

Arizona Dreamin' - Out In The Fields

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Tuesday, February 03 2009 7:00 PM -

It's time for another dose of Arizona' Dreamin on a cold, snowy, and generally miserable winter day here in C-Town ... as Paulie C checks in with the latest installment of his spring training preview series. Today, Paul takes a look at the outfield, which is a very fluid situation once you get past Super Sizemore in CF. Ben Francisco and Shin-Soo Choo are the likely flanks for Grady, but the team has some very intriguing young outfielders that could factor into the mix in 2009.



Now just a little over a week away from the wonderful phrase "Pitchers and Catchers report today" passing through the lips on untold sportscasters (and with "Major League" all set up in my DVR for viewing next Wednesday night), let's keep rolling with the Spring Training preview that has somewhat morphed into a season preview (albeit accidentally), if only because all I want to do is some Arizona Dreamin'...on such a winter's day.

With the pitching staff adequately covered in the first two pieces ([here](#) and [here](#)), let's turn the attention to the outfield if only because outfielders stand on grass and I haven't seen anything remotely green on the ground for a solid 4 months and so I can title a piece after [this bit of genius](#)

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Whereas questions surround the rotation (spots #3 to #5 most notably for Goodyear) and how the bullpen shakes out (who will be the 7th reliever most notably for Goodyear), very little question exists for what outfielders figure to break camp with the parent club. That being said, beyond SuperSizemore, questions abound regarding the use of the other three main OF who figure to be on the 25-man out of Arizona and certainly 2009 represents a crucial year for each to determine where (or if) they fit in the organization for this year and

beyond.

Before getting into any of that, though, let's take a moment to appreciate the greatness that is Grady. Sizemore is now 26 (turning 27 in August) and to this point in his career, [Baseball-Reference.com tells us that two of the most comparable players to Grady at the age of 26 are...wait for it...Barry Bonds and Hall of Famer Duke Snider](#). All told, Bonds is the closest comp, and that would be Barry pre-head enlargement (remember when he was still a first-ballot HOF before BALCO?) with Sizemore actually besting Bonds' numbers over the two players' first five years in the league. In fact, in 35 fewer games than Bonds (again in their first five years) and only 85 more AB, Grady has accumulated 11 more runs than Bonds, 65 more hits than Bonds, 15 more extra-base hits than Bonds, and has posted an OPS of .861, besting the OPS of .837 that Bonds compiled over his first five seasons.

Ridiculously close totals for two wildly talented players, no?

Aren't you impressed yet...without me even invoking the name "Brittany Binger"?

If not, how about the fact that according to Fangraphs.com's new formula that determines a player's value in terms of runs and wins (Win Values), [Sizemore was the 5th most valuable player last year in MLB, and the most valuable in the AL](#).

Is this a good time to mention that the Indians hold a club option for Grady in 2012 that would pay him \$8.5M that year if an extension or restructuring of his contract is not addressed prior to that?

Is Grady's game flawless?

No, he still struggles against LHP (.735 OPS vs. LHP in 2008, affected for sure by the .250 Batting Average on Balls in Play vs. LHP) and his arm strength is average at best. But that's just splitting hairs on the head of one of the best 5 to 10 players in baseball just now hitting his prime.

If anything can be hoped for Grady in 2009 (outside of a further development of his game) it would be that Sizemore remains healthy all year because if there's one player in the lineup for whom a contingency plan isn't obvious, it's him. So,

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whenever you drop to your knees (or do whatever it is you do when/if you call on that higher being), after you think of people actually IN your life, give a little shout-out to Grady and his health for 2009. Because, if healthy and continuing on his career path, I have no qualms (being completely comfortable with myself) saying that my man-crush on Grady is only going to grow...something completely normal for an Indians' fan, male or female.

