

## A Lazy Sunday Balancing Act

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

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With the DiaBride off visiting her sister and our new niece in Wisconsin for the weekend, it's been a boys' weekend here on the North Coast, full of take-out pizza, tee-ball, grilled cheeses from Melt, and a birthday party that actually included pony rides...all while trying to forget the ugliness of the end of the Cavaliers' season. The attention will be diverted today by watching some friends finish the 10K downtown, so since we're off to cheer them on at the finish line, let's get off on a Lazy One...

While you wouldn't know it from any sports coverage (national or local) there is a pro sports team from Cleveland playing these days and if you've been watching, you're aware how disjointed and cobbled together the Indians have looked over the past few weeks as the youngsters have continued to struggle to adjust to MLB and (much more importantly) the likes of Sizemore and Hafner have remained decidedly ineffective. Due to the ineptitude of the offense all season, the makeup of the lineup has changed decidedly in the past couple of weeks as the veterans signed to deals (both minor league and Major League) in the off-season are finding themselves on the field with startling frequency.

The inclusion of players like Kearns, Brayan, and Grudzielanek (mainly) was a topic recently broached by Manny Acta, who addressed [the issue of playing time, development, and trying to win games](#) :

*"It's a tough balancing act because you owe it to the rest of the team and you owe it to the fans and the franchise to try and win on an everyday basis, but you can't lose track of the big picture. You want to try and find the other pieces that are going to go along with Grady Sizemore, Travis Hafner, Asdrubal Cabrera and Shin-Soo Choo for the long ride here. You still have to try and develop those guys."*

--snip--

*"As we've said over and over these kids are going to get a legit opportunity to see if they're going to be part of the supporting cast. If the other [veterans] click the way they've been clicking, it makes life easier for us. I believe on any given day, any player can help you win a ballgame. You come to the ballpark every day hoping it's going to be Marson or LaPorta or*

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*Valbuena and not that it's always going to be Choo, Sizemore, Hafner, Branyan and Cabrera and Kearns."*

--snip--

*"It's tough because you want to win and I believe we can win," Acta said. "But you don't want to lose the focus of building a [winning] team that is going to be here for years to come. There is a very fine line between winning two or three more games at the end of the year by playing a guy who is probably not going to be here next year [or] playing a guy who is going to be part of the future."*

Those comments are particularly interesting in the context of Wednesday's game against the Royals (a win, by the way), in which the number of Indians' players in the lineup for both teams that were younger than 27 was...wait for it...one. Asdrubal Cabrera (24 years old), was the only Indian in the starting lineup for a team that finished 65-97 at the bottom of the Central last year. Sure Sizemore and Choo are only 27, but 5 of the 9 players in the lineup were 30 or older...this in a rebuilding/reloading/whatever year.

While the game was a bit of a yawner (unsurprisingly and not helped by two rain delays), it brought under the hot glare of attention this advanced state of limbo that has afflicted a number of teams in MLB, unsure whether to go full bore into an attempt at rebuilding (or whatever it's being called) mode, or whether to lean on some veteran presence in the lineup (in Wednesday's case, steaming heaps of "veteran presence") in an attempt to win games in the here and now, with less of an eye towards the future.

That brings up a fundamental question as a team like the Indians unquestionably needs to break in their young players with an eye past 2010, but does that "breaking-in" process do more damage as the youngsters struggle and the team slips further into ignominy, a slide that can be tempered (somewhat) by inserting the likes of Kearns, Branyan, and Redmond into the mix to buy goodwill, some local attention, and perhaps even wins?

In the Indians' case, the early season experiments of giving jobs out of Spring Training to Luis Valbuena, Matt MaTola, Lou Marson, and Mike Brantley have resulted in OPS+ of 64 (Valbuena), 45 (LaPorta), 44 (Marson), and 19 (Brantley) in 292 cumulative plate appearances. That strategy certainly seems to have recently given way to increased playing time for Austin Kearns (162 OPS+), Rusty Branyan (127 OPS+), and Mark Grudzielanek (81 OPS+) as the Indians attempt to actually start winning some games...perhaps at the cost of development and flattening out the learning curve for players that do realistically figure into their plans past this year.

It becomes a greater question however for a team like the Indians that is unlikely to be players in the Free Agent market (the one that includes elite players and not all players) year after year and that have very little chance of retaining their own players, assuming they do excel, once those established players reach FA, compete in the here and now while keeping an eye to the future.

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If the Front Office decides to flip some “Go Young” switch that exists in the Teams’ Offices, the growing pains will certainly begin and the possibility exists that players like LaPorta and Brantley never match the production of Kearns and Branyan. In the present however, players like Kearns and Branyan are performing and helping their teams win games...infrequently as it may be.

