

## Depth Charges

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

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There's little mystery as to which 25 players will break camp with the Indians and head to Cleveland as part of the big league roster. However, an interesting situation is developing in left field where The Ben Francisco Treat is having a great camp, outplaying the Dellichaels platoon partners. In his latest, Paul looks at the situation, and also at the Indians overall philosophy of staying loyal to their veterans, and their reluctance to depend on unproven players.



Though very little mystery remains for what the Indians' 25-man roster figures to look like out of spring training, much of the talk and debate coming out of Winter Haven has centered around Ben Francisco's bid to make the club as well as the very real concern that David Dellucci may not be able to rebound from a dreadful and injury-marred 2007 campaign. If results in spring training are the overriding factor in who makes the team out of Winter Haven, there really is no comparison between the two:

### **Francisco (38 AB)**

.368 BA / .419 OBP / .605 SLG / 1.024 OPS, 2 HR, 8 RBI

### **Dellucci (31 AB)**

.129 BA / .229 OBP / .258 SLG / .487 OPS, 1 HR, 1 RBI

But, quite simply, that isn't how this thing works. Spring performance falls somewhere down the list of factors determining actual roster construction, behind committed salary and remaining options...at least. Debate all you like about whether The Ben Francisco Treat should start the season in Buffalo or Cleveland, but barring an unforeseen move, he's slated to be a Bison as 2008 begins.

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The assumed destination of these two players, however, underscores an organizational philosophy that has become apparent over the past few off-seasons, carrying over to spring training and culminating in the ultimate construction of the opening day roster. The philosophy involves the propensity of the team to break camp with veteran players (whether they are already in the organization or are added in the off-season) with more of a proven track record than to hand spots to young players and hope for the best in their development. That, in turn, sends younger players to Buffalo to start the season in the hopes that their individual performance in the International League forces the Indians to take notice as well as the youngster's hope (whether any player would admit this or not) that the veteran that is perceived to be "taking their spot" either struggles or is moved, thereby creating a spot for them on the parent club.

The wisdom of this philosophy could certainly be debated (Grady Sizemore making the team in 2004 ONLY after Juan Gonzalez's hamstrings turned to dust immediately jumps to mind as a poor move in hindsight) for putting the best team on the field from Opening Day, but the strategy is one that worked to perfection last year as young players (Gutierrez, Cabrera, Perez, Lewis) were able to continue developing in the minors and were ready to contribute when it became apparent that the veteran players who started the season on the roster simply didn't have anything left in the tank (Nixon, Hernandez) or, for some reason or another, simply weren't viable MLB players in 2007 (Lee, Barfield).

The overarching strategy in place would seem to be that the Indians identify positions where no viable in-house candidate is an established MLB player (or at least has a semi-substantial MLB track record) and buys some insurance, if you will, that their prospects may not pan out immediately by adding a veteran player (generally eschewed by Shapiro critics as "bargain-bin shopping") to presumably start the season in Cleveland. The most obvious example of this came last off-season as the Indians added Trot Nixon, Keith Foulke, Joe Borowski, Roberto Hernandez, and Aaron Fultz instead of allowing an open competition of sorts commence for a roster spot from the likes of Gutierrez, Choo, Francisco, Davis, Fernando Cabrera, Perez, and others. The Indians arrived in Winter Haven with the veterans basically assured of a spot on the roster (so long as they didn't retire), while the youngsters came into camp with little hope of breaking camp with the Tribe and pretty aware that they'd be starting the season in Buffalo. Interestingly, the one instance in which they attempted to break camp last year with an as-yet-unproven youngster in Andy Marte was done only because Casey Blake's versatility provided the insurance from the veteran side of

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the ledger.

But back to the philosophy - if the veterans pan out (even in relative terms), the Indians have filled a roster spot without much risk and with little financial commitment. Borowski, for as much consternation as his saves and performance may cause, is a perfect example of the idea of a veteran player stepping into a role and settling a unit when no obvious in-house candidates existed (really, at the beginning of 2007, how comfortable would you have been with Betancourt closing, and who was setting him up...CaBBrera...Jason Dangerously?) and allowing young players to develop in the minors, ready to step in as the season progresses. The veteran additions don't cause a run on the Tribe ticket line, but if their addition amounts to filling out the roster with complementary players and filling in cracks, even a few months of effectiveness (read Fultz, Aaron) buys the organization more time to evaluate and promote their own.

Some of these veterans turn into marginal placeholders who draw the ire of fans (and likely front office members) while they continue to be Trotted (pun intended) out in the everyday lineup. And while this philosophy is seen by some as "blocking" prospects or giving at-bats to players not in the club's long-term plans instead of players who may comprise a portion of future lineups, a by-product of beginning prospects that the club is not 100% certain about in Buffalo is that it allows the younger players to develop a routine in Buffalo with the hopes of getting into a groove away from the "bright lights" of Cleveland.

But more important than just giving the veterans one last chance at resurrecting or redeeming their MLB careers or allowing the young players more time to develop is the depth that it creates throughout the organization in case of injuries or ineffectiveness. Imagine for a moment that the Indians didn't bring in the veteran arms of last off-season and decided to start the season with a bullpen that was meant to include Edward Mujica, Jason Davis, Fernando Cabrera, Tony Sipp (pre-injury), Rafael Perez, and maybe even a Atom Miller. What happens when ineffectiveness (Mujica, Davis, Cabrera) or injury (Sipp) rear their ugly heads? The result is players like Matt Miller, Mike Koplove, Jeff Harris, Jason Stanford, and Brian Sikorski start to log MAJOR innings as the young talents like Jensen Lewis and Jeff Stevens start to separate themselves from the pack and plant the seed of their helping the parent club at some point.

Which brings us back to this year and the soup du jour (that's the soup of the

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day...which sounds good...I think I'll have that) about marginal veterans (Dellucci, Michaels, and Lee) impeding the progress of talent (Francisco and Laffey) that is potentially ready to contribute. However, organizational depth is a major reason why the Indians were able to contend down the stretch in 2008 and why they were able to overcome injuries in the starting rotation to capture the AL Central title last year. That depth figures to remain as 2008 starts with the likes of Laffey, Sowers, and Francisco all a phone call away, with the BLC slated to emerge from the DL in May, with players like Jordan Brown, Jeff Stevens, and Reid Santos perhaps playing the role of the cavalry for the parent club as the year progresses.

Isn't it interesting how all of the beat writers are trying to predict who is going to help this year? Isn't it nice that the question is whether they'll perform well enough in Buffalo or Akron to merit a call-up, as opposed to hoping that they can find success immediately in Cleveland?

With the Indians figuring to contend this year, don't expect them to go with young player over a veteran off the bat (no matter [how obvious a compromise may seem](#)), not only to give the veteran a chance to re-prove himself, but also to retain that desired depth. However, with the same concept of year-long contention in mind, don't expect players like Cliff Lee, Aaron Fultz, David Dellucci, or Jason Michaels to be on very long leashes as they need to prove that 2007 was the aberration (Fultz and Michaels to a lesser extent) and not the beginning of a downward trend. If a player like Lee or Dellucci is able to pretend that the calendar reads 2005 again (Lee went 18-5 with a 1.22 WHIP while Dellucci hit 29 HR with an .879 OPS) and is able to re-establish themselves as a viable complementary piece - great. But, if they don't...that organizational depth will start to inch closer to the surface with the likes of Laffey and Francisco ready to step in for their veteran counterparts.

The Youth Movement is still underway for the Indians, there's just not room for any more of it on the flight from Winter Haven to Cleveland ... for now.