

All Hands On Deck

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Tuesday, September 01 2009 7:00 PM -

September is upon us and more of the young players are arriving to the North Coast as Carlos Carrasco received his first start last night while Mike Brantley makes his trip up I-71 to move another name from the "recently acquired" list (relatively speaking) to the "recently promoted" list and more are likely to be on their way. In Paulie's latest, he takes a closer look at Brantley as well as some of the other young promising players now on the Indians big league roster.



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While September call-ups generally give teams a look at some of their young players who may or may not figure into the immediate plans for the following year, that "try-out" mode has actually been in effect with the Indians for a few months now as young players have ascended to the parent club (with varying results) even before the Mark DeRosa deal. This recent group of call-ups simply represents the next batch of players whose role in the organization in 2010 will likely be determined in the next month of games, off-season decisions, and a full Spring Training in Arizona.

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Looking over the active roster (now standing at 27 with Carrasco and Brantley), let's take a quick look at how many of those players began the season in AAA, be it in Columbus or elsewhere:

Laffey
Sowers
Huff
Carrasco
Ohka
Sipp
Todd
Chris Perez (yes, he did...if only for 4 innings in Louisville)
LaPorta
Valbuena
Marte
Gimenez
Toregas
Brantley

Want to throw Crowe (on the 15-day DL) on that list?

Have at it, but even without him, that's 14 of the 27 players currently on the active roster who started the season in Columbus or Louisville (the Cardinals' AAA affiliate) with more likely to come to perhaps tip the scales well past the 50% mark of the active roster who began 2009 in the Minors.

For the Indians in the last month of the season...the future is now.

But how far into the future do the Indians want to look or, to put it another way, how should the Indians manage the playing time of so many of these youngsters, most of whom factor into 2010 in some capacity?

The first answer came with the Carrasco call-up as it was reported that a 6-man rotation would go into effect with Carmona and Masterson being the only pitchers being thrown every five games with the other starts coming from the combination of Laffey, Huff, Sowers, and Carrasco - effectively setting up what would be the beginning of the competition for the 2010 rotation. Still waiting for the call would be Hector Rondon, whose success in AAA has certainly merited a cursory promotion for a start or two for the Tribe with the opening for him likely coming

when Dave Huff's inning limit (around 160 when he's at 140 2/3 between Columbus and Cleveland right now) is reached.

But if the Indians feel that Rondon should get his feet wet this year (or even if they wanted to revert back to that 5-man rotation when Huff hits his inning limit), an easier and more prudent solution exists by moving Jeremy Sowers to the bullpen to begin a possible transition to long man for 2010. This is old news, I know, when you look at what Sowers has done his first couple of times through the lineup, in early innings versus later innings, and so on and so on.

Recent success considered with Sowers (ERA of 3.71 in his last 7 starts), it's time for the Indians to acknowledge that with Sowers out of options after this year and with a career 5.14 ERA and a 1.43 WHIP over 66 games started in his career that the likelihood of Sowers staying effective enough as a starter throughout the 2010 season is diminishing...if it isn't already gone. Yes, Sowers' value as a starter is inherently more than his value as a long man, but with the risk of losing him if he's exposed to waivers after Spring Training of next year being a reality, moving him to the bullpen now to see if Sowers' value as a long man can keep him in the organization instead of seeing him walk away at some point next year for next to nothing.

What's preventing this move from happening right now...Tomo Ohka's precious role as current long-man?

Is there an actual belief that Sowers is going to be consistently effective enough that he's going to have his spot in the 2010 rotation cemented when so many arms are going to be moving in and out of said rotation?

I can't believe that there is, particularly if you consider that Westbrook (if healthy), Carmona, and Laffey are all out of options as well and that the team seems awfully committed to Masterson as a starter, meaning that Sowers would have to start the year as the 5th starter and remain there through thick and thin, leaving players like Carrasco, Rondon, and Huff to fill the roles of 6th, 7th, and 8th organizational starter. Maybe that's the plan (though it would certainly be short-sighted given the lack of roster flexibility in that rotation, save an injury), but an easy solution exists for freeing up starts for some of these young pitchers and perhaps finding a role for Jeremy Sowers in the long-term as well...and that is the long-overdue move of Sowers to the bullpen.