Whether the development of young players as they adjust to MLB and attempt to get their sea legs under them is compromised in the process of infrequently winning these games becomes the great debate as to how to build a team capable of contending in the uneven competitive structure of MLB. Certainly, drafting and development (or lack thereof in the case of the Indians’ in recent history, whose talent has largely been acquired via trade) plays a role in teams facing this quandary, but in the current financial climate in MLB, how do small-market teams play this balancing act between youth being the only thing on the menu, going through those requisite growing pains and attempting to win games to keep fans interested, if the better chance of winning comes with players that don’t figure into their future?

Perhaps this issue comes about by the organization’s own doing, but the chasm between the “haves” and the “have-nots” is growing in MLB and teams that are fighting upstream to begin with in the revenue race often find themselves in this death spiral that was on display on Wednesday night in Kansas City. How the Indians can pull themselves out of that vortex (and they did as recently as 2004) will be the interesting theme to watch this season and there’s going to be no shortage of opinions of how to improve the team both for the short-term and the long-term.

To that end (and off of the soapbox for a moment), some [compelling lineup suggestions](#) were recently asserted by Steve Buffum (of TCF) when sitting in Rob Neyer’s chair at ESPN that could provide some ointment for the rash that is the Indians’ offense.

Reading through Acta’s comments from [an interview with Baseball Prospectus’ David Laurila](#) and looking at that idea that development and contention are mutually exclusive ideas, it would seem that the Indians had a plan coming in regarding how AB were going to be distributed, so whether any of this out-of-the-box thinking (as logical as it may be) suggested by Buffum will take hold:

**MA:** *Here, it’s fantastic. We’re pretty much on the same page. We talk almost on a daily basis, but it’s not exactly about what I’m doing managing. Before the season starts, we put a plan together and we know who we’re going to try to give a certain amount of at-bats to, and who we want to be out there, or not out there, and also what we have coming from the minor leagues. The plan is pretty much in order, so unless I feel like I need to make a drastic adjustment or something, I don’t need to communicate it to our baseball people.*

**DL:** *If you make a move—for whatever reason—that is counter to what data shows might have been a better option, do you get a call from Mark Shapiro or assistant GM Chris Antonetti after the game, asking why?*

**MA:** *No, not at all. These guys, they let me work; they’re not that way. They’re not hands-on*

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*when it comes to that kind of stuff and that's something that I make sure of wherever I go. I'm not going to have to put up with stuff like anyone making up a lineup for me, anybody calling me about a player, or anything like that. I think here, they did all their research, and they're very thorough on what they do with the interviews and stuff to have a feel of how I'm going to do things.*

Interestingly, [Baseball Prospectus also had Mark Shapiro sit down for a Q & A](#) that largely focused on how the Indians went about their managerial search, but he did have some interesting comments in the context of hiring Manny Acta because he understood the place that the Indians found themselves and how Acta was familiar with the situation, in Cleveland, both in terms of personnel and market:

*He was educated to our situation and he saw positives here, whereas a lot of people around us, in our market, see the negatives here. Manny saw the positive attributes here, and I don't think you can overlook that positive energy. This game has so much inherent negative built in, and this market has a lot of negative energy in it right now, so that positive energy was important.*

While the “inherent negative built in” to the game isn’t something that could be misunderstood by anyone who’s been paying attention (here, at least) all off-season, the comment about the “negative energy” in “this market” can be taken a number of ways. Whether it be the perception among fans that the Indians are a flawed organization, from top-to-bottom with no discernible sign of changing course, or whether it speaks to the manner in which the team has been raked over the coals by the majority of the local media for dismantling the team over the past two years, blissfully ignoring the financial realities that caused that dismantling...along with the horrific starts, of course.

Of course, the other possibility in terms of the “negative energy” in “this market” came to light in a recent web chat when [Pete Gammons told WEEI in a recent interview](#) (as he was discussing the disinterest in Tampa, despite a winning team) that the financial situation for the Indians is dire because of the struggles of the city:

*And Cleveland is a serious concern now, too, because they have no Fortune 500 companies left and 30 percent of the households in greater Cleveland have left in the last two years. The economy there is absolutely dead. What might save the Indians is if LeBron [James] leaves, because we all know it is a football town, but if you have the Browns and LeBron there isn't enough money to support three teams. A lot of people doubt that.*

While Gammons is embellishing a little bit to prove his point, as [Greater Cleveland has 7 Fortune 500 companies and Akron has two more](#), anyone whose spent a minute of time in downtown Cleveland in the past few years knows that these concerns are not entirely unfounded. The Indians are last in attendance in MLB (and not by a small margin) and interest in the team is at the lowest levels in recent memory.

Where this all goes (in terms of both the city and the organization) is fodder for a whole year’s worth of conjecture and analysis, but the 2010 season could be more than just the “balancing act” that Acta references as he discusses who plays and how often. While the future of one

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team in Cleveland is largely reliant on the decision of a 25-year-old (whose potential final game in a Cavaliers' uniform was [brilliantly summarized by native South Euclidean here](#)), the future of the team that occupies the stadium across Gateway Plaza may be done in by the growing chasm in team revenue, one that may only grow wider as the city that the Indians call home slips further into the abyss.