

2009 Columbus Clippers Preview

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Sunday, April 12 2009 7:00 PM -

The 2009 season is the Indians inaugural season with Columbus as their Triple-A affiliate, and boy did the Indians set Columbus up with one doozy of a roster. The lineup is loaded with young hitting prospects, and the pitching staff has a mixture of major league veterans and high upside prospects. Nine of the Indians Top 20 prospects - per my list - are on the Columbus roster, and that doesn't even include Scott Lewis and Trevor Crowe, two players who could be on the squad at some point this season. Tony Lastoria previews the 2009 Clippers.



It is a marriage made in heaven.

A marriage that saw the Cleveland Indians and Columbus Clippers come together last September to hammer out a deal to move the Indians Triple-A operation out of Buffalo, NY into the Indians home state, and state capital to boot. Football may be king in Cleveland and Columbus, but now they also share another common bond:

Indians fever.

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Indians Top 20 prospects -

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- are on the Columbus roster, and that doesn't even include Scott Lewis and Trevor Crowe, two players who could be on the squad at some point this season.

The strength of the team will be the offense, which is lead by the power and speed combo of Matt LaPorta and Michael Brantley, two players the Indians acquired last season in the C.C. Sabathia trade with the Brewers. Offseason acquisition second baseman Luis Valbuena as well as regular farmhands such as first baseman Jordan Brown, catcher Chris Gimenez, and

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third baseman Wes Hodges highlight an impressive collection of hitting talent on the Columbus roster.

On the pitching front there is a lot of major league depth up and down the rotation and bullpen, which has been a recurring theme with the Indians it seems every year in Triple-A. However, there are some good high upside pitchers to watch this year, namely lefties David Huff and Tony Sipp along with righty John Meloan.

The Clippers are loaded with talent, and should be an exciting team to follow as they make their maiden voyage with the Indians this season as their Triple-A affiliate. After opening on the road for the first nine games, the Clippers will return to Columbus for Opening Day on Saturday April 18th for what should be one spectacular event.

Minor League Affiliates

Columbus Clippers (AAA)
Akron Aeros (AA)
Kinston Indians (High A)
Lake County Captains (Low A)
Mahoning Valley Scrappers (Short Season A)
Arizona Indians (Rookie)

Coaching Staff

Manager: Torey Lovullo
4th season as manager of Indians Triple-A team, 8th season in Indians organization

Hitting Coach: Jon Nunnally
1st season as Columbus hitting coach, 3rd season in Indians organization

Pitching Coach: Scott Radinsky
3rd season as Indians' Triple-A pitching coach, 6th season in Indians organization

Starting Rotation

Jack Cassel (RHP), David Huff (LHP), Aaron Laffey (LHP), Kirk Saarloos (RHP), Jeremy Sowers (LHP)

The starting rotation is a mixture of veteran depth with Saarloos and Cassel (and likely soon to be Tomo Ohka), some young major league proven talent in Laffey and Sowers, and a high upside prospect in Huff. With the lefty Scott Lewis going on the disabled list for the Indians over the weekend, Laffey will get the call to Cleveland to fill the vacated starting spot.

When this happens, it is expected that Ohka will slide into the rotation.

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Huff is the starter to pay the most attention to here as he has the most upside and likely will have the biggest impact with the Indians this season. He is not expected to be in Columbus long, and when he does get to Cleveland he may never come back.

He is one of the top left-handed starters in the minors, and profiles to be a good middle of the rotation starter in the big leagues, and could be what the doctor ordered for the Indians this year to find someone to slide into the rotation and provide some consistency and effectiveness.

He throws a fastball, curveball, slider and changeup, with the fastball velocity consistently clocking in at 90-93 MPH and has topped out as high as 94 MPH.

He is a strike-thrower and has excellent command of all his pitches, and has the best fastball command in the entire Indians system.

His changeup is his money pitch and a legitimate weapon against lefties and righties.

Laffey is still very young (8 months younger than Huff), yet he already has played in parts of two seasons with the Indians. He has enjoyed some success at the big league level, particularly when healthy he has been very good.