If Grady is the given in the OF for 2009 (and 2010 and 2011 and 2012), the player on the roster that has the greatest opportunity to become a given in the lineup for this year and the years going forward is Shin-Soo Choo. Stop me if you've heard this before, but The BLC posted the 5th highest OPS in all of baseball after the All-Star break last year, amassing a line of .343 BA / .424 OBP / .614 SLG / 1.038 OPS with 11 HR and 48 RBI over 210 AB.

But it wasn't just after the All-Star break that Choo thrived for the Tribe. From the first game he played in (on May 31st) to the end of the season, Choo posted a line of .309 BA / .397 OBP / .549 SLG / .946 OPS, good enough for the 16th highest OPS in MLB during that timeframe for players with more than 300 plate appearances.

And, [as you can see, he's in pretty good company there](#) .

Thus, the question becomes whether 2008 represents Choo's emergence as an elite player, or if it simply is a matter of a player riding momentum to a tremendous season.

Is Choo's 2008 a break-out or simply a mirage?

Going into 2008, the one knock on Choo has always been that he projected as more of a platoon player, because of his performance against RHP and LHP, both in the 2006 season (the only season during which he spent considerable time in MLB) and throughout his minor league career:

2006 in MLB vs. RHP - .836 OPS in 158 plate appearances

2006 in MLB vs. LHP - .628 OPS in 21 plate appearances

Career Minor League vs. RHP - .862 OPS in 772 AB

Career Minor League vs. LHP -.708 OPS in 280 AB

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That line of thinking was thrown a giant wrench in 2008 though, when The BLC improved his performance against LHP while positively CRUSHING RHP:

2008 vs. RHP - .992 OPS in 286 plate appearances

2008 vs. LHP - .800 OPS in 84 plate appearances

Throughout his minor league career, Choo had proven himself to be a competent hitter, posting a career Minor League line of .292 BA / .376 OBP / .444 SLG / .820 OPS and in 2008 (with his balky elbow presumably healed) he finally translated that sustained success to MLB. But 2009 should serve as the year that goes a long way in determining whether Choo broke through as an elite player in MLB (as the numbers from his 2008 portend) or if 2008 simply serves notice that Choo is a serviceable MLB player, capable of spurts of dominance, but not among the league's elite.

There's no question that Choo will be given the everyday RF job and should only see days off against the upper echelon LHP (not unlike many LH hitters around MLB) as he's certainly earned the right to establish himself as a fixture in the lineup in 2009 and beyond (as nobody seems too concerned about the military service requirement...at least not publicly).

Whether he does or not will be an interesting subplot as the season unfolds.

With Sizemore and Choo, then, 2/3 of the Indians' outfield looks pretty set, in terms of players who figure to be on a pretty long leash because of their 2008 season and greater body of work, doesn't it?

Well, it's time for the second half of the program here, the one with all of the potential moving parts...

After getting the call to the Bigs to replace Jason Michaels, The Ben Francisco Treat acquitted himself quite nicely to MLB, compiling a .365 BA / .397 OBP / .619 SLG / 1.016 OPS with 2 HR and 10 2B in his first 68 plate appearances over the first 19 games he played in. After that dazzling debut (and because of some circumstances having nothing to do with him), The Frisco Kid was put either in the #2 or #3 hole for 94 of the next 102 games he played. But Frisco skidded after his initial success as over those final 102 games, as he posted a line of .250 BA / .322 OBP / .409 SLG / .731 OPS with 13 HR and 22 2B in his final 431 plate appearances.

While those numbers tell a bit of a story (and how nuts is it that the second set of numbers come ostensibly from the #2 or #3 hole of the offense that scored the most runs after the All-Star break in MLB, despite Francisco), it's really not fair to pick arbitrary dates to get a sense of the greater body of work that Francisco put forth in 2008.

