



While I am no longer in Arizona, here is a special notebook edition talking about some of the recent developments in big league and minor league camp for the Indians.

Talbot Wins Rotation Spot

It comes as no surprise that right-hander Mitch Talbot has officially won a spot in the opening day rotation. Going into spring training he was a heavy favorite to win one of the two open rotation spots in a competition that started out with four candidates among himself and lefties Jeremy Sowers, David Huff, and Aaron Laffey. Barring injury or a complete disaster of a showing in spring training Talbot was all but assured a spot, and he did not disappoint or leave any room for questioning the decision as he has put together a very nice spring so far where in four starts he is 1-0 with a 0.79 ERA and in 11.1 innings has allowed 8 hits, 1 walk and has 7 strikeouts, and also had an impressive 6 inning and 1 run showing in a minor league game earlier this week.

Talbot has been very sharp, and Indians officials have been very pleased with what they have seen out of him. They caught a lot of flack for the Kelly Shoppach trade, and while it is only spring training and there is a long way to go it appears that they may have indeed gotten something of value in return for Shoppach, contrary to what a lot of fans may have realized back in December.

Laffey To The Pen

Another non-surprise and no-brainer to me was the announcement yesterday that left-hander Aaron Laffey has won a spot on the big league pitching staff, but that it would be in the bullpen and not in the starting rotation. I personally do not have a problem with putting him in the bullpen as I actually prefer him there at least in the short term. Aside from Jeremy Sowers he arguably has the least upside of any of the starters in camp being considered for the last two rotation spots, but what he may have over anyone else is he is the most athletic, versatile, and durable pitcher among the starters to handle long relief and spot starting when needed.

In year's past when the Indians had C.C. Sabathia, a healthy Jake Westbrook, Paul Byrd, Cliff Lee, and others anchoring the rotation, a long man was unnecessary, but with the questions surrounding this starting staff and the volatility we should expect in their performance from night to night having a reliable long man is a huge need if you ask me. Laffey should get more than enough work in as the long man without hindering his ability to pitch five innings if needed as a spot starter or to go back into the rotation if needed. If by chance he is not getting work then it means that the starting staff is pitching very well, so really there is no downside to this move.

Huff vs. Carrasco

The big surprise yesterday was that left-hander David Huff was not named to the opening day rotation yet, and that right-hander Carlos Carrasco is very much in the running for the last spot. It was originally thought that Carrasco would simply just open the season at Triple-A Columbus and come up later in the season, but he has had a very strong showing in camp where in three starts he is 0-0 with a 2.25 ERA and in 12.0 innings has allowed 8 hits, 3 walks and has 8 strikeouts and the Indians think he may not need to go to Columbus after all.

In comparison, Huff has had a so-so camp where in five starts he is 1-1 with a 5.40 ERA and in 16.1 innings has allowed 22 hits, 5 walks, has 8 strikeouts and probably most notably has given up 3 home runs while Carrasco has not given up any, so clearly Carrasco has had a much better camp. If they are making this decision clearly on their performance this spring, Carrasco should get the nod. It wouldn't be that much of an upset as Carrasco has always been viewed a better prospect than Huff, so this is not like some unknown coming out of nowhere and stealing a job to which I would not be happy myself with the decision. If they want more experience and diversity in the rotation, then they probably will go with Huff as he pitched two thirds of the season last year in Cleveland and pitched better as the season went along, plus he would provide a different look to the rotation as a left-hander whereas Carrasco would make it an all right-handed one.

People will get caught up in Huff's 11 wins last year which were nice, but wins are one of the least important stats when evaluating pitchers, at least for the front offices for every major league team. His stat line was pretty forgettable last year as he put up a 5.61 ERA, which was saved from being in the high 6's or low 7's after a tremendous month of September (3-1, 2.00 ERA). In addition to that batter's hit .301 with an .833 OPS off him, and he had a 1.56 WHIP, 4.6 K/9, and a 2.9 BB/9. These are the stats front office personnel look at (along with a lot of other complex data) and aside from the BB/9 number his overall stat line was not very good last year. In fairness, Carrasco was an abomination in his call to Cleveland last September where in five starts he went 0-4 with an 8.87 ERA, 2.28 WHIP, 4.4 K/9, 4.4 BB/9, and hitters hit .400 with

a 1.125 OPS against him in his very small sample size of 22.1 innings. So, the numbers for each pitcher from last year can be thrown out of the conversation as they were both not very good. This decision will be based solely on whether they want to go with the higher upside pitcher in Carrasco right now who has also had the better spring, or if they want to go with the more experienced pitcher in Huff who should eventually settle into the middle of the rotation for a long time and also gives the rotation a different look.

Two Needed For Bullpen

With Laffey being announced as a member of the bullpen, five of the seven spots have been filled. It is possible that with Laffey in the bullpen to give it length that they may go with a six man pen and add an extra position player instead, though that appears unlikely. In any case, the five guys locked into the opening day bullpen are left-handers Laffey, Rafael Perez, and Tony Sipp and right-handers Joe Smith and Chris Perez. Only four bullpen pitchers remain in camp who are battling for the final two spots in the pen, and no surprise they are all right-handers: Jensen Lewis, Saul Rivera, Jamey Wright, and Hector Ambriz.

