

Battlestar Goodyear

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Tuesday, March 10 2009 7:00 PM -

With 35 games scheduled for the Indians to play this spring and Monday's game against the A's constituting the 12th game this Spring, we're a little more than 1/3 of the way through the spring games. When you're talking about "position battles" for the Indians, there are really only two spots on the roster overtly at play - that of the 5th starter and that of the 7th reliever. In Paul's latest, he takes a detailed look at those two battles and all the competitors.



With 35 games scheduled for the Indians to play this Spring and Monday's game against the A's constituting the 12th game this Spring, we're a little more than 1/3 of the way through the Spring games. That being said, most of the players are still easing their way into the Spring, in terms of working on the team wants them to work on and building strength and endurance, particularly for pitchers. Nevertheless, now might be a good time is there to examine the performances of the main candidates in the "position battles" that need to find an answer in Arizona.

When you're talking about "position battles" for the Indians, there are really only two spots on the roster overtly at play - that of the 5th starter and that of the 7th reliever. Another interesting subplot exists, as to whether the team will go with The Looch out of the gate or if they're more inclined to go with the versatility and speed that Trevor Crowe would offer them as either would be the 4th OF. There is little that Dellucci adds to the team in the outfield and on the basepaths is little to nothing whereas Crowe can play CF (something that Francisco and Choo can "allegedly" do) and provide the athleticism off the bench that

Dellucci cannot. The replacement of Dellucci on the roster, likely with Crowe, is going to happen at some point this season; but the importance of it happening out of Spring Training isn't too high as the playing time for whichever player fills that 4th OF spot is minimal at best because of DeRosa's versatility.

As for the other "position" that is supposedly in play (that of the 13th position player), it's time to acknowledge that Josh Barfield is likely to be the 13th position player on the roster because the Indians are attempting to increase his versatility for the parent club and because sending him back to AAA would only block Luis Valbuena, who seems to have vaulted ahead of Barfield in the 2B food chain.

There's really nothing compelling to monitor on the position player side as the two players that fill those two spots (4th OF and 13th position player) will play sparingly given the versatility of the players ahead of them, so instead let's focus on the two spots that are there for the taking in terms of the pitching staff. Before getting into this, let's first accept the assumption that Reyes and Pavano, if healthy and even mildly effective, are in the rotation because of Reyes being out of options and because of Pavano...well, because the Indians pretty much guaranteed a healthy Pavano a spot in the rotation.

In addition, let's assume that even if Atom Miller gets the go-ahead to start throwing later this week (and I'm not holding my breath), he's too far behind everyone else to make enough of an impression, with enough innings, to legitimately still be considered an option for the 7th spot in the bullpen out of Goodyear.

With all of that being said, we're essentially back to those two aforementioned spots that a number of pitchers are angling for, the 5th starter spot in the rotation and the 7th reliever out of the bullpen. Since everything that we hear from the Indians regarding Spring Training evaluations have to do with "getting better" or "progressing", each individual outing is listed separately, though the whole body of work this Spring for each player follows their name.

5th Starter Candidates

Aaron Laffey - 12.60 ERA, 2.80 WHIP in 5.0 IP with 2 BB and 4 K

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February 26th vs. ARI - 2.0 IP, 2 H, 1 R, 0 ER, 1 BB, 1 K
March 2nd vs. TEX - 2.0 IP, 6 H, 4 R, 4 ER, 0 BB, 1 K
March 7th vs. KC - 1.0 IP, 4 H, 3 R, 3 ER, 1 BB, 2 K

If the 5th spot was Laffey's to lose entering Spring Training, he sure is doing everything he can to lose that spot. Obviously, it's early and Laffey can right his ship to regain the "favorite" tag that so many placed on him as the team arrived in Goodyear, but the results thus far have been very discouraging for a player that simply needed to perform adequately to net the first shot at the 5th spot out of the gate.

