

Spring Happenings: Lee Looking To Rebound

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Saturday, February 23 2008 7:00 PM -

I'm geeked up for another year of "Minor Happenings" every Thursday this Indians season from Tony Lastoria, and as he did last season, T wets our beaks this spring with "Spring Happenings" every weekend from now 'till the start of the season. In it, Tony recaps the week that was in Winter Haven, giving us all the latest news, rumors, and updates from sunny Florida.



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 will continue to post every weekend during spring training, and then look for "Minor Happenings" to return every Thursday starting on April 3rd.

Spring training is under way, all players have reported to camp and are working out, and Grapefruit League games are just a few days away from starting. There is not a whole lot of suspense in camp as just about every job is locked up, but there is some intrigue in what happens with the final bullpen spot, the fifth starter's spot, and with players like Andy Marte, Adam Miller, and others.

Her

e is the rundown of what happened this week.

Cliff Hanger

One of the more compelling things to watch this spring will be the battle for the fifth starter's spot, particularly what left-hander Cliff Lee does this spring. While many fans have already cast Lee aside, if the Indians can get him to rebound and pitch like he did from 2004-2006 it helps the team now and in the future.

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he general consensus as to why Lee struggled last year center mostly around the oblique injury he suffered in spring training last year.

When Lee went down with the injury, it started a domino effect where his season spiraled out of control and he could not get out of the funk he was in, and when he came back he seemed to be playing catchup all year.

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He reportedly is in camp in better spirits and ready to put last season's huge disappointment behind him.

The Indians maintain that the decision for the final rotation spot will not come down to money or experience- Lee will make \$4 million in 2008 whereas Sowers and Laffey around league minimum at \$390,000. This is clearly not true as if Lee is even just average in camp he likely will get the nod because of his past success and his contract size. The key with Lee is him getting his fastball under control and keeping hitters more off balance with his offspeed stuff because he was way too predictable last season.

He lacked good location last year and he was not crisp at all, which may have been a byproduct of a short spring training and playing catchup from the injury all season.

Reportedly the Cardinals were very interested in Lee this offseason, and he was involved in a lot of trade talks with the Pirates in a Jason Bay trade. So, it will be interesting to see if he is moved at some point this season.

Marte's Clock Is Ticking

Decision time is looming with third baseman Andy Marte. Marte is out of options and cannot be sent to the minors without clearing waivers (he would be claimed).

Right now, the Indians plan to use Marte as a right-handed bat off the bench who can play third or first base.

As a hitter they want to see his in-game at bats improve and for him to be a more professional hitter.

One small concern is the Indians wanted Marte to come into camp in better shape, but when he arrived last week he was in pretty much the same shape as last year.

Marte actually was anointed the starting third baseman last year, but a few weeks into the season he strained his left hamstring in April and never returned until the end of the season as a September callup. He had a so-so year at Buffalo hitting .267 with 16 homers and 60 RBIs, and in 30 games he hit only .198 in the Dominican Winter League (DWL) this offseason.

Marte spent most of his time in the DWL acclimating himself to first base, and he will continue to get work at the new position this spring to make him a more versatile bench option.

He will need to earn playing time, and his performance the first month or two will greatly determine his fate as an Indian because when Shin-Soo Choo likely returns sometime in May he is another player whose option clock has expired and a decision will need to be made on him as well.

Marte is a once highly regarded prospect who is out of options, and the situation he is in is very similar to that of former Indians middle infielder Brandon Phillips two years ago. Like Marte,

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Phillips was the next big thing that never materialized and put up several disappointing seasons going into his final spring training with the Indians in 2006.

The Indians made the mistake of giving up on Phillips too soon, and apparently they will not make this same mistake twice as barring injury Marte is all but certain to break camp with the team as a bench player.

When the Indians acquired Marte from Boston two years ago at the end of January 2006, the Indians thought Marte would be a fixture at third base and a core piece of the team the next several seasons.

What if the Indians were to trade or release Marte, who would fill his spot on the bench? The options are limited and not very appealing.

Second baseman Josh Barfield would be a possibility, but he is not very versatile, and the Indians would rather he played every day in Buffalo to work on getting his hitting back on track.

So, the only options would be from a pool of minor league free agents they have brought into camp: Andy Gonzalez, Aaron Herr and Danny Sandoval.

Seeing how the Indians brought very little in to challenge Marte for the bench job, it just cements it even more he will make the team.

One And Done

On Tuesday, left-handed ace C.C. Sabathia met with the media to discuss his contract situation the one and only time this season. Just before camp opened, Sabathia suspended contract negotiations until after the season saying he did not want it to be a distraction for him throughout the year. He cited that he has seen it be a distraction for others in the past (Hafner?) and did not want it to be an issue this year.