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Speaking of finding time for some of these young players, the news that Mike Brantley will make his way topside has generated some excitement in that it puts another player who potentially fits into the team's long-term plans on display in Cleveland. While Brantley may be here to spell a still-aching Grady Sizemore in CF, it's important to note that Brantley still looks like far from a finished product if you're looking at what he did in Columbus this year:

April

.217 BA / .299 OBP / .275 SLG / .574 OPS with 3 XBH and 5 SB in 17 games

May

.261 BA / .344 OBP / .383 SLG / .726 OPS with 10 XBH and 10 SB in 30 games

June

.271 BA / .368 OBP / .318 SLG / .686 OPS with 3 XBH and 15 SB in 28 games

July

.280 BA / .362 OBP / .402 SLG / .764 OPS with 6 XBH and 6 SB in 20 games

August

.298 BA / .366 OBP / .417 SLG / .782 OPS with 7 XBH and 10 SB in 21 games

To say he's not a "finished product"; however shouldn't diminish what Brantley accomplished in AAA this year (overall .267 BA / .350 OBP / .361 SLG / .711 OPS), particularly in a year in which he battled injury in a league in which he was young for his level. Brantley is still a 22-year-old OF with tremendous on-base skills and a discerning batting eye (59 BB vs. 48 K this year) who led the International League in SB with 46 while earning raves from the Indians organization for his improved defense.

Rather than bemoaning that he isn't quite ready based on 2009, his year puts his development in perspective as he's done nothing to dampen the enthusiasm that he projects as a viable part of the next incarnation of the Indians; but it also reveals that he's found AAA challenging enough this year. If that is the case, Brantley's September with the parent club then shouldn't be unlike many youngsters who came before him, where playing time may be sporadic (likely coming when Sizemore needs a night off or moves to DH with Hafner's latest injury issue) but whets the appetite of a young player with a little taste of MLB.

For players like Brantley, September represents a glimpse into their future - a future that is not tomorrow, but is closer than it was in April - but not much more as AB should continue to be given out regularly to the likes of Matt LaPorta* and Andy Marte, players who either obviously figure in prominently to the 2010 team right out of the gate (like LaPorta) or find themselves out of options (like Marte), with a decision necessary in the off-season...a decision that can only be made legitimately with a larger body of work in terms of steady plate appearances.

**As a quick aside here while we're on the topic of LaPorta, a few nicknames with some staying power have come my way for some of the youngsters who find themselves squarely in the Indians' plans for the future. The first comes via reader John Mast, who has put forth that Valbuena shall heretofore referred to as...wait for it...Louis V ("Louis the Slugger") as an odd sort of homage to [the French monarch \(yes, it would be said "Louie the Fifth"\) who was known as "Louis the Sluggard"](#);*

. And while "Sluggard" is not exactly complementary, if Louis V keeps knocking extra-base hits all over the yard, he may just become referred to as "King Louis V";. ☐

The other bit of nomenclature comes from Jay Levin at LGT, who may have solved the mystery as to what Matt LaPorta should finally be called. Jay's suggestion comes in the form of "Vanilla Thunder"; with the variant of

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*"ThunderMatt" allowing for the inevitable "Thunderstruck" at-bat music or even the Gator4God coming to bat with the ["Thundercats" theme music](#) blar
ing over the loudspeakers.*

Louis V ("Louis the Slugger") and Vanilla Thunder...The BLC and SuperSizemore welcome you.

Players like Brantley and even Jordan Brown may factor into the 2010 club at some point, but the luxury that the Indians have to begin them as depth options or go to Spring Training next year with them fighting for a roster spot (even if that fight looks like a long-shot) means that finding AB for Brantley or Brown or even a guy like Lou Marson (who probably has a better chance of starting 2010 with a prominent role for the Indians than either Brantley or Brown) shouldn't come at the expense of players like LaPorta or even Andy Marte down the stretch in 2009.

For the next month, unlike LaPorta and Marte, some of these guys could join the mix of guys (like Gimenez, Torgas, and Crowe, when healthy) that play every couple of days but either don't project as legitimate everyday players or simply aren't finished products, ready for everyday exposure in MLB. That's not to say that they don't have worth or should spend the next month picking splinters, but the addition of more players to the team shouldn't change the pleasant stability that the lineup has enjoyed for the past month.

Before jumping into the next phase of this overhaul, let's find out where the first layer of these players (LaPorta, Marte, even Marson) fit in before completely making this even larger transition into the world of Brantley and Brown and, further down, Santana and Weglarz.

With all of these new, exciting names now donning the Indians' uniform, it's important to remember that 2010 is still likely to be a transition year with a full season of wheat separating itself from the chaff still to come, so patience actually becomes important at this stage in the rebuild...reload...whatever. If Brantley starts the season in AAA or Brown starts the season as depth in 2010, so be it - there should be no shortage of opportunities for either to distinguish themselves in an organization that saw the massive upheaval of events in 2009 and work their way into the legitimate discussion as everyday options.

That time however is not now - or at least not yet - and even despite that reality,

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the last month of the season just got a whole lot more interesting in a season during which we haven't had much to look forward to since mid-June.