Jeremy Sowers - 5.40 ERA, 2.40 WHIP in 5.0 IP with 3 BB and 5 K

February 25th vs. SF - 2.0 IP, 3 H, 1 R, 1 ER, 0 BB, 2 K
March 1st vs. COL - 2.0 IP, 4 H, 1 R, 1 ER, 1 BB, 1 K
March 6th vs. MIL - 1.0 IP, 2 H, 3 R, 1 ER, 2 BB, 1 K

More of the same from the pitcher once lovingly referred to as "The Vandy Dandy", who hasn't looked dandy since 2006 as Sowers continues to get pounded as he attempts to figure out how to become even back-end-of-the-rotation MLB fodder that looks miles away from him right now.

Scott Lewis - 2.25 ERA, 1.50 WHIP in 4.0 IP with 2 BB and 4 K

February 28th vs. OAK - 2.0 IP, 0 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 1 BB, 2 K
March 4th vs. CHC - 2.0 IP, 4 H, 1 R, 1 ER, 1 BB, 2 K

With each start that Laffey and Sowers struggle in while Lewis continues to pitch with moderate effectiveness, the Ohio State product pushes himself more prominently into the discussion of legitimate options for the 5th spot out of Goodyear. He's on the 40-man and experienced some success in his four starts for the Tribe last year, so the 5th starter spot may fall into his lap before the team breaks camp for the regular season.

Zach Jackson - 3.86 ERA, 1.42 WHIP in 7.0 IP with 3 BB and 2 K

February 25th vs. SF - 2.0 IP, 1 H, 1 R, 1 ER, 0 BB, 0 K
March 1st vs. COL - 2.0 IP, 4 H, 1 R, 1 ER, 1 BB, 1 K
March 7th vs. KC - 3.0 IP, 2 H, 1 R, 1 ER, 2 BB, 1 K

While Jackson's spot on the roster may present itself in the bullpen instead of the rotation, he's performed adequately if not spectacularly in his appearances in Arizona. "Adequate, if not spectacular," is about as good as a description as you're going to find for Jackson, who likely isn't going to vault ahead of Laffey, Sowers, Lewis, or Huff for the 5th starter spot but whose versatility and left-handedness may put him squarely in the mix to break camp as the final reliever...but more on that in a bit.

Dave Huff - 9.00 ERA, 2.50 WHIP in 2.0 IP with 1 BB and 1 K

February 27th vs. SD - 2.0 IP, 4 H, 2 R, 2 ER, 1 BB, 1 K

If ever the opportunity is there for Huff to assert himself into the rotation mix, the early struggles of Laffey and (to a lesser extent, Sowers) give him the chance to push his way onto the Opening Day roster with a strong Spring. He's only pitched in one official ST game, with him scheduled to go later this week, and the Indians may be more inclined to have him start the season in AAA to manage his service time; but if Huff comes out over the last few weeks of the Spring and distinguishes himself as the best option out of Goodyear, the Indians should take a long, hard look at heading to Texas for the Season Opener with Huff on the plane.

Kirk Saarloos - 10.80 ERA, 1.95 WHIP in 6.2 IP with 5 BB and 3 K

February 26th vs. ARI - 1.1 IP, 1 H, 2 R, 0 ER, 1 BB, 0 K

March 1st vs. COL - 1.0 IP, 1 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 0 BB, 0 K

March 3rd vs. KC - 1.1 IP, 4 H, 6 R, 5 ER, 2 BB, 2 K

March 7th vs. OAK - 3.0 IP, 2 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 2 BB, 1 K

Saarloos, who pitched very well against his former mates on Saturday, doesn't have a shot of making the rotation. While his name is fun to say and the pair of double vowels is fun to see on the back of a jersey, so much would have to happen for Saarloos to jump ahead of all of the other names listed above, he figures to represent a depth option if needed in Columbus.

