

Minor Happenings: LaPorta Brings Thunder With His Bat

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Tuesday, July 08 2008 7:00 PM -

It has been almost 72 hours since the first announcement hit the net that C.C. Sabathia had been traded. Since then, Tony has been busy burning up the phone lines and researching the players received in the deal. In a special edition of Minor Happenings, Tony provides a recap of Matt LaPorta's press conference yesterday, some comments from Farm Director Ross Atkins, talks about the mysterious "player to be named later", and even chimes in with his analysis of the trade.



A little different setup this week with *Minor Happenings*. With the big trade over the weekend that consummated between the Indians and Brewers, and all the information coming out of it, I felt it best to do a special edition of *Minor Happenings* focusing just on the trade. Mi

The regular version recapping the news and notes from the previous week will actually post on Friday this week.

I was in Akron last night to see outfielder Matt LaPorta make his Indians debut and also attend his press conference. The game was cancelled because of a nasty thunderstorm, so I missed the opportunity to see his first at bats as an Indian. I was even going to video his at bats and post them in this piece today, but so much for that.

I actually may still try and go tomorrow to see him play, and if I do, I will most definitely have some video to share maybe as soon as Friday's report.

LaPorta Arrives

Talk about a thunderous arrival.

Roughly ten minutes before the start of a 5:30 press conference for newcomer Matt LaPorta in the third base dugout at Canal Park, the sky blackened and the temperature instantly dropped several degrees. As the thunder clouds swiftly rolled in it looked like a scene from the movie *Independence Day*.

Then the rains came, followed by the thunder and lightening. The media quickly made their

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way inside for protection from the rain and into a cramped tunnel below the stands just outside of the Akron clubhouse. LaPorta appeared shortly after that, almost as if he arrived with the storm.

The Indians were probably hoping he would display a little thunder with the bat in his Indians debut last night, but I don't think they envisioned him taking it that far.



LaPorta is the newest Cleveland Indian and the headline prospect the Indians received in the C.C. Sabathia trade on Monday. As he conducted his press conference in front of 30-some media members and roughly a half dozen TV cameras, I was taken aback with how much composure he has, the confidence he shows, the incredible aura that surrounds him, and probably most importantly how genuine and real this guy is. He does not appear to be the typical primadonna athlete as this guy respects the game, is deeply religious, and has a smile that never leaves his face.

LaPorta is the big fish in the trade, and fills a huge need in the organization for a power right-handed bat. It does not matter what position he plays, as with his power and hitting combination, he was one of the best power prospects in baseball and the Indians can use that kind of player anywhere in the lineup. Even at a position they appear to have options at like in the outfield and first base.

While he was drafted as a first baseman, he has been playing professionally as a corner outfielder.

For now, the Indians will use him mostly in left field at Akron and have him take ground balls during batting practice at first base to keep him ready there.

Over the course of the last 48 to 72 hours I have talked to many different people on the trade, and most feel the Indians got good value in the trade and addressed a huge organizational need. Right-handed power is hard to find, and the Indians were desperate for it, so the addition of the blue-chipper LaPorta alone is huge for the Indians.

"LaPorta is big, strong with the ability to handle more advanced pitching right now," said one American League scout I talked to yesterday. "He showed that in the Arizona Fall League during his debut last season with power to all fields. He was primarily a pull-power guy in college, but he has no problem driving balls out away from him now. I'm not sure if they'll move him back to first base, but he's serviceable in left field--he's not going to kill you out there--and has potential to be a middle-of-the-order run producer."

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For LaPorta, his life has been turned upside down in the past 48 hours. Upon hearing about the trade he had to quickly pack, get on a flight and make his way to Akron to make his debut as a player in the Indians organization.

"It has been kind of crazy," said LaPorta during the press conference on Tuesday. "I stayed up the other night packing until about 4 o'clock making sure I had everything in boxes that was going to be shipped home and all that stuff.

Today getting on the flight was difficult, and I finally arrived here but one of my bags didn't.

The one with all my clothes.

So hopefully that will come in soon."

LaPorta has been the talk of the prospect world the past week not only because of his abilities, but because of his rumored involvement with a high profile major leaguer such as C.C. Sabathia. When the deal finally went down, LaPorta was first informed of the trade by Don Money who was his manager at Milwaukee's Double-A Huntsville club.

"I think it was Saturday, I talked to my manager and he said everything that is going on with the trade don't worry about it and just keep playing ball," said LaPorta. "So, I said okay. Then our first baseman got hurt, and I was like 'am I going to go play first base?' and he was like 'no, you gotta stay in the outfield because one of our outfielders was hurt as well'."

The next day I came to the field I was not in the starting lineup, and I was like 'okay, what's going on now' and as the day went on he told me why I was not playing because they felt the trade might go through."

As far as being traded, LaPorta understands it is the nature of the game and feels it is an honor to be traded for a great pitcher like Sabathia.