For that, let's take a look at Francisco's performance month-by-month:

May/April

.307 BA / .351 OBP / .500 SLG / .851 OPS with 13 extra-base hits in 88 AB

June

.269 BA / .339 OBP / .426 SLG / .765 OPS with 9 extra-base hits in 108 AB

July

.256 BA / .330 OBP / .465 SLG / .795 OPS with 10 extra-base hits in 86 AB

August

.292 BA / .333 OBP / .458 SLG / .792 OPS with 8 extra-base hits in 96 AB

September/October

.188 BA / .300 OBP / .319 SLG / .619 OPS with 7 extra-base hits in 69 AB

Now when you see it broken down like that, does the word "mediocrity" float across your mind? It does for me, as Frisco is far from a black hole in LF, but he's no longer young (he's 27 going on 28) and really the notion that he's going to improve on these numbers can't really be a rational thought.

The Indians will say that Francisco had the unnecessary pressure of being a #3 hitter on him, causing him to press. But his career Minor-League line of .291 BA / .355 OBP / .459 SLG / .814 OPS suggests otherwise. It suggests that Francisco, at this point, is a modest MLB player, who's going to post league average numbers, but not much more than that.

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The best case scenario has Francisco holding his own in LF (both offensively and defensively) until some of the young guns who figure to start the year in AAA are legitimately ready to emerge to the parent club, allowing Frisco to continue to contribute to the Tribe as a 4th OF, deepening the quality of the talent on the team. On the other hand, the worst case scenario is that he completely bottoms out (though he topped a .765 OPS in every month but his combined September/October), forcing the Indians to either incorporate The Looch into the fold, move DeRosa into the OF on more of a full-time basis, or rush the development of one of the young players.

If Francisco maintains a level of even simply average production, the Indians are likely to allow him to sit near the bottom of the lineup and take the bulk of the AB in LF with the caveat that a strong performance in Columbus by the likes of LaPorta, Brantley, and (to a lesser extent) Crowe could force the Indians to make a decision regarding LF at some point this season.

Regardless of the performance of Francisco, one would have to assume that he's going to get the lion's share of the time in LF, if only because the alternative (The Looch) really isn't much of an alternative at all. Without getting too much into the utter failure that Dellucci has been since arriving to Cleveland on a deal that was at least a year too long, just know this - Dellucci was signed to serve as part of a platoon in the OF, where his part of the arrangement was to crush RHP. Everyone's got this, right?

David Dellucci vs. RHP in 2008 - .746 OPS

David Dellucci vs. RHP in 2007 - .709 OPS

Not that I want you to feel worse about this, but Dellucci in two seasons has only had 44 plate appearances against LHP (with a total of 4 hits in those plate appearances), so even when he's being used EXACTLY as his numbers state that he should be, he's underwhelmed as an Indian.

To say that The Looch is on a short leash is quite an understatement as I'm not even sure there's a leash involved. I'm thinking more just someone holding onto his collar, ready to pull him back as soon as he gets out of line or simply taking off the collar and watching him run away. He'll likely be on the team out of Goodyear, if only because he's a LH bat off the bench (unlike Carroll and Barfield), but he shouldn't get anywhere near the field and if the Indians look to be getting AB for Hafner, Martinez, Garko, and Shoppach, then DH opportunities look to be rare for

Dellucci. More than likely, he bides his time on the roster until one of the AAA guys come along and push him off the 25-man at some point during the season.

So, if Dellucci's just a LH guy off the bench, how does the rest of the 2009 OF look...with just three guys filling three spots? Not quite, as the 4th OF in the mix will actually be Mark DeRosa. DeRosa played 38 games in RF and 27 games in LF for the Cubs last year, so the Indians will likely use DeRosa in the outfield when giving Choo or Francisco a break and moving the infield around accordingly to cover DeRosa's absence from 3B. Of course, it's been rumored that Barfield and...ahem...Garko will see time in the OF in Goodyear; but at this point, DeRosa is ostensibly the 4th OF on the roster.