Wright has unofficially locked up one of the two spots, so the last spot will come down to Lewis, Rivera and Ambriz. At this point Ambriz has no shot to make the team as he will open the season on the disabled list or be offered back to the Diamondbacks because of Rule 5 stipulations. So the decision lies between Lewis and Rivera. They could really go either way here since Lewis has an option left and Rivera is only signed to a minor league deal so neither will be lost on waivers, but I am not sure I see the Indians adding two minor league contract guys in Wright and Rivera to the roster. For that reason I think Lewis opens in the bullpen in Cleveland and Rivera in the bullpen at Triple-A Columbus provided he accepts the assignment or does not have an opt out clause like Austin Kearns does.

Lefties Have Rights

It may appear somewhat odd that the Indians will have three lefties in the bullpen, but one thing to remember is the starting rotation will be right-handed heavy or all right-handers if Carlos Carrasco wins the final spot. So with that in mind, having the long man be a left-hander is a good idea since the lineup would have been geared up for a right-hander and managers are unlikely to make any matchup changes with their lineup in the 4th-6th innings of a ballgame.

Still No Bryan

It appears we are getting closer to first baseman Russell Branyan officially being placed on the disabled list to start the 2010 season. While the Indians logic with the signing makes a lot of sense from a business standpoint in regard to managing service time and it also added a veteran option at a position of need, I have to say that so far this decision has blown up in their face.

The pickings were slim, but you have to wonder if a better option could have been had to fill the role Branyan was expected to fill. He still may fill it eventually, but so far it has been a disaster and left a lot of fans once again questioning GM Mark Shapiro's sanity with picking up these

kind of bargain bin guys seemingly every year. He started going to the well back in 2004 when he got Bob Howry for cheap off the scrap heap, or to an extent Casey Blake in 2003, but while he has gone back to that well time and time again in every offseason it appears that well has dried up as just about every bargain bin signing for a veteran has not worked out since.

The Branyan Effect

With Branyan expected to open the season on the disabled list, it appears the lineup may go back to what it was originally expected to be before they signed him, which is to have Matt LaPorta get the majority of time at first base and Michael Brantley to get the majority of time as the left fielder. This is definitely the case for LaPorta, who has only played first base this spring anyway; however, Brantley may still not be out of the woods yet. There is still a lot of value from a business sense to have him open the season for at least six weeks at Triple-A Columbus in order to align his service time, which the Indians will surely consider. But the reason they considered that option is they wanted a for sure option in left field to play everyday in order to do that, which LaPorta afforded them when he was moved to left field after the Branyan signing.

So with LaPorta back at first base - even on a short term basis as Branyan may only be out a month - the Indians may prefer Brantley at the outset of the season as the everyday left fielder again.

The other option is to just put Trevor Crowe and Austin Kearns on the roster as the third and fourth outfielder and use them in a platoon, which very well might happen. Kearns and Crowe have been battling for the fourth outfielder spot and have both had solid camps, plus Crowe is a switch-hitter with speed while Kearns is a right-handed hitter in a left-handed heavy hitting outfield and lineup so there is value there in keeping both. One thing to note is Kearns has an opt out clause in his contract where if he is not on the Indians big league roster at the end of spring training he can leave and sign with another team.

Valbuena Correction

This is not necessarily a correction as it is just more of an explanation, but after I noted last week that "if" Mark Grudzielanek came on strong at the end of camp that he "may" open the season as the starting second baseman, I got several e-mails that centered around this move as if I had said it was already done and wondered how the front office could be out of their minds. Again, it was a long-shot and at this point likely won't happen at all now. Valbuena has not had a good camp, and while Grudzielanek has been a little better, I don't think he has shown enough to make such a drastic move. I'm wondering if he even sticks in the organization after spring training as there appears to be no spot for him at Triple-A Columbus, though we will see. But anyway, the original point of the comment from last week was that had Grudzielanek come on strong it could have changed things at second base.

Minor League Injury Updates

Left-hander Scott Lewis is back in action in minor league camp and is progressing well as he recovers from the left elbow injury which wiped out almost his entire 2009 season. He is ramping up his innings and pitch count and is expected to open the season in the starting

rotation at Triple-A Columbus. ... Left-hander Elvis Araujo is in camp, but is not throwing. He was sidelined last year with a left elbow injury and is still working his way back. There is no set timetable on when he will start his throwing program at the moment, but the Indians are hopeful he can pitch in the summer for their rookie level team in Arizona by late June or early July. ... Right-hander Joey Mahalic missed a lot of time last year with an arm injury, but he is back and supposedly 100% this spring. He is working his pitch count up this spring and is expected to make a full season team, possibly as a starter at High-A Kinston.

MLB Crackdown

Over the past few weeks the Indians have had three players from their Dominican Summer League team suspended for PEDs, which they subsequently released at no cost to the team (no signing bonus was paid). These players had all been signed in the last two to three months in the Dominican Republic, and none of the players released were anyone of significance. The steroids and PEDs problem is rampant in Latin America, and MLB is cracking down on it with tougher testing. The Indians are also going to soon begin their own testing program, which while it will be costly for them to do it will pay off in the long run to where they don't lose out on money paid out to some of these players who fail drug tests or identity checks. They were burned with the Jose Ozoria (Wally Bryan) situation last year and are out over \$500,000 for the signing bonus paid to him which they cannot recoup.

New Latin Digs

The Indians are set to open their new complex in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, literally a few blocks from their old complex. The new site will open on May 1st as their Latin players get ready to open the Dominican Summer League which starts up at the end of May. The Indians previously shared their Dominican Republic facility with the Colorado Rockies, but the new one will be their own with two full sized fields and lots of space and amenities to provide better accommodations for their Latin players who live there.

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