

Tomahawks on the Move

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

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As the North Coast reels from the latest failure to bring a championship to Cleveland (with a vicious thunderstorm rolling in, as if on cue, after the game ended), perhaps I was the only one who was struck by the similarities to the last unsuccessful attempt to win the city's first title since 1964.

A Cleveland team, with championship aspirations, is done in by a more experienced team from Boston, their hopes dashed by a series of questionable coaching strategies and by their best player simply failing to show up when the team needed him most. That best player, in both instances, stared Free Agency in the face after the series (though Sabathia was under contract for 2008) and the sense that the opportunity lost would represent the last opportunity in some time prevailed.

For the sake of the Cavaliers (and all of Cleveland), let's hope that the team does not suffer the same cataclysmic decline that has occurred since the 2007 ALCS for the team, as pieces and parts are moved quickly, that they call their Gateway brethren. While we hold out that hope heading into the summer, let's release some Tomahawks about that "other" team that calls Gateway home because...well, because that's what we do here...

Since the Royals are apparently the cure for what ails the Indians, perhaps the schedule-makers could do the Erie Warriors next year and front-load some series with Kansas City so the Tribe can be seen as getting off on the same way that Detroit did this year, playing the Royals in 6 of their first 9 games. If you're wondering, the Tigers started the season 6-3 and are 13-12 since, so opponents do have something to do with how the AL Central standing look to date.

That's not to say that the Indians are getting CRUSHED by a tough early season schedule. Rather, that these things balance themselves out over the course of the months of the baseball season and the Indians chance to peek at respectability may be coming.

The Tribe is playing 8 of their next 13 at home and while their home record is not exactly reminiscent of UCLA Basketball in the 1970s, their opponents in those 13 games could be

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telling as to how the remainder of the first half of the season progresses.

After starting out in Baltimore to play the worst team in the AL (11-24), they make their way for a quick 2-game series in Tampa everyone's new example of a small market team "doing things the right way", the Rays. After those games, the team heads back to the North Coast to face these very same Royals for 2 games, followed by three-game homestands against the and the "could-be-a-mirage" 19-15 Reds (who have a negative run differential and have swept BOTH the Pirates and Astros in the early going) and the 4th place White Sox, who have actually allowed more runs per game than the Indians.

This is not to assert that the Indians are suddenly going to find themselves neck and neck with the Twins for the Central, but a quick look around .500 wouldn't hurt in the next 13 games before they head out to the Bronx for the final series of the month.

Since the team is 13-19 now, if the team ends Memorial Day around 23-26 (that would be 10-7 from now until the end of May...which may be a tall order even considering who they're playing) or thereabouts, then May will have been a smashing success (relatively speaking) as the moves that figure to take place that first week in June figure to galvanize (again, relatively speaking) the fan base.

Speaking of moves that will take place in that first week of June (and I mainly refer to the Santana promotion), my guess would be that a couple of moves are coming before Memorial Day. The first would figure to be the promotion of Saul Rivera, who has an out clause in his contract if he isn't on the Tribe roster by Saturday and has a 0.56 ERA and a 0.94 WHIP in 16 IP in Columbus to date. Yes, he's struck out only 9 and walked 7 in those 16 IP (which shows that he may be the beneficiary of some luck as a Clipper), but he did post a 3.72 ERA and an ERA+ of 115 in 215 games and 237 1/3 IP as a member of the Nationals' bullpen from 2006 to 2008.

Is that an exciting addition, given that he's now a 32-year-old RH reliever who gave up more than a hit per inning pitched last year in the NL?

Certainly not, but the Indians are still struggling to find that right mix of relievers (past Sipp and Laffey) that can rely on to contribute meaningful innings out of the bullpen with some consistency (even if it just means pitching multiple innings while the team is losing) and if 6 weeks is devoted to finding out if Saul Rivera has anything left in the tank to get out MLB hitters.

A case could certainly be made that Frank Herrmann should get a look before Rivera (same ERA, same WHIP, more K, fewer BB), but the terms of Rivera's contract give him an out if he's not an Indian by Saturday and Herrmann isn't even on the 40-man roster, meaning that his option clock hasn't even started.

Additionally, there would certainly seem to be an open spot for Rivera to test his mettle against MLB hitters as the clock struck midnight long ago on Rafael Perez and the pumpkin act that he's been taking out to the mound no longer needs to be seen in Cleveland. The time to DFA

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Perez has come and gone and come again and there may be some thought that a team will claim Perez and rehabilitate him as a viable reliever, but that thought process was once applied to Fernando Cabrera (who was historically a highly-thought of arm, unlike Perez who appeared out of nowhere in 2006 to contribute) and countless other bullpen arms who eventually end up bouncing around the Minors after experiencing success (as wildly surprising and enjoyable as it was in 2007) in MLB, a success that eludes them into eternity.