"It is a great honor to be traded for C.C., I mean he is an outstanding player and is going to be great for the Milwaukee Brewers," said LaPorta. "But, I just don't really look at it that way. I mean we are both ballplayers and out here to do a job and I am just thankful for this opportunity.

It is part of the business and part of the game.

I like new things in my life and this is definitely a new task and I am enjoying it."

There is no timeline on how long LaPorta will be in Akron, but it is highly likely he plays in Akron the rest of the season. LaPorta is likely to be chosen to play for Team USA in the Olympics, and if that happens he will leave the Indians the last week of July and not return until mid to late August.

That would mean he would get a just under three weeks of time in at Akron before departing for the Olympics, and then when he returns have about a

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week and a half before the end of the season.

Some may think he would go to Buffalo upon his return, but this likely will not be the case as Buffalo's season is going nowhere while Akron's is going somewhere. Buffalo will not make the playoffs, while Akron very well could and this is a big reason LaPorta would return to Akron so the Indians can put him in and expose him to a playoff environment.

Not playing in Buffalo or Cleveland this year does nothing to change his status for next year, as he should go into spring training as a non-rostered major league ready bat.

If the Indians deem him ready, he could skip Triple-A altogether, be rostered, and open the season in the Indians outfield.

Past evidence, however, suggests the Indians will play it safe and start him off in Triple-A.

As the key player in the trade, the fans will have very high expectations for him. Maybe even some that are unrealistic.

But, in any case, there will be a lot of pressure on LaPorta and the Indians front office for him to perform and become the player most think he will be.

"You just gotta go out there and do your job," said LaPorta. "You can't worry about the expectations that people put on you.

You gotta out there and stay within yourself and play hard everyday."

Director's Cuts

Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins chimed in on his three new players OF/1B Matt LaPorta, RHP Rob Bryson, and LHP Zach Jackson that he has coming into his system:



On Matt LaPorta: "Matt's an unbelievable name. You read about him and watch him on video, and when you talk to him you see the confidence he has as a man.

As a professional he is everything you want as a farm director.

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He is exciting to talk about, exciting to watch play.

Obviously he is very strong and he has tons of power as he already has 20 home runs in his first full season of professional baseball.

He is a 2007 first rounder and is already in Double-A.

He had a huge performance in the [Arizona Fall League] and obviously has a great pedigree.

If you look at him objectively and subjectively I guess the only thing that would keep him from being a "can't miss" would be if he gets hurt and we have no reason to believe that is going to happen.

On LaPorta in the outfield: "He is slightly below average with his speed. Those average routes and average jumps when you are a slightly below average runner gives you a step or too less where you are covering a little less ground.

He has a great release, he gets to a lot of average and routine plays, and makes all of those plays.

His arm strength is average, but very accurate.

We'll sort through what is the best position for him, but that bat is going to find its way into any lineup.

That will be a determination for all of us involved, but as of today what he will do is predominantly get his at bats in left field, take some ground balls from time to time at first base, and then we'll go from there.

We'll see what we have, and he'll get to know us and we'll get to know him.

On Rob Bryson: "It is interesting how Milwaukee has used him as they used him as a starter and a closer to develop him as a closer. We don't go about it that way, as that is an interesting way to go about it.

I think medically we are more comfortable with a more consistent routine.

He'll pitch every three days, throw two or three innings, and face an entire lineup.

The fastball has been up to 96 MPH and he strikes out guys at a very high rate.

He is athletic, and had a lot of success as an amateur and got a very significant signing bonus.

He is a very interesting prospect and a great young arm to have at 20-years old in our system.

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On Bryson closing: "From time to time he will close a game, but it will be the third inning of his performance. He'll come in and face an entire lineup and maybe pitch the seventh, eighth and ninth to get that save. But what we like to do is have a guy face three left-handed hitters if he is right-handed and make sure he is developing that second and third pitch."

A guy that dominant, if he comes in and faces just three hitters he is not going to get exposed until he gets to the next level.

So we are going to do everything we can to develop him at that level to the best extent that we can before he goes on to Kinston, before he goes to Double-A and before he is a major leaguer."

On Zach Jackson: "A great prospect at one point. He has not had the best success over the last year and a half, but shows very good signs of being able to contribute to a major league team. Statistically he has not been incredible this year, but our scouts like him a lot."

He can start or relieve.

Milwaukee recently transferred him to a left-on-left guy and more situational, so we are going to see what we have got."

Analyzing The Trade

Here is a quick scouting report I have compiled for each of the three known players in the C.C. Sabathia deal. This information was compiled from several people I have talked to over the days. The Indians also received a player to be named later (PTBNL), but more on that later.



Matt LaPorta (1B/OF): In just 411 at bats as a professional, LaPorta has 32 HR and has a .616 slugging percentage. He has plus-plus power to all fields and is without a doubt a middle of the lineup bat. He also has an advanced approach at the plate (45 BB and 63 Ks in 304 AB) and can hit for average.

He is a below average runner, and an average defender at first base and the outfield, but he has good instincts and is a gamer.

His throwing arm is a tick above average.

