator

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Indians designated hitter Travis Hafner is a menacing looking hitter at the plate. Not only is he a feared hitter, big, and powerful, but he also wears various forms of protection on his body to protect him from injury. Add another form of protection to this list as Hafner plans to wear a hard plastic shell over the top of his right-hand batting glove to help protect him against further injury to his hand. Hafner will use it primarily when he faces left-handers. Why the extra protection? Hafner is trying to protect himself after he missed the final 29 games last year when he was hit by a pitch that broke his right hand. The plastic shell is attached using Velcro to his batting glove, and is designed to help protect Hafner in the future from balls that come inside on Hafner and get away from them.

Showalter Sent Packing

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Now that spring training is over, the Indians will send Buck Showalter home. No, they are not sending him home for good and cutting ties with him, but instead they are sending him home to work on several projects the Indians have lined up for him. One such project is to evaluate a Shapiro-provided list of players with visits to the minor league affiliates, and the other will be to work hand-in-hand with Special Assistant to the General Manager Neal Huntington in scouting out spring training complexes in Arizona. The Indians are moving to Goodyear, Arizona in 2009, and Showalter has expertise with new complexes being built when he was with the Yankees when their Tampa site was built, and was with the Diamondbacks when their Tucson complex was built. Showalter will provide insight and some examples of stuff that works and doesn't work, and point out things he feels should be done differently.

Lara Sent Down, Not Forgotten

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Juan Lara was optioned out to Buffalo, but he will be seen again soon in the Indians bullpen. In fact, it could be a revolving door between Buffalo and Cleveland for several pitchers all year. In addition to Lara, others like Eddie Mujica, Rafael Perez, Tony Sipp, and others will likely see time in Cleveland at some point. Lara had a breakthrough year in the Indians minor league system in 2006, when he put up a 2.70 ERA in 40 appearances at Akron and a 3.00 ERA in 13 games at Buffalo. As a left-hander, the Indians love his aggressive, no-fear attitude and how he is very deceptive with his pitches.

ShopVac Light

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The new slimmer version of Indians backup catcher Kelly Shoppach looks much better at the

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plate (homeplate that is, not the dinner plate). After gaining before and during last season, Shoppach has now dropped 25 pounds since last spring training. The Indians wanted to see Shoppach shed some of the extra pounds so his body can more easily handle the grind of a 162 game season. When Shoppach reported to camp in such great shape, the Indians have raved about his condition and feel he is even better defensively than he was before because he moves around much better behind the plate.

The National Bandwagon Continues

Last week it was [Sports Illustrated](#) and [Baseball America](#). And weeks before that it was various other places like Fox Sports, The Hardball Times, Baseball Prospectus and more. The common theme among the national writers is the Indians will be very good in 2007.

This week, [CBS Sportsline](#) did not pick the Indians to win the tough AL Central, but predicted they will win the AL wildcard. The Wall Street Journal (no link available) took it a step further, picking the Indians to win the AL Central outright, then beating the Yankees in the ALCS and the Mets in the World Series. Indians fans will take a World Series win any way they can get it, but beating both New York teams along the way would be a dream scenario for many I am sure.

Last, [ESPN](#) chimed in late this week with their predictions. A panel of eleven ESPN columnists like Peter Gammons, Rob Neyer, Jason Stark and others all picked the Indians to win between 86-92 games and finish anywhere from 1st to 4th in the division.

Most have the Indians finishing 1

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or 2

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and making the playoffs as the division winner or wildcard winner.

Final Cuts

The Indians made their final roster cuts of the spring this week, sending catcher Armando Camacaro, infielder Keith Ginter, right-hander reliever Brian Sikorski, and infielder Luis Rivas to minor league camp. Also, infielder Hector Luna, outfielder Shin-Soo Choo, outfielder Ben Francisco, and left-handed reliever Juan Lara were optioned to Buffalo.

Random Happenings

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Starters Paul Byrd and Fausto Carmona stuck around in Winter Haven when camp broke Friday. Byrd is scheduled to make a final tune-up in a minor league game Sunday before his start in the Indians home opener this coming Friday. Carmona will pitch in the exhibition game for Single-A Lake County against Double-A Akron this Tuesday. ... To start the season, the Indians plan to use both Rafael Betancourt and Roberto Hernandez in the setup role. ... Through the middle of the week, backup catcher Kelly Shoppach had thrown out 50 percent (6-of-12) of attempted base stealers, while starting catcher Victor Martinez had thrown out 8 percent (1-of-12). ... Indians Manager Eric Wedge decided that second baseman Josh Barfield will hit 8th and third baseman Andy Marte will hit 9th to start the season. ... Carmona was brilliant in his final start in camp this week, going six shutout innings without allowing a hit. ... Right-hander Cliff Politte is still recovering from shoulder surgery, and is playing catch every other day. He is not scheduled to begin throwing off a mound for another month. ... Hector Luna will play mostly shortstop at Buffalo, according to Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins.