

Tomahawks Breaking Bad

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Thursday, May 20 2010 12:00 AM - Last Updated Thursday, May 20 2010 7:25 AM



Fresh off of a 4-4 road trip and about to welcome the Royals, the not-as-good-as-their-record Reds, and the somehow-behind-the-Indians-in-the-standings White Sox to the corner of Carnegie and Ontario, the Indians say goodbye to two of their best players (one of their best players who was actually playing well this year and the one who has an OPS .008 higher than AJ Pierzynski), suddenly destined for stints on the DL.

Say it with me here...“ah, 2010 Indians baseball”, and while attempting to choke down the bile that has accompanied those 3 words, let’s release some mid-week Tomahawks:

Obviously, the news of the week revolves around the former Tribe shortstop exacting some measure of revenge on the current Tribe shortstop for taking “his” position (yes, I’m kidding...I think) and [Grady heading off to the 15-day DL with a deep bone bruise](#) . So, let’s put on the stethoscopes and the scrubs and immerse ourselves in some medical intrigue and the accompanying fallout.

While a nasty rumor has floated around that characterizes Asdrubal’s injury as potentially season-ending (and I suppose anything is possible), I’ll rely on Will Carroll at Baseball Prospectus to [lay out a timeframe while he also addresses the other Tribe player who could have been hurting more than we know](#) :

Cabrera should be out until about the All-Star break, but shouldn’t have any long-term consequences. As a lot of young kids can tell you, arm bones heal pretty cleanly. I am curious to watch the timing on this with a lot of the interesting research on bone stimulation coming out of the Cleveland Clinic. The Indians are all about the bones right now, as Sizemore had an MRI to see what his problem is. His knee was thought to be just bruised, but he has had severe pain and some inflammation. He’d had some minor issues with this same knee back in April, so there may be some connection or we could be seeing some underlying pattern that suggests a problem.

Perhaps I missed it, but I don’t remember ever hearing that Sizemore had “minor issues with this same knee back in April” and this idea that an “underlying pattern” could “suggest a problem” just gave me the shivers, as does the intimation that surgery is possible for Sizemore, which is no small procedure given that it would take place in the knee.

Tomahawks Breaking Bad

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Thursday, May 20 2010 12:00 AM - Last Updated Thursday, May 20 2010 7:25 AM

Regardless of the results of the MRI for Sizemore, perhaps he can benefit from the 15-day DL stint to rest his body and his mind and if this is a lingering issue (Acta was on the pre-game radio broadcast saying that Sizemore injured it in Los Angeles in the final days of Spring Training), then perhaps an explanation for his slow start (to be charitable) finds an answer. As both Cabrera and Sizemore hit the DL, it would certainly seem that we have an answer to that question from earlier in the week as to "how are the Indians going to work the young guys in" as opportunities and plate appearances seem to be there for the taking all around the diamond.

The obvious beneficiaries of Cabrera's injury are Jason Donald, whose timeframe for promotion was accelerated as he now takes over at his natural position of SS for about 2 months, and Louie V, who lives to fight another day in the Indians' lineup despite not really doing much on the field for the parent club this season to merit his stay in Cleveland. Of course, the pessimist would say that Cabrera's injury screws up the management of Valbuena's service time issue which was about to be rectified when he was sent down in favor of Donald, but if Valbuena continues to perform as he has (even with a long leash considered), he's going to find himself in Columbus for that service clock maintenance/wake-up call soon enough.

Certainly, nobody is suggesting that Donald (who is actually 14 months OLDER than Cabrera and has played 98 games above AA) is going to come in and save a listless offense or even replace Cabrera's presence in the lineup, even if Cabrera was struggling in terms of comparing them to his 2009 season. Rather, Jason Donald has now been handed the opportunity to play for 2 months, likely without respite, for the parent club and is probably going to be paired (intermittently) with Luis Valbuena in the middle of the diamond. During the course of Cabrera's rehab then, the Indians will have the opportunity to evaluate both Donald and Louie the Fifth in a convoluted "battle" to see which of the players remains in the lineup as the 2B when Cabrera returns.