So, 1/3 of the way through Spring Training games, where does the race for the 5th spot stand? It's probably still Laffey's to lose, though Lewis and Huff could make some headway on the spot if either separates himself from the pack while Laffey and Sowers continue to struggle. Jackson could, in theory, still pitch his way into the rotation; but at this point, the more likely avenue for him onto the

25-man roster is in the bullpen.

As a final addendum to the first look at the 5th starter "position battle", here are the 2008 Spring Training numbers from the pitcher that emerged "victorious" in last year's battle for the 5th spot:

8.31 ERA, 2.42 WHIP in 8.2 IP with 4 BB and 5 K

That's the 2008 Winter Haven line for one Clifton Phifer Lee, Mr. Cy Young.

Spring Training stats, meet your grain of salt...

Bullpen

Ed Mujica - 19.64 ERA, 2.73 WHIP in 3.2 IP with 1 BB and 1 K

February 25th vs. SF - 1.0 IP, 3 H, 4 R, 4 ER, 1 BB, 0 K

February 28th vs. OAK - 1.0 IP, 2 H, 1 R, 1 ER, 0 BB, 0 K

March 3rd vs. KC - 1.2 IP, 4 H, 3 R, 3 ER, 0 BB, 1 K

With Miller realistically out of the mix, one could make the argument that the 7th spot is Mujica's to lose because he's out of options; but with each appearance, the loss of that 7th spot for him grows more likely. Unless something drastically changes with Mujica, it's highly unlikely that he makes the team out of Goodyear and only a little less likely that a team would claim him off of waivers, given his MLB body of work and his performance this Spring. See you in Columbus, Eddie!

John Meloan - 9.00 ERA, 1.67 WHIP in 3.0 IP with 2 BB and 2 K

February 27th vs. SD - 1.0 IP, 0 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 1 BB, 0 K

March 2nd vs. TEX - 1.0 IP, 0 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 0 BB, 1 K

March 8th vs. OAK - 1.0 IP, 3 H, 3 R, 3 ER, 1 BB, 1 K

The other hard-throwing RHP, besides Miller, that the Indians have high hopes for in the bullpen, Meloan has pitched decently in his few appearances and is still making the transition back to the bullpen after an ill-fated attempt by the Dodgers to make him a starter out of the gate in 2008. Because of that transition, and because the Indians think too highly of Meloan's future in the bullpen to bury him in that 7th spot (where the frequency of appearances will be sporadic, at best), it's

likely that "Mayday" Meloan will be sent out to AAA to get back into the rhythm of being a reliever and to be at the ready when (not if) a reliever is needed for the parent club.

Juan Salas - 0.00 ERA, 1.00 WHIP in 3.0 IP with 2 BB and 1 K

March 2nd vs. TEX - 1.0 IP, 1 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 0 BB, 1 K

March 4th vs. CHC - 1.0 IP, 0 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 0 BB, 0 K

March 7th vs. KC - 1.0 IP, 0 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 2 BB, 0 K

An intriguing late addition to the mix, Johnny Living Rooms (["Salas" is "Living Rooms" in Spanish](#)

) could be a wild card in this bullpen mix as the Indians can use him infrequently as an innings-eater without worrying too much about his development as a reliever (the way that they would about Meloan or Sipp) and move him up and down between Columbus and Cleveland because of his one remaining option. By most accounts, he has a live arm and might simply be a placeholder out of Goodyear until a better option reveals itself from the mix that figures to start the season in Columbus.