Still, even with his statement the issue will not go away as it will continue to be a subplot all season long as his time with the Indians gets shorter and shorter.

Sabathia keeps saying all the right things in that there will be plenty of time after the season to get an extension done and that he wants to remain here with the organization he has been with since he was 17 years old. But, he is focused on the season and doesn't want the awful experience of in-season contract negotiations he went through in 2005 be a distraction.

When he signed his three year extension in 2005, he had been on the phone with his agent all day and night and did not get any sleep.

Replacing Sabathia Will Be Tough

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So, if C.C. Sabathia leaves after this season, who would replace him in the rotation? The Indians have practically the entire team returning in 2009, and with or without Sabathia the Indians will be a contender provided there are no major injuries between now and the start of the 2009 season.

Right now, the Indians have possible ace in waiting Fausto Carmona in tow until at least 2013 and middle of the rotation starter Jake Westbrook through 2010.

In addition, they have lefties Cliff Lee (2010), Jeremy Sowers (2012), and Aaron Laffey (2013) in here for the next several seasons.

So, even with Sabathia leaving the Indians have a good core of starting pitching to rely on in 2009 and beyond.

Paul Byrd likely will not return in 2009 as he will be a free agent after this season, but he seems to be replaceable with starters from the minors like Laffey, Sowers or even Adam Miller. However, Sabathia will be impossible to replace and the Indians ability to offset his loss likely will be determined by the growth of Carmona this year, and how the lefty triumvirate of Lee, Laffey and Sowers fare this year and if Miller can remain healthy.

If Carmona can build on last season, and Lee can get back to pitching like he did from 2004-2006, and youngsters Miller, Laffey and Sowers can continue to develop, it will go a long way in determining what length the Indians need to go to retain Sabathia.

He isn't critical to retain, but close to it.

If Sabathia were to leave, the Indians would have to either overpay for a middle of the rotation starter in free agency, or go with one of the young kids.

They also could explore bringing Paul Byrd back as well.

It is no secret that the Indians hoped Miller would be further along by now, and ready to be a difference-maker in the starting rotation. Miller was awesome in camp last year, but he was plagued with various hand and arm injuries last year that limited him physically.

Still, the Indians believe if he can show he is healthy that he will impact this team sometime this year.

Miller may end up being the key to how much the Indians look at extending Sabathia after this season, especially if he puts up a very good season and finishes the year in Cleveland.

The Indians have great depth in the starting pitching department at the moment, but it will take a serious hit this offseason when Sabathia and Byrd are free agents.

This is why they should not consider trading any of their starters, including Cliff Lee, unless they are overwhelmed with an offer.

Byrd On A Wire

It has been roughly four months since the *San Francisco Chronicle* released the news before Game Seven of the ALCS that Paul Byrd used HGH.

Yet, Byrd and the Indians still have not received any word from Major League Baseball (MLB) on whether or not he will be suspended or fined.

MLB is doing a thorough investigation into the matter, and it is possible that offseason events like the Mitchell Report and the Clemens Saga have pushed Byrd's case aside.

That said, the feeling around the league is this matter will probably not be resolved until Byrd's new book titled "Free Byrd" hits bookstores around the All Star break.

Byrd reportedly wrote about the HGH use in his book, so MLB is most likely going to wait and see what is in the book before making a decision (Question:

Why can't MLB get advanced copies of it or the manuscript to make an earlier judgment?)

According to the *Chronicle*, Byrd supposedly purchased \$25,000 worth of HGH and syringes from 2002 to 2005, but it was done before MLB put HGH on their banned substance list.

The timing of the release by the *Chronicle*

was strange, as they did so on the day of Game 7 of the ALCS, and Byrd had to have a press conference to explain the story, which he candidly did.

Byrd's story was that HGH was used to treat a pituitary gland problem; however, his story is questionable as he was purchasing the HGH through a dentist and he declined to comment whether he was still using HGH or not.

Byrd and the Indians do not expect Byrd to be suspended, although in the past other players like Jay Gibbons and Jose Guillen were suspended without a positive drug test.

Preventing A Starter Overload

It is no secret that for some playoff teams, particularly first timers, the starting pitchers go way beyond their typical innings pitched threshold for the season and there is some carryover effect the following season where the pitcher shows some fatigue and/or a dead arm. We saw it last year with the Detroit Tigers starters after they made a deep playoff run in 2006, and with the White Sox starters in 2006 after a deep playoff run in 2005.

C.C. Sabathia pitched almost 260 combined innings in the regular season and playoffs last season, an astonishing 60 more innings than his career innings pitched average. The Indians understand this, and while there is not much the Indians can do about it, they do plan to lessen the workload this spring for him.