Is there a chance that Donald going to go all Chase Utley on the Indians here, as a late-blooming middle infielder who came up through the Phillies organization?

I suppose in a happy, dream-filled world, I could make the comparison as Utley's career totals in MiLB (.282 BA / .357 OBP / .465 SLG / .822 OPS IN 1,877 PA) compare with those that Donald has accumulated (.284 BA / .371 OBP / .434 SLG / .806 OPS in 1,694 PA) to date in the Minors. Utley also made his first extended appearance in MLB as a 25-year-old in a year in which he had 144 AAA plate appearances, whereas Donald is a 25-year-old hitting MLB for the first time after logging 165 AAA plate appearances.

Is this pie-in-the-sky thinking and simply thinking of a best-case scenario while pointing out what could be largely coincidental similarities?

No question, as Utley has outperformed his MiLB line for each of the last 6 years in Philly (posting an OPS over .900 every year), but Donald's going to get the opportunity in 2010 to see if he can become a legitimate option at 2B going forward for this team. That doesn't presuppose that he'll suddenly become Chase Utley (however the transition to the one we see know in Philly happened from a prospect who cracked the Baseball America Top 100 prospect list once...at #89), only that if he puts up average offensive numbers from the middle-of-the-infield while

Tomahawks Breaking Bad

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Thursday, May 20 2010 12:00 AM - Last Updated Thursday, May 20 2010 7:25 AM

playing above-average defense for the next two months, you can likely pencil him in as the Indians' starting 2B for the next 4 to 5 years at a position that has largely been a long-term problem (other than Asdrubal playing out of position there) since the trade of Roberto Alomar.

As for Grady's injury, the Indians have already made the corresponding move to bring Shelly Duncan up from AAA. While the move is confusing in that Duncan does not exactly fit into the future of the team, my guess is that the promotion of Crowe for Marte and Duncan for Sizemore essentially balance each other out as Crowe will take the place of Grady in the lineup and Duncan will take the place of unused RH bat off of the bench until Marte is ready to return from the DL.

Not that anybody asked, but if it were up to me, I'd promote Brantley to play CF (and I do think that he gets the call if Sizemore undergoes surgery as they try to avoid the yo-yo game with Brantley from Columbus and Cleveland) and play the mildly-resurgent Matt MaTola (.838 OPS in his last 7 games) in LF. The benefits would be two-fold, to get both Brantley and MaTola some needed MLB AB, but more importantly so we're not subjected to Crowe's defensive deficiencies in CF (and he cost the Indians the game on Monday by misplaying both Crawford's triple AND breaking back on Blalock's single before diving for it unsuccessfully), much less hoping that Crowe is able to go on some Ben Francisco-esque hot start to build up the hopes of Indians' fans that Crowe is anything more than a "poor man's Ben Francisco" which, if you think about it means that he's a "poor man's 4th OF".

Lest anyone forget, Crowe is a 26-year-old OF (15 months older than Grady) whose cumulative OPS by level above A ball are .636 (OPS in A-ball), .724 (OPS in AA), and .761 (OPS in AAA); so while he may look the part and provide some athleticism and speed for the team, athleticism and speed without ability or instincts will take a player only so far. Nevertheless, Crowe will get the opportunity to show that everything that he has done in the Indians' organization is an aberration and that he belongs on the 40-man roster as much more than a fill-in.

Even before these injuries, it appeared that the plate appearances are going to be there for these young guys to assert themselves into the mix for 2010 and beyond. Now, with these injuries presenting more opportunities (and with Carlos Santana just hammering away at that MLB door), the rest of the season looks to be shaping up to be an audition of sorts for a lot of young players.

How do they balance all of those youngsters with attempting to win, or at least generating some interest at the box office (although that ship may have already sailed) at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario?

I suppose we're about to find out...

In terms of this development and attempting to win, if you remember [the hypothetical question from last Sunday on playing time and developing young players](#)

, Joe Posnanski has

[a similar piece on SI.com](#)

in which he asserts that the built-in "advantage" that small-market teams have over teams (he

Tomahawks Breaking Bad

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Thursday, May 20 2010 12:00 AM - Last Updated Thursday, May 20 2010 7:25 AM

uses the Royals as the example) with higher revenues is time to allow players develop:

Well, the big thing is to know that while, sure, you want to win, the goal must be bigger than that. You are building a team to win down the road. Everything -- and I mean EVERYTHING -- must be pointed in that direction. Every break you take, every move you make, every smile you fake, every bond you break should have 2011 and 2012 and 2013 in consideration. And with time, you can do things. If you have some young and reasonably talented players, you can give them opportunities to learn and grow at the Major League level. If you have prospects you are not quite sure about you can FIND OUT what they have inside.

--snip--

But it seems to me that if they are going to be about developing young players, they actually have to DEVELOP YOUNG PLAYERS. No, nobody wants to go through another 90-100 loss season. But the Royals are going to lose those games anyway. The question is: What will they get out of all those losses? What will they get out of this season?

This is certainly the intent of the thought process from last Sunday (and the comments by Acta that they did have a laid out plan in terms of working these young players in is comforting), and if you want to see the manner in which this “treatise” applies to the Indians (or at least a realistic application of it in the here and now for the Tribe), [Steve Buffum tackles the whole Indians' roster and who should and should not be seeing the field at the present time](#)

. Going through Buffum’s assessment, I can’t say that I could make a compelling argument against any of his assertions in terms of where playing time should be allotted.

That being said (and back to the Posnanski “treatise”, as Buffum calls it), I think that the fundamental truth that Posnanski ignores is the idea that this “time” and development is certainly well and good, but that the seeds of that development don’t always bear the fruit all at the same time to make winning feasible.

That is, the endgame of successful development needs to happen in such a perfect timeframe for these small-market teams that it also becomes nearly impossible. As the Indians have proven (in the not-too-distant-past), not only does this development of talent need to occur in the small markets over “time”, but it has to occur up and down the lineup and throughout the pitching staff simultaneously to close the talent gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” in MLB in any given year, much less consistently.

If you think that the situation that occurred in Cleveland from 2007 to 2009 was the aberration or the result of faulty leadership (and truthfully, some of it was), take a look at what Dave Cameron at Fangraphs wrote about [the situation unfolding in Milwaukee](#) :

With 124 games to play, assuming that they'll need to win 92 games to give themselves a good chance of winning the NL Central or the Wild Card, they would have to play .621 baseball the rest of the way to make that happen.

--snip--

Tomahawks Breaking Bad

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Thursday, May 20 2010 12:00 AM - Last Updated Thursday, May 20 2010 7:25 AM

Realistically, the playoff chances for the Brewers appear slim for 2010, and with that reality staring them in the face, it's probably time for them to put Prince Fielder on the trading block.

--snip--

It's not the outcome that Milwaukee had in mind when they put this roster together, and they do have enough talent to right the ship and get back to a winning record, but they are far enough back in the NL Central where its getting to be time to change directions. Six weeks of bad baseball can sink a season, and in the case of the Brewers, it probably has.

Where have I seen that situation unfold before, where “six weeks of bad baseball can sink a season” causing a team with limited resources and with their best players staring Free Agency in the face to [confront very harsh realities and perhaps attempt to fight another day](#) ?

That's right...I remember now.

And it's not just the situation in Cleveland and Milwaukee, which DID develop and acquire young talent that DID mature and succeed together. As great of a story as Tampa is these days, the Yankees likely have already made Carl Crawford pinstriped jerseys to sell in the team shops in the Bronx and Carlos Pena will likely find himself elsewhere next year as well. As stocked as the Rays' farm system is purported to be (and 10 years of Top 5 picks SHOULD do that) and as great as their young pitching looks, all that needs to happen is a couple of bad breaks and the Rays are back to this state of limbo that most small-market teams encounter as they hope that Desmond Jennings can succeed in short order and hope that their starting pitching holds up and isn't done in by a bullpen or any other extenuating circumstances or before David Price (only signed through 2012) and Matt Garza (signed through 2013) find themselves inking contracts too large for the Rays to legitimately consider or before they're considered trade bait 1 ½ years before Free Agency as Fielder may be.

Those “extenuating circumstances” deep-sixed the Indians' intentions of contending in 2008 and 2009 and are threatening the talented squad in small-market Milwaukee. Whether Tampa's next on the list of teams to follow the slow ascent and quick descent remains to be seen, but the “blueprint” is there, as are the system-imposed limitations that lead to following that “blueprint”.

Attempting to lighten the mood, since we're nearing that “magical” 40-game mark at which teams often say that they can start to get a sense of the team that they have, how about a quick look at what was thought to be the weakness of the team going into the season – the starting pitching.

April Numbers for Starters

Carmona – 4.05 ERA, 1.23 WHIP, 15 K, 14 BB in 33 1/3 IP

Westbrook – 5.53 ERA, 1.55 WHIP, 18 K, 13 BB in 27 2/3 IP

Talbot – 2.05 ERA, 1.18 WHIP, 7 K, 11 BB in 26 1/3 IP

Huff – 4.10 ERA, 1.33 WHIP, 11 K, 10 BB in 26 1/3 IP

Tomahawks Breaking Bad

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Thursday, May 20 2010 12:00 AM - Last Updated Thursday, May 20 2010 7:25 AM

Masterson – 5.68 ERA, 1.95 WHIP, 24 K, 11 BB in 19 IP

May Numbers for Starters to date

Carmona – 2.00 ERA, 1.33 WHIP, 11 K, 7 BB in 18 IP

Westbrook – 2.41 ERA, 1.45 WHIP, 13 K, 8 BB in 18 2/3 IP

Talbot – 4.71 ERA, 1.38 WHIP, 12 K, 10 BB in 21 IP

Huff – 7.47 ERA, 2.04 WHIP, 5 K, 6 BB in 15 2/3 IP

Masterson – 5.63 ERA, 1.71 WHIP, 22 K, 13 BB in 24 IP

What does all of that mean?

If I would have said at the beginning of the season that the Indians would have three legitimately even-average starting pitchers on a semi-consistent basis at the 40-game mark, how surprised would you have been?

If I would have said that two of those three legitimately even-average starters would be Carmona and Talbot, how long would it have taken for me to peel you off of the floor?

As frustrating as it is to go watch Masterson and Huff completely come off the rails as starters, it can't overwhelm the pleasure in seeing Carmona hold opposing hitters to a .630 OPS or when he strikes out 7 in 6 2/3 on Monday night (in a game he should have won) against the Rays. Nor can it cast a gray cloud over the unexpected sunshine inexplicably coming from "The Fury" as he continues to pitch well despite all the numbers (and the eye test) that say that he simply shouldn't be doing as well as he is. Westbrook's days are numbered in Cleveland, but the way that he's pitching (and doesn't it feel strange to root for some of these guys so their trade value is peaking in July) should net the Indians more than what they could have expected in return for him when the season started.

While the inclination and the knee-jerk reaction would be to send Huff off to AAA and Masterson off to the bullpen, I hate to be the one to break this to you but the Indians aren't going to contend in 2010 for the Central or the Wild Card and giving these guys a long leash (even if it means that they hang themselves with it) is the prudent path to follow.

They tell me that patience is a virtue and, as Cleveland fans, ours has certainly been tested. However, this Indians' season is built on development and answering questions about players in this organization going forward. That development and those answers aren't going to come without ugliness and dark days, so until the light at the end of the tunnel becomes visible (and it isn't yet), we're left with a young team that's about to get younger and less experienced due to injury/injuries.

How the young players adjust to those opportunities in 2010 are going to go a long way in determining where the Indians find themselves in this new age of development, whether the players struggle (as Marson, Valbuena, MaTola, Huff, and Masterson have) or whether they thrive (as Talbot, Sipp, and...well) will give the Indians a better idea as to when contention (and

Tomahawks Breaking Bad

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Thursday, May 20 2010 12:00 AM - Last Updated Thursday, May 20 2010 7:25 AM

by that I mean legitimate contention) is plausible.