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LaPorta has outstanding makeup and displays maturity both on the field and off it.

He is the complete package with the charm, looks, power and ability to be the face of a franchise.

LaPorta was the seventh overall pick of the 2007 draft by the Brewers, and was recently named to the All-Star team in the Class AA Southern League. He was hitting .288 for Huntsville with 23 2B, 20 HR, and 66 RBI in 84 games, and at the time of the trade was leading the Southern League in home runs, was 2nd in RBI

and extra-base hits (41), was 3rd

rd

in slugging percentage (.576), tied for 5th

th

in runs scored (56), and was 6th

th

in on-base percentage (.402).

LaPorta is in his second year of professional baseball after twice being named the Southeastern Conference Player of the Year at the University of Florida.

Last season after signing with the Brewers, he hit .304 with 12 home runs and 31 RBI in 30 games between rookie level Helena and Class-A West Virginia.

Prior to this season, LaPorta was named the top prospect and best power-hitting prospect in the Brewers organization and tabbed as the 23rd best prospect in all of baseball by *Baseball America*

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LaPorta has also been selected to play in the Futures Game on July 13th for Team USA, and is one of 60 players currently being considered for the 24-man United States Olympic Team roster.



Rob Bryson (RHP): Bryson signed for \$300,000 with the Brewers last year as a draft-and-follow player. He has bounced around some in different roles from a starter to a closer during his time in Milwaukee.

He throws two plus-pitches, a fastball that tops out as high as 96 MPH and a wicked slider.

His outstanding two-pitch mix projects him as a serious prospect in the backend of the bullpen.

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He is young and is still working on refining his fastball command, which has led to some walks and a high ERA, but as a 20-year old in Single-A he has impressed in his 55 innings of work by allowing only 43 hits and piling up 73 strikeouts.

In two pro seasons, Bryson is 6-2 with 13 saves and a 3.47 ERA in 109 innings pitched.

He has only allowed 92 hits and struck out 143 batters (11.8 K/9).



Zach Jackson: Jackson is a tall left-handed pitcher (6'5" 220 lbs) who has now been traded two times. He was originally drafted in the first round of the 2004 Draft by the Blue Jays, and then was traded to Milwaukee in the Lyle Overbay trade in December 2005. Jackson has an above average fastball for a lefty that sits in the low 90s and tops out at 92 MPH, and he compliments it with a big sweeping curveball, changeup and cutter, all of which grade out as average pitches.

He has a funky delivery that helps create deception with his pitches and play up the velocity of his repertoire.

In his minor league career, Jackson is 28-23 with a 4.62 ERA, and in 509 career innings pitched he has 349 strikeouts and 171 walks.

He has some big league experience, throwing 42 innings and compiling a 5.36 ERA in limited time with Milwaukee.

The Bottom Line: Now that I have done a ton of homework on the players I feel more confident in analyzing this trade and providing some opinions on it. With any trade, you really have to evaluate it twice.

The first being at the time of the trade to assess the perceived value received, and then a few years later to see how everything played out.

Right now, I like this trade. I am not downright giddy about it, but I really like it. When there was any talk of trading Sabathia, I had a hard-lined stance that the Indians should focus on the two top players in the deal being potential impact bats since we are in such a need for them.

And, that is what the Indians did here.

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LaPorta is an impact bat who could help the Indians maybe as soon as the start of next year and eventually should be a staple in the middle of the lineup for years to come.

Some of the comps I have heard of him to Matt Holiday and Lance Berkman only make him more exciting.

The other impact bat will likely come in the "player to be named later" (PTBNL) portion of the deal.

Also, the more I find out about Bryson, the more I like him. At first I was less than thrilled with the inclusion of a low-A ball relief pitcher in the deal.

But, his stuff is electric, and he is a serious closing candidate down the road.

He has a ways to go still, but his ceiling has not even come close to being reached.

Jackson to me is sort of a throw in to the deal.

He has some value as a prospect still, and the Indians like him as a depth starting option for this year and next.

He could even complete his transition to a left-on-left situational role, which is something the Brewers started using him in before he was traded.

But for now, he likely will become a fixture in the Indians rotation the last half of the season once he can get his pitch count ramped back up.

If I had to grade the trade at this point, I would give it a B+. The only thing to me holding it back from being an A is that I would have liked the Indians to get one more major league ready bat to team up with LaPorta.

If the PTBNL ends up being Michael Brantley, then I think this would help as I believe he is a near ready bat that could help next year and move to the leadoff spot thereby moving Grady Sizemore into the 3-hole.

But, for now, I am assuming that bat will be Taylor Green who I like, but is a little further away still.

The Players Yet To Be Named

Something that has probably not received a lot of attention through other media outlets is the importance of the player to be named later (PTBNL) in this deal. Indians GM Mark Shapiro is on record as saying that the player is very important to the deal, and in fact is the second most important piece of the trade.

That said, the identity of the players being considered by the Indians to complete the trade is still a mystery. We know that there

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