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The Indians typically have their starters throw on a four-day rotation until they ramp up to three innings in spring games, and then they switch to the standard five-day rotation.

This year, however, the Indians will put Sabathia on a five-day rotation from the start.

Also, the Indians have limited fielding drills for pitchers where they will do less drills running and covering first base.

The only other pitcher who pitched a high amount of innings last year was Fausto Carmona, but because he is a sinkerballer who pitches to contact and throws less pitches per start, the Indians will not limit him this spring. Paul Byrd did not throw an unusually high amount of innings, and Jake Westbrook and Cliff Lee missed considerable time due to injury last year so their innings pitched totals never reached a level to be concerned about coming into this season. The same applies to Jeremy Sowers and Aaron Laffey.

Miller Getting The Finger

Miller has been sidelined in camp for a few days because of a blister to the middle finger of his throwing hand. This is the same middle finger that pretty much was the culprit of all his physical problems last year that saw him sidelined for three to four months. He played catch at 120 feet yesterday, will throw a bullpen session today, and then most likely will throw batting practice on Tuesday.

Miller would have made his major league debut last May or June had the finger injury not cropped up. The Indians were on the verge of sending Jeremy Sowers to Buffalo and calling up Miller when he injured the finger, and saw his season derailed. He came back from the injury in July, but then came up with inflammation in his elbow and was sidelined again until late August.

He went to the Arizona Fall League (AFL) in the fall to get some work in and log more innings, and in his final start in the AFL he re-aggravated the finger injury.

Aside from the blister, Miller is reportedly healthy. The blister is only a minor setback, but it is time to start being a little more concerned about his finger issue.

According to Dr. Tom Graham, who is the hand specialist the Indians are using to routinely evaluate Miller, while the finger issue is rare Miller is more susceptible to this type of injury because of his big hands, longer fingers and how hard he throws.

Miller is ticketed for a return trip to Buffalo to continue to get more work in and prove he is healthy before he could be an option the Indians consider sometime later this year.

One Bullpen Opening

While there are few position battles in camp this spring, the Indians have let it be known that

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there is an open competition for the seventh and final spot in the bullpen. Joe Borowski, Rafael Perez, Rafael Betancourt, Jensen Lewis, Aaron Fultz and Masahide Kobayashi already have six of the seven bullpen spots locked up.

The candidates for the last spot are:

Tom Mastny, Scott Elarton, Eddie Mujica, Rick Bauer, Matt Ginter, Jeff Harris and Jorge Julio.

Tom Mastny is the front-runner going into camp since he held a bullpen spot in Cleveland all last year, and while he was inconsistent and somewhat of a disappointment during the regular season, he came up big against the Red Sox in the postseason. Jorge Julio is probably Mastny's biggest challenger.

Julio had visa problems and arrived in camp a few days late, but Julio has a lot of experience pitching out of the backend of the bullpen in the major leagues, is still young (28), has a live arm, and is healthy.

Julio started last season with Florida and in ten appearances had a 12.54 ERA, was traded to Colorado and pitched much better by posting a 3.93 ERA in 58 appearances.

If Julio shows he can be much more consistent with his command, he may be the guy to win the job no matter what Mastny does in camp.

Scott Elarton could be a dark horse as he now wants to be converted into a reliever. Since the final spot is mostly considered a long relief/mop up role where the reliever comes in to pitch when a starter can't go at least three or four innings or to pitch in garbage time when a game is a blowout, Elarton could fill this role because of his ability to go multiple innings.

After he was released from Kansas City last year, the Indians picked him up and he went 1-0 with a 2.50 ERA in nine games at Buffalo.

Minor League Coverage On STO

The Indians cable network SportsTime Ohio has some cool things in store as far as minor league coverage goes in 2008. On the show "All Bets Are Off with Bruce Drennan", there will be segments dedicated every Tuesday and Friday to minor league coverage.

They will have representatives for each team in studio or on the phone to talk about their team and what is happening with the players, as well as player personnel people like Farm Director Ross Atkins once a month.

Here is the proposed schedule of appearances on "All Bets Are Off"; in April:

Friday April 4th: Kinston manager Chris Tremie

Tuesday April 8th: Lake County manager Aaron Holbert and Play-By-Play voice/Media Relations Director Craig Deas (both will be in studio)

Friday April 11th: Akron manager Mike Sarbaugh

Tuesday April 15th: Buffalo manager Torey Luvullo

Friday April 18th: Lake County manager Aaron Holbert

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Tuesday April 22nd: Kinston manager Chris Tremie

Friday April 25th: Buffalo manager Torey Luvullo

Tuesday April 29th: Akron manager Mike Sarbaugh

It should be noted that the schedule is subject to change, and also that Ross Atkins has not committed to a date yet, but should appear on one show sometime in April. So, as you can see, if you want some more minor league news, you should be able to catch it every Tuesday and Friday on "All Bets Are Off with Bruce Drennan";.

