

Tomahawks On The Way Up From The Cellar

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Friday, April 24 2009 7:00 PM -

Well, the Indians finally won a series, taking the rubber match against the Royals on Thursday night. With that, Paulie says it's time for a little optimism. He looks at the turnaround of the Tribe's starting rotation, the possibility of Matt LaPorta being called up in the next few weeks, the return of David Dellucci actually helping, and the impressive arrival of Tony Sipp.



As the Tribe finally wins a series against the AL Central leading (well, kind of) KC Royals, perhaps now would be a good time to release some Tomahawks as 80 degree weather is on the way to the North Coast, as are the first rung to climb on that AL Central ladder to the top...the 4th place Minnesota Twins.

And with that optimism setting the tone, release away:

After another good outing by Ant Reyes Thursday, the Indians' starters look as if they finally may have turned the corner...and not a moment too soon.

Want an indication of how important the turnaround in the Indians' rotation has been?

First 8 outings (Team's Record: 1-7)

37 1/3 IP, 42 ER, 53 H, 18 BB, 31 K

10.12 ERA, 1.90 WHIP in 8 games with an average of approximately 4 2/3 IP per start

Second 8 outings (Team's Record: 5-3)

59 1/3 IP, 16 ER, 45 H, 22 BB, 28 K

2.42 ERA, 1.13 WHIP in 8 games with an average of approximately 7 1/3 IP per start

Obviously, the bullpen remains a concern and the struggles of ¡Fausto! (10 BB to 8 K in 14 IP) bear serious watching, but the rotation has shown signs of stability after what can charitably be described as a train wreck of a start to the season. And that...well, that's an awfully good thing to see finally rectify itself.

On the topic of the starting five, it's going to be interesting to see what happens in the rotation when Scotty Lewis is ready to return from his DL stint as his spot was filled by Aaron Laffey, who has put together two excellent starts thus far, sporting the best ERA on the team for anybody not named Tony Sipp and being the first starter to throw a pitch in the 7th inning (much less finish the 7th) on Tuesday.

Given the volatile nature of the rotation to this point (although things certainly feel more settled as evidenced above), I can't see how the Indians stand by their previous stance that SLewis will simply be handed his spot in the rotation once he's healthy. To date, Laffey has been the Indians' most consistent starter (yes, I know it is just two starts) and maybe I'm colored by my opinion that he's probably the 3rd best starter in the organization right now in terms of MLB readiness and repertoire, but the idea of sending him down to Columbus after his appearances for the parent club to call up Scott Lewis doesn't hold any water.

A much more palatable arrangement would be to send SLewis back to the rotation in Columbus once he's healthy (call them "rehab starts"...I don't care)

to allow him to ease himself back into the mix and wait for the Indians' rotation to have that glaring need (via injury or ineffectiveness) that is likely to come down the pike.

Realizing fully that the offense has not been this team's problem (although the last two days have shades of Opening Day in Texas), let's take a quick look at the OF on the team not named Grady and Big League:

The Ben Francisco Treat

.250 BA / .327 OBP / .409 SLG / .736 OPS with 1 HR and 4 RBI in 44 AB

Trevor Crowe

.179 BA / .258 OBP / .214 SLG / .472 OPS with 0 HR and 4 RBI in 28 AB

Yes, it's only 15 games and real evaluations of players still seem awfully premature, but both of these guys have always looked a lot like 4th OF in terms of their versatility in the field and their shortcomings at the plate. The Frisco Kid continues to evoke a feeling of "meh" and Crowe's MiLB mediocrity has translated like you think it would have to MLB...which is to say, not well.

Look, these two are both players who fill a role on a team (and while it may seem like it is wildly premature to say this), it's just that it shouldn't be a starting role. But...but...but...Francisco thrived in his debut month last year and Crowe just needs some time to adjust to MLB.