His stay in Columbus was short, as he will be the starter called up to Cleveland to fill in for the injured Lewis, and as long as he is healthy he could be back to his old consistent self and provide a boost to the Cleveland rotation.

He is one of the most confident pitchers in the system, as he trusts his stuff and goes right after hitters. His 87-88 MPH fastball is not overpowering, but it he has excellent command of it and it has excellent movement with good sink, and he throws a good slurvy breaking ball and changeup.

Sowers breezed through three levels of the Indians system in his professional debut in 2005, then had an exciting 2006 season where he went 9-1 with a 1.39 ERA in 15 starts at Triple-A Buffalo and was called up to Cleveland midseason and went 7-4 with a 3.57 ERA in 14 starts. Ever since then, however, Sowers has almost seemed to be in regression where he went 1-6 with a 6.42 ERA in 13 starts for Cleveland in 2007 and went 4-9 with a 5.58 ERA in 22 starts for Cleveland in 2008.

He has always never been one to miss many bats, so has had to rely on command and control as his best strength.

While he does not walk very many hitters, he has had a problem throwing quality strikes and gives up too many hits and home runs.

He has fallen on the pecking order, and is just major league depth at this point, though he does still have the talent and youth on his side (he is only 26) to turn things around.

This may be his last chance to do it with Cleveland this year since he is out of options after this season.

Cassel is a career minor leaguer as this will be his 9th season in the minors (47-54, 4.07 ERA,

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291 games). He has played in parts of two seasons in the big leagues (2007 and 2008) pitching in a total of 15 games (2-2, 4.92 ERA).

His fastball sits 91-93 MPH, and he complements it with a curveball and changeup.

Saarloos is a veteran starter who has played parts of seven seasons at the big league level, having experienced some good success in three of the seasons (2003, 2005, 2006).

He is versatile where he could really start or relieve, and is a groundball pitcher.

His sinker is his best pitch, and he changes speeds well.

Bullpen

Greg Aquino (RHP), Vinnie Chulk (RHP), Matt Herges (RHP), John Meloan (RHP), Tomo Ohka (RHP), Rich Rundles (LHP), Tony Sipp (LHP)

Like with the rotation, the bullpen is made up of a mixture of career minor league depth and legit high profile bullpen prospects. One of the exciting arms for Indians fans to get excited about in the bullpen is right-hander John Meloan.

Meloan throws a fastball that tops out around 94-95 MPH, and he complements it with a nasty slider that is an out pitch. He also throws a cutter, changeup and curveball which are all good pitches, but are more show-me pitches to set up his fastball and slider.

He is a competitor on the mound with great makeup, and should factor into the Cleveland bullpen situation at some point this season.

The other exciting arm in the Columbus bullpen to watch is left-hander Tony Sipp. He is a diamond in the rough the Indians unearthed in the 45

th round of the 2004 Draft out of Clemson University who is now one of the top left-handed relief prospects in baseball.

He is a year and a half removed from Tommy John surgery, and is considered 100% healthy and without restriction on the mound.

He is a power-armed pitcher who has an impressive three-pitch arsenal. His stuff is big-time, fronted by a plus fastball and plus-plus slider that both grade out as out pitches at the major league level. His fastball has good movement and consistently sits in the 91-94 MPH range, although his quick arm action and excellent deception makes it look a lot faster.

Like Meloan, he is another reliever who could factor into Cleveland's bullpen picture very quickly this season.

Lefty Rich Rundles is a guy who has some value as a left-on-left specialist for the Indians, and could see some time in Cleveland this year. His fastball sits around 87-91 MPH, and he throws

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an above average curveball and a changeup that grade out as average.

When he came to the Indians, his arm slot was up high, but they worked on converting his arm slot to more of a sidearm so he would be even tougher on left-handed hitters. He has taken to it unbelievably well, which should only help him being productive to now dominant against left-handed hitters.