Zach Jackson - 3.86 ERA, 1.42 WHIP in 7.0 IP with 3 BB and 2 K

February 25th vs. SF - 2.0 IP, 1 H, 1 R, 1 ER, 0 BB, 0 K

March 1st vs. COL - 2.0 IP, 4 H, 1 R, 1 ER, 1 BB, 1 K

March 7th vs. KC - 3.0 IP, 2 H, 1 R, 1 ER, 2 BB, 1 K

Back when some (OK...me) thought that Jackson was out of options, his inclusion on the 25-man roster as a long man made sense as he's unlikely to ever represent much more than a depth option in the rotation and he has the versatility to be the long man/spot starter that is missing in the bullpen. Now, with Miller (the prohibitive "favorite" when camp started) not likely to be an option, doesn't that same logic hold for the Zach Attack to break camp with the parent club? His purpose would be to absorb innings and serve as a multi-inning option for the first month of the season while the relievers in Cleveland and Columbus slot themselves with performance with the Indians able to use his last remaining option to shuffle some arms back and forth until the right mix is found.

Rich Rundles - 18.00 ERA, 2.75 WHIP in 4.0 IP with 2 BB and 5 K

February 26th vs. ARI - 1.0 IP, 2 H, 2 R, 1 ER, 0 BB, 1 K
March 1st vs. COL - 1.0 IP, 2 H, 2 R, 2 ER, 0 BB, 2 K
March 3rd vs. KC - 1.0 IP, 1 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 0 BB, 1 K
March 6th vs. MIL - 0.1 IP, 0 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 0 BB, 0 K
March 8th vs. OAK - 0.2 IP, 4 H, 5 R, 5 ER, 2 BB, 1 K

Rundles' numbers are misleading this Spring (even more so than those of the others with these painfully small sample sizes) as Rundles has been facing all comers for the most part this Spring instead of just facing LH hitters, which is the LOOGY role that he would find himself in for the Indians. Spring Training stats are hard enough to find and compile, so don't expect me to know what Rundles' splits look like this Spring. Just know that if the decision is made to carry a LH-specialist in the bullpen (because Raffy Perez can't be pigeonholed as one), Rundles will be that 7th reliever to break camp with the team.

Tony Sipp - 4.50 ERA, 0.50 WHIP in 2.0 IP with 0 BB and 3 K

March 3rd vs. KC - 1.0 IP, 0 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 0 BB, 1 K
March 7th vs. KC - 1.0 IP, 1 H, 1 R, 1 ER, 0 BB, 2 K

"If the decision is made to carry a LH-specialist in the bullpen...Rundles will be that 7th reliever to break camp with the team - what? What about Tony Sipp?"...am I hearing that right? Yes, as talented as Sipp is and for as much as I think he's going to play a role in this bullpen this year, the logic of breaking camp with Sipp as the LOOGY is counter-productive. Sipp is still not far removed from serious injury and, when healthy, has displayed the ability (like Perez) to thrive against both LH and RH hitters. So why would the Indians keep him on the roster as the LOOGY, when a larger role will exist for him later in the season as attrition and injury force this bullpen to evolve? Like Meloan, Sipp should start the year in Columbus and attempt to slot himself as the first reliever called up when reinforcements are needed in a more important role in the bullpen.

Greg Aquino - 3.00 ERA, 1.33 WHIP in 3.0 IP with 1 BB and 4 K

February 27th vs. SD - 1.0 IP, 2 H, 1 R, 1 ER, 0 BB, 2 K
March 2nd vs. TEX - 1.0 IP, 0 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 0 BB, 1 K
March 7th vs. KC - 1.0 IP, 1 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 1 BB, 1 K

Probably one of the more intriguing of the NRI's, Aquino is still relatively young

(31) and has had moderate success in MLB recently (106 ERA+ in 2006 over 42 games with the D-Backs). That being said, the likelihood of Aquino forcing his way onto the 40-man roster, much less the 25-man, would take some pretty dominant outings from Aquino and more than a total collapse from the pitchers listed above (all of whom are on the 40-man) for that to happen.