The other move that is probably being considered (other than the Donald to SS, Louie V. to Columbus...which will be done soon and for more reasons than just performance as Valbuena's service time could be managed by spending some time in AAA) would have to be to take a look at Dave Huff making his way back to Columbus as his 2010 season has come off of the rails.

Since his complete game, Huff has posted a 7.77 ERA a 2.00 WHIP and has compiled 10 BB and 8 K in his last 22 IP over 4 starts. That...that's not the results you want to see out of 25-year-old former 1st Round Pick.

That all being said, while I think that consideration will be paid to sending Huff down to AAA in an attempt to build his confidence back up, I don't see the corresponding move that makes a lot of sense. Maybe the Tribe moves Aaron Laffey into the rotation and puts Rivera in the bullpen (saving Perez once again), but to me, Aaron Laffey has adjusted nicely to his role in the bullpen (as undefined as his actual "role" might be) and given that he's one of the more dependable relievers out there, I'm inclined to let him continue that odyssey in the bullpen. Maybe the Indians start stretching Laffey out to slide back into the rotation, but at this point in the season, I would leave Laffey in the bullpen until Huff has been given a chance to attempt to apply some of the ["fire-lighting" points from Acta](#) to his next few outings.

Past the idea that Laffey is most valuable to this team in the bullpen (currently, not necessarily all season), the starters in Columbus are not compelling the Indians to make a decision by forcing their way into the rotational conversation. With Carrasco struggling with inconsistency and Rondon headed to the DL with a strained forearm, the most obvious replacement for Huff in the rotation would be Yohan Pino, for whom a 40-man move would have to be made to add to the mix. That's not to say that some 40-man maneuvering is a bad thing, but I'm not ready for a Huff-for-Pino exchange...yet.

That's not to say that Huff should be trotted out there in perpetuity regardless of results and while he could perhaps benefit from the boost to his confidence that facing AAA hitters would give him, I would continue to keep him on that long leash as a starter to see how he performs with regular turns in the rotation for a longer timeframe than 6 starts before deeming him unworthy of a rotation spot when no obvious answer exists.

It's been said before, but it bears repeating – in 2010, the focus is on development and casting an eye to the future. Perhaps Huff doesn't ultimately project as a legitimate MLB starter (much the same way that Masterson looks like the will end up in the bullpen), but if there was ever a year to dole out the innings to form a more complete answer based on a larger amount of data, this is the year.

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That doesn't necessarily bode well for the attempted peek at respectability by the end of May mentioned above, but finding out where guys like Huff or Masterson fit in this organization going forward is more important than reaching .500 by Memorial Day.

Doing both (finding out where some of these guys fit AND reaching .500 by Memorial Day) would be nice, but if you think that's possible...you haven't been watching the games.

Beneath Cleveland, I like the way that the Indians are being aggressive with some of their arms to challenge them at higher levels or moving them into roles into which they ultimately project. In case you missed it, Zach Putnam moved from the rotation to the bullpen in Akron, where he could be fast-tracked to help the parent club in short order. Additionally, Joe Gardner has been promoted from Lake County to Kinston on the strength of striking out 38 hitters in 25 IP. Gardner actually notched as many strikeouts as walks and hits allowed in Lake County.

Putnam was a 5th Round Pick in 2008 and Gardner was a 3rd Round Pick just last year, so as the Indians start to press the fast-forward button on some of their more talented arms, whether it be transitioning to the bullpen or jumping levels early in the season, it would certainly seem that the organizational philosophy of seeing how many guys can be kept as starters is starting to evolve as is the previously followed blueprint that pitchers should spend the majority of a season at one level.

The thing to watch going forward would be to see how quickly the Tribe moves some of the more highly-touted arms like Nick Hagadone and Alex White, both of whom are finding success in Kinston and are both a little too old for the league. Perhaps the Putnam and Gardner moves are a sign that the Indians are being more aggressive in the promotion and development of their arms, attempting to stock the upper levels with the most talented arms as quickly as possible, whether those arms project as starters or relievers.

With the Indians these days, it's all about projection and development, but in the here-and-now, we have a summer that promises to be full of "will he stay or will he go" on the North Coast and the continued growing pains of a young team in a city that could be as far away from a legitimate championship contender in the last 20 years.