The rest of the bullpen is filled with career minor league arms or former major league players looking to resurrect their careers. Right-hander Tomo Ohka had a few decent seasons in the majors, but since 2005 has been irrelevant. He is nothing more than veteran rotation depth, and now that Laffey is on his way to Cleveland, he should move to the rotation.

Right-hander Greg Aquino is looking to resurrect a once promising baseball career.

He is a former Top 10 prospect with the Diamondbacks just four years ago, but his star faded fast due to injuries and performance.

The 39-year old Herges has lots of experience in the minors and big leagues, but is just more depth the Indians are storing at Triple-A.

Righty Vinnie Chulk was recently called up to Cleveland, and lefty Ryan Edell was called up from Akron to replace him.

Catchers

Chris Gimenez (C), Wyatt Torgas (C)

The Indians have two viable backup options to turn to in Columbus this season if one of Victor Martinez or Kelly Shoppach were to get hurt for any lengthy period of time. Torgas would probably be the first one called up to fill a pure catching need since he is the superior defensive catcher to Gimenez, and would fill in best as the backup catcher playing once or twice a week.

He is an excellent defensive catcher that can control a running game.

He has a natural knack for calling a game, is a natural leader, loves to take charge of the pitching staff, and has a lot of pride as a catcher.

He has some pop at the plate, though has largely been an inconsistent hitter at the plate, which is something he is working on.

Clearly, his biggest strengths are his defense and outstanding makeup.

Gimenez will be more of the backup catcher in Columbus, but also the super utility player playing virtually everywhere on the diamond. On any given night he could be in left field, right field, third base, first base or catcher. While

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Toregas will be the first pure catcher the Indians look to call up, Gimenez could be the first utility and bench option the Indians pluck out of Columbus this year.

He is a physically imposing specimen, and with his chiseled physique arguably may be the strongest player in the Indians system.

He has very good power, and is one of the most patient hitters in the system.

He also has the best makeup of any player in the system, and may be the hardest working individual as well.

While he is still learning the nuances of catching, he has developed into a solid receiver and could even potentially be a starter there someday in the big leagues.

Infielders

Michael Aubrey (1B), Jordan Brown (1B), Andy Cannizaro (INF), Wes Hodges (3B), Andy Marte (1B/3B), Luis Valbuena (2B), Wilson Valdez (INF)

The Columbus infield has the makings of a Triple-A All Star team. Valbuena headlines the infield as he is probably the most major league ready player of the bunch who also can provide the greatest impact to the Indians this season.

The Indians picked up Valbuena in an offseason trade that sent outfielder Franklin Gutierrez to Seattle.

He has a good approach at the plate, and has demonstrated good bat-to-ball ability with a quick bat with a nice line-drive stroke.

He is not intimidated by anyone when he steps into the box and profiles as a top of the order hitter because of his ability to work counts, never give away an at bat, take walks, make consistent contact and showcase decent speed.

He has worked hard to become a fringe above-average defensive second baseman that makes all the routine plays while displaying very good range, a strong arm, and the ability to make consistent, accurate throws.

Hodges will likely be in the Columbus lineup all season, further developing his offensive approach, but mostly fine-tuning his defense which has been the subject of a lot of negative press by national pundits this past offseason. As a defender, he is rough around the edges at third base. He has good hands and a strong arm, but has displayed questionable range and ability to come in on groundballs.

He sort of regressed some at third base last year at Double-A Akron, but the feeling by those in the game is he can rebound and become solid defensively and the arm is good enough to handle the position.

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He is a very disciplined hitter with great bat-to-ball ability, and has a nice, short line drive stroke that allows him to cover the whole plate with good power potential to all fields.

His best asset without a doubt is his offense, and he should be a key contributor to the middle of the Clippers lineup all season.

Brown comes into this season with somewhat of a chip on his shoulder. After being ranked as one of the Indians top five prospects in nearly every publication going into 2008, this year he fell considerably on just about every list as many seemed to abandon him after a subpar 2008 campaign at Triple-A Buffalo where he hit .281 with 7 HR, 51 RBI, and a .754 OPS.