Fine, I'll give you that Frisco had a nice debut and maybe Crowe needs to adjust to MLB, but neither of them are going to ever be any more than what they look like...4th OF.

If you don't believe me, check out their career MiLB stats:

Frisco

.291 BA / .356 OBP / .459 SLG / .815 OPS

Solid? Sure...but nothing that indicates that the now-27-year-old has that one skill that sets him apart, other than consistently being average.

Crowe

.275 BA / .361 OBP / .394 SLG / .755 OPS

For a now-25-year-old whose OPS in the minors, by year, has been .653, .798, .694, .867, show me where the evidence is that he's suddenly going to break this cycle of being an average hitter.

I'm not trying to discount either of these guys as MLB players as Frisco has some pop in his bat, but he's a defensive liability without hitting enough to overcome that while Crowe has speed and is a solid defender with versatility, but he's a slap hitter without a lot of power or outstanding on-base ability.

No, the reason this is relevant is that for the first time in a long time, measured mediocrity is not the ceiling the Indians are shooting for in LF. For the first time in a VERY long time, the Indians have a legitimate corner OF prospect on the cusp of the Majors, practically banging down the door in Columbus for someone to open it for him.

The Indians have Matt LaPorta.

Matt LaPorta, he of the .285 BA / .382 OBP / .577 SLG / .958 OPS career minor league line, is positively crushing AAA pitching.

How badly is LaPorta trying to hit his way off the Clippers?

.362 BA / .423 OBP / .660 SLG / 1.083 OPS with 3 2B, 1 3B, 3 HR and 9 RBI in 31 AB

And here's where the alleged conundrum comes in - is the move really that necessary when the offense is playing as well as it is? It seems that the usage patterns for particular players are working as a whole, so wouldn't this just be a move to make a move?

I suppose that's valid on some level, but adding a guy like LaPorta (especially if he's taking AB away from Frisco and Crowe) immediately improves an already very good lineup, allowing the Indians to put one guy in LF and being able to keep

a guy like Crowe around for defensive purposes and pinch-running appearances ONLY (this cannot be stressed enough), thus strengthening the bench that already looks too thin in terms of versatility.

When the Indians netted LaPorta from the Brewers, he was purported to have a "near MLB-ready bat" and his performance in Columbus (yes, it's only 13 games) has done nothing to dispel that notion. If the Indians were waiting to see how LaPorta reacted to his first taste of AAA pitching after scuffling down the stretch in AA after the CC deal, I'm pretty sure that they have their answer. The 24-year-old is proving that AAA is beneath him, just as he proved that AA was beneath him last year.

Is it too early?

For some perspective on early season call-ups, Evan Longoria got called up on April 12th in 2008, in time for the Rays' 11th game of the season and Ryan Braun got called up on May 25th in 2007, in time for the Brew Crew's 48th game of the season.

With the players ahead of LaPorta struggling (or at least doing their best imitation of a Replacement Level Player) and LaPorta obviously seeing the ball well in AAA, what reason is there not to bring him up soon?

How soon?

If I were a betting man, I'd put LaPorta's ETA somewhere between those two dates from Longoria and Braun, which would put him in a Tribe uniform during the first week of May...or in about two weeks.

Yeah, he's that impressive and the reasons to keep him there are get less compelling with each passing AB by Ben Francisco and Trevor Crowe for the Tribe and each AB by LaPorta in Columbus.

As a quick aside here, there's been a fair amount of wailing and gnashing of teeth over what the Indians do with The Looch when he completes his rehab assignment in Columbus. I think that the argument goes, "how could they

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call him up...he's terrible...he's a waste of money...they should just eat his contract and cut him..."

Most of which I think have quite a bit of merit, but let's look at this rationally:

Dellucci is LH...

Nobody on the Indians' bench is LH, unless you count the switch-hitting Crowe...

Most of the Indians that you would pinch-hit for are also RH...

Thus, the Indians need a LH option on their bench.