Big props to STO for this addition.

Slocum Back In The Mix

Right-hander Brian Slocum is looking to re-establish himself as a depth alternative for the Indians starting rotation or bullpen this spring. After he had a good year in 2006 in Buffalo and Cleveland, he came into 2007 as one of the Indians primary depth starting options.

However, Slocum encountered hamstring issues right from the start of spring training last year and while trying to pitch through it he hurt his elbow in the process.

While he opened the year with Buffalo, a month into the season he was put on the disabled list with a strained flexor tendon in his right elbow and never returned.

Slocum also had surgery in September to have a deviated septum repaired.

Slocum was cleared to participate in the Florida Instructional League, and then went out and made a few starts in winter ball in the Venezuela Winter League.

He is in camp healthy, and ready to pitch for a major league job sometime this year.

On The Mend

Here is the status of some of the Indians who are coming off offseason surgeries or were hurt last season:

Adam Miller: His blister on the middle finger of his throwing hand has slowed him down some, but other than that he looks like he will be good to go when camp breaks and head to Buffalo.

Eddie Mujica: Mujica actually had arthroscopic surgery on his left knee in September, and is healthy and ready to compete for a bullpen spot in camp this spring. He has also lost some weight.

Tony Sipp: Sipp is progressing well in his recovery from Tommy John surgery last July. He is throwing off the mound and threw 60 pitches the other day.

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When camp breaks, Sipp will stay behind in spring training to continue his rehab.

The plan is to send him on a rehab assignment in early May - likely to Lake County - and be ready for normal action by late June or early July.

Michael Aubrey: Aubrey has been hampered by various injuries throughout his career, but is coming into camp as healthy as he has ever been and ready to hopefully have a big year at Buffalo this year.

Shin-Soo Choo: Choo had Tommy John surgery on his left elbow back in September, and is playing catch at about 90 feet and taking soft toss in the batting cages. He likely will be limited to designated hitter duties early on in spring training, but he could get some time in the outfield late in camp. He will stay in extended spring training to continue his rehab when the Indians start the regular season, and the plan is to send him on a rehab assignment to Buffalo sometime in May.

David Dellucci: After his season was ended prematurely in June last year because of a left hamstring tear, he is back to full health.

Brendan Donnelly: Donnelly is still recovering from Tommy John surgery he had last August, and he will not arrive in camp until late March. He will remain in extended spring training and begin a throwing program, and the plan is to send him on a rehab assignment sometime in June.

He likely will not be ready to pitch at the major league level until August.

Jordan Brown: Brown had a arthroscopic knee surgery in the offseason and is about to resume normal activities. He is about a week behind other players.

Parting Shots

Several Indians are a lot lighter this year and came into camp in much better shape. Notably, Ryan Garko looks to have lost 15-20 pounds and Victor Martinez has lost 13 pounds over the winter.

Al so, others like C.C. Sabathia dropped about ten pounds and Joe Borowski dropped about five pounds. ... Outfielder Shin-Soo Choo is obligated to serve in the South Korean military for between 24 and 28 months before he turns 30 (Choo is currently 26).

There are a few loopholes to get out of the obligation, like becoming a U.S. citizen or by winning a gold medal at the 2010 Asian Games in China where he would receive a military exception like fellow countrymen Chan Ho Park and Byung-Hyun Kim have in the past.

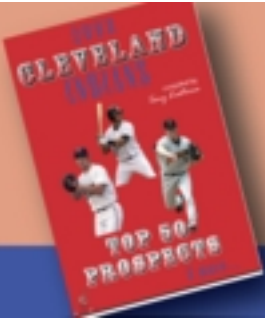
Because of the communication barrier between Japanese reliever Masahide Kobayashi and the Indians players and coaches, interpreter Toshi Nagahara will be with the Indians full time and officially serve as an assistant athletic trainer and translator. Nagahara is not allowed in the dugout or bullpen during games, but will be available in the runway behind the dugout to help

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provide Indians coaches with phrases to help Kobayahi when they need to talk to him on the mound. ... Senior advisor Buck Showalter's one year stay with the organization is over as he has re-joined ESPN as an analyst. ... Outfielder Jason Tyner was signed to a minor league contract on Thursday, and will report to minor league camp when it opens this coming week. ... SportsTime Ohio announced Monday that in addition to all Indians games being broadcast in high definition, all other programming will be broadcast in high definition starting April 1st.



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