Brown struggled with a left knee problem almost all of last season, which contributed to most of his problems.

Nonetheless, he is pure hitter with incredible hand-eye coordination and a passion for hitting.

He is a persistent hitter who is a tough out and one of the best hitters in minor league baseball at bat-to-ball ability and making hard, consistent contact.

He has good gap power and piles up doubles, and his bat profiles well in the majors where he projects to be a high average hitter with the ability to hit 15-20 HR a year.

He came into the system as a below average first baseman, but has become a good defensive first baseman which is a testament to his strong work ethic and athleticism.

Aubrey is probably in his swan season with the Indians, as after this season he will be a minor league free agent and will likely sign elsewhere where he has a better chance to get back to the big leagues. When healthy, Aubrey is a superior defender and good hitter with gap power, but numerous leg and back injuries over his 6-year career have deteriorated his skills to where he is about 75-80% of the player he once was. Marte is also on borrowed time with the Indians, and likely will sign elsewhere after the season as a minor league free agent unless he is 40-man rostered for some ungodly reason.

He has always had loads of potential and was once considered to have an impact bat, but has never realized it and seems to have plateaued as a career 4A player.

Cannizaro and Valdez will split duties at shortstop, and both can also fill in at second and third base, while Valdez can play a little outfield.

Outfielders

Michael Brantley (OF), Stephen Head (OF), Matt LaPorta (OF)

This could be the strength of the team as the two best players, Brantley and LaPorta, are both in the outfield for the Clippers. LaPorta is the big bopper of the bunch, and gets all the

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headlines and rightfully so. He has impact potential as a middle-of-the-lineup run producer in the big leagues with his plus-plus power to all fields, and he is big and strong with the ability to handle more advanced pitching right now.

He also has an advanced approach at the plate with good pitch recognition skills and patience to wait for his pitch to hit or take a walk.

He is also an excellent teammate and exhibits great makeup and work ethic.

He is a converted outfielder, and there is the possibility down the line he may return to his more natural position of first base.

That said, he has improved dramatically as a defender in the outfield to where he is not a solid-average defender out there.

He may not be in Columbus for long, as a fast start by LaPorta combined with a need for offense in left field for the Indians could result in a callup to Cleveland as early as mid-May, if not sooner.

Brantley is the other part of this dynamic duo; however, while LaPorta uses thunder in his bat to impact a game, Brantley uses the lightning in his legs to impact it. He is a gifted runner with plus speed, and is just about everything you want out of a leadoff hitter.

He is one of the best players in the minors at making consistent contact and bringing a solid plan to every at bat by being patient at the plate, making consistent contact, hitting for average, and getting on base.

At just 21-years of age, his bat-to-ball ability is phenomenal and he has displayed an elite level approach at the plate striking out just 27 times in 420 at bats this past season ranking second in the entire minor leagues with a strikeout per plate appearance ratio of 17.7 (27 K in 479 PA).

His best comp may be as a Kenny Lofton type offensive player, a hitter who can steal 30-40 bases and can pound the gaps and hit the occasional home run and pile up 40-50 extra base hits in a season.

He is also versatile enough where he can play all three outfield positions, and he even played some first base in the Brewers organization last year.

He is an above average defender in the outfield with good range and an average arm.

Head is overshadowed somewhat because of the presence of Brantley and LaPorta, but he is also a very good player in his own right. With Trevor Crowe now getting a chance in Cleveland as the fourth outfielder, Head has a chance to get a lot of playing time in the outfield and establish himself as good outfield depth for the Indians to potentially use sometime this season if the need arises.

He has good gap power and the ball really jumps off of his bat. He is an outstanding defensive first baseman, and is the best in

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the system at the position defensively where he profiles as a good major league defensive first baseman. The Indians recently moved him to right field in the middle of the 2007 season to create more versatility for him and take advantage of his athleticism, and while he has split time in the outfield and first base, he now projects as a good outfielder as well.