And as detestable as the idea may be, The Looch would be that LH option off the bench. Am I saying that he's a GOOD LH option off of the bench?

No, but at least he's LH and, frankly, on a team carrying too many pitchers in the bullpen and too many RH non-hitters on the bench, he can't be much worse than the other pinch-hitting options.

OK, he can be worse, but maybe he can't be MUCH worse...at least he wouldn't get used that much.

Speaking of usage patterns, anyone notice that Trevor Crowe has more AB than Kelly Shoppach?

Sure, the "platoon" of Shoppach and Garko around Victor is supposed to depend on the pitcher and the match-up, but isn't this the same Kelly Show Pack who posted the 10th best OPS in the AL from June 1st to the end of the year?

It's not as if he's struggling wildly (.799 OPS) or that he's a defensive liability, so the answer as to why he's not playing more must have something to do with the fact that the players who ostensibly block Kelly from every day playing time (Victor and, to a lesser degree, Garko...Polo) are both off to hot starts.

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That is not a problem for Crowe in LF.

Who else has their Tony Sipp jersey en route?

Watching him go 1-2-3 in his appearance in relief of C.P. Lee on Wednesday (answering questions quickly as to how he'll be used) was such an oasis in the desert of failure that is the bullpen that I'm irrationally enthusiastic about Sipp.

In fact, I'm already lining up potential endorsement deals for him...how about as a pitchman for Great Lakes Brewing Company's Commodore Perry beer?

You know the one...it says ["Don't Give Up the Sip" on the label](#) .

We all remember so fondly [another young Indians' reliever who became a pitchman for a local establishment serving up the cold ones](#) , so why not Sipp and GLBC?

I know...it's only one appearance.

Fine...I'll hold off on the irrational exuberance...while WEARING my new Tony Sipp jersey and drinking my Commodore Perry!

Did you notice the Royals institute "The Shift" for Victor when he was batting LH against their RHP? You know the one...the one that everyone uses for Hafner, Thome, and Big Papi that moves the infield to the right side of 2B. While the wisdom of that strategy is questionable at best, given Victor's ability to do...well, whatever he wants with a bat this year, are we just waiting for the time when "The Shift" gets employed on Grady and Choo?

According to my handy-dandy [IA2K9](#) , both Grady and Choo hit over 50% of the balls they struck last year to the right side of the field and given what each has done in the early going, I wouldn't be surprised if some sort of defensive

adjustments were made for the erstwhile MVP and for The BLC

On this week's edition of "Smoke Signals", [Tony Lastoria and I were fortunate enough to be joined by Indians.com beat writer Anthony Castrovince](#), who spoke at length about the life of a beat reporter and his experience in dealing with the Indians' brass and their tendency to read from the same script, as well as taking us into what it was like to be in Arizona for ALL of Spring Training.

The interview (which hit on the bullpen, Lewis over Laffey in Goodyear, Carmona, among other topics) was an interesting look into the opinions of someone who sees this team every day, talks to this team every day, and remains attached to his BlackBerry everyday to stay on top of Indians information for you.

If you're not getting your Indians news from AC at [The Official Site](#) or at [CastroTurf](#) ...well, frankly that's your loss because once you start reading him, every other Mainstream Media news source that you used to rely upon for you Indians' fix (outside of Terry Pluto) just fades into oblivion.

Finally, if you're going to be anywhere around Lakewood on Saturday (or just want to go to a fun party), TheClevelandFan.com is throwing a Draft Day Party at The Winking Lizard. Yours truly will be there, attempting to do the whole "Beers of The World" tour in one night.

No, I'm just kidding...but it is going to be a blast to pore over the minutia that is the NFL Draft Day and to convince ourselves that this...THIS...is the year that the Browns turn it all around and this...THIS...is the day that serves as the jumping point for the imminent renaissance of the Browns' organization.

Maybe this is overselling it, but join me at the Lizard to celebrate for such an historic occasion...