Vinnie Chulk - 3.38 ERA, 0.75 WHIP in 8.0 IP with 2 BB and 6 K

February 25th vs. SF - 2.0 IP, 3 H, 3 R, 3 ER, 0 BB, 1 K

March 1st vs. COL - 1.0 IP, 0 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 1 BB, 1 K

March 3rd vs. KC - 1.0 IP, 0 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 0 BB, 1 K

March 6th vs. MIL - 2.0 IP, 0 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 1 BB, 0 K

March 9th vs. CHI - 2.0 IP, 1 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 0 BB, 3 K

If Aquino's age and recent performance intrigue, Chulk's age (also 31) and recent performance (124 ERA+ in 2007 over 57 games with the Giants) should slot him ahead of Aquino in terms of legitimate options for that 7th spot. But, like with Aquino, Chulk would have to impress ALL of the right people (though his Spring performance thus far is a good start) for Chulk to be a truly legitimate option.

Matt Herges - 7.20 ERA, 1.80 WHIP in 5.0 IP with 3 BB and 7 K

February 25th vs. SF - 1.0 IP, 0 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 0 BB, 2 K

February 27th vs. SD - 1.0 IP, 2 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 0 BB, 0 K

March 2nd vs. TEX - 1.0 IP, 0 H, 1 R, 0 ER, 2 BB, 1 K

March 6th vs. MIL - 1.0 IP, 4 H, 4 R, 4 ER, 1 BB, 1 K

March 9th vs. CHI - 1.0 IP, 0 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 0 BB, 3 K

Nearly 39, Herges has the best track record in MLB of any pitcher on this list as he's averaged nearly 58 appearances over the last nine (yes, nine) seasons and was a key component of the Rockies' bullpen in their 2007 playoff push. This Spring, he's had one very bad appearance, three excellent appearances, and one marginal one to put himself probably at or near the top of the NRI ladder...if such a ladder exists. Herges would have to make an impression on a group of guys not seen since Helen of Troy to make this team out of Goodyear and it's more likely that he heads off to Columbus (assuming he accepts the invitation) in an attempt to pitch his way back into MLB relevance.

Jack Cassel - 9.39 ERA, 1.70 WHIP in 7.2 IP with 0 BB and 3 K

February 26th vs. ARI - 1.2 IP, 7 H, 4 R, 4 ER, 0 BB, 1 K

March 1st vs. COL - 1.0 IP, 1 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 0 BB, 0 K

March 3rd vs. KC - 2.0 IP, 1 H, 0 R, 0 ER, 0 BB, 1 K

March 7th vs. KC - 2.0 IP, 4 H, 4 R, 4 ER, 0 BB, 1 K

The best thing that can be said about Cassel is that his brother is the new QB of the Chiefs. Other than that mention, this will be the last time that you'll see Jack Cassel's name in this space.

Again, now that we are 1/3 of the way through the Spring Training games, have yet to see an Atom Miller appearance, and look to be back where we were before Miller started buzz-sawing through hitters in the Dominican Republic, what does the competition for that 7th spot in the bullpen look like? To me, it really depends what the Indians are looking for out of that spot as Zach Jackson provides the innings and versatility of a long man/spot starter (which is lacking in the bullpen as presently constructed) while Rich Rundles would perform the role of a LOOGY (which, again, is lacking in the relievers slated #1 through #6 in the current Tribe bullpen). If the Indians are looking for a reliever whose development won't suffer from the infrequency of use in that 7th spot that they can still shuttle back and forth between Cleveland and Columbus, Juan Salas fits that bill.

As for the two most exciting names on this list, the wisdom of breaking camp with either Meloan or Sipp seems counterproductive as both need to continue to become comfortable as relievers, in terms of routine and approach and starting both in Columbus makes more sense to have either ready to contribute in more significant situations at some point later in the season. Beyond those 40-man options, and pertaining to the veteran NRI's, the likelihood of any of them realistically breaking camp with the team decreases significantly with each decent outing by players already on the 40-man roster.

Still lots of baseball left to play under the Arizona sun, but the wheat is starting to separate itself from the chaff as the Indians look to fill out the back end of the rotation and the bullpen from the arms that will continue to labor in the desert heat.