Beyond the players that are almost assured to begin 2009 populating the Tribe OF, the performances of the three players who figure to start the season as Columbus' starting OF should serve as the reinforcements for the parent club as the season reveals itself. Though it's likely that SuperSizemore and the BLC will be give pretty wide berths in CF and RF, LF could find itself in need of an injection of talent at some point in the middle of the season and Matt LaPorta, Michael Brantley, and Trevor Crowe figure to be jockeying for position to get the first crack at a permanent spot in the lineup and in LF as they share time in the Columbus lineup.

As inarguably the most ballyhooed of the three, Matt LaPorta arrives to the organization after posting an impressive line for AA Huntsville prior to the trade to the tune of .288 BA / .402 OBP / .576 SLG / .978 OPS with 23 2B and 20 HR in 84 games. Though LaPorta struggled (relatively speaking) once he joined AA Akron, the 17 games he played there were interrupted by a trip to Beijing to represent the USA and multiple other personal events. While most accounts peg LaPorta projects as that "big, corner bat", the corner that he eventually ends up playing (as he played 1B in college, but was primarily an OF in the Milwaukee organization) is likely to be determined more by the players in front of him (namely Francisco in LF and Garko, Aubrey, and Brown at 1B) as much as by LaPorta himself. Regardless of the position, if he keeps hitting like he did in 2008, LaPorta will force his bat onto the Cleveland roster eventually, perhaps as early as 2009.

The other player netted from the Brew Crew for Sabathia, Brantley arrives to the Indians' organization as an upper-level OBP machine with speed who likely figures as a LF for the Indians (you see...there's this guy who plays CF for the

Tribe), perhaps as early as late 2009. His career as a minor-leaguer in the Brewers has been highlighted by the .399 OBP that he has compiled, and the 87 SB in 329 career MiLB games lead many to believe that Brantley's ability to get on base and his speed once on those bases translates to a potential leadoff hitter. He is extremely young (he'll be 22 in May) for his level of advancement and whether he discovers any kind of power to augment his tremendous on-base skills will be the thing to watch for Brantley in Columbus. His performance in his first exposure to AAA could either put Brantley on the fast-track to Cleveland (though let's hold off on the idea that he'll IMMEDIATELY be the leadoff hitter) or could emerge as the first roadblock to what has been an express elevator up the minor-league ladder. Brantley is a name to watch...maybe not out of the gate in 2009, but certainly as 2009 rolls on as his youth and ceiling look promising.

As long as we're on the topic of youth and ceiling, let's just get the idea that Trevor Crowe is much of a bona-fide prospect out of the way right now. Crowe turned 25 in November of 2008 and has a career minor-league line of .275 BA / .361 OBP / .394 SLG / .755 OPS over 4 seasons. If you think that Ben Francisco is a nice player who has a limited ceiling, but is nicely suited to fill the role of a 4th OF perfectly...well, Crowe's a step down from that these days. He's only played a total of 35 games at AAA and, while he's admittedly battled injuries for much of his minor-league career, he's never put forth that sustained level of success that makes a prospect jump off the page. He's been hot and cold throughout his time on the farm and the only season that saw him spend the whole year at one level resulted in a .694 OPS in Akron in 2007. He could factor into the 25-man roster at some point this year, if only because he's really the only guy on the 40-man roster not named St. Grady who can play CF. He doesn't hit LHP any better than RHP (.808 career MiLB OPS vs. LHP, .739 career MiLB OPS vs. RHP), so he's not even a candidate for much of a platoon role. Instead, he factors in as a stop-gap, not unlike Francisco if a step down from Frisco.

All told, of all the subsets of the Indians' team, the OF actually looks to be the most settled. While questions exist over whether Choo is an All-Star waiting to happen or if The Ben Francisco Treat can continue to hold a spot until the youngsters can slot themselves for a shot at LF, the presence of Sizemore is a calming presence on the OF as a whole. Certainly, 2009 will mark the end of The Looch's time here in Cleveland, but it also may mark the beginning of two careers (those of LaPorta and Brantley) that could stabilize the OF situation even further than the 2012 (say it over and over...2012) that Grady is signed through.