

## A Lazy Sunday Off the Bus

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}  
Sunday, June 27 2010 9:39 AM -

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After having been saved from watching the Indians fall further and further away from even sniffing respectability by being out of town all week, a Sunday morning after an all day drive from Wisconsin is a welcome respite from the traffic in Chicago and travelling with two young boys. While I was away, the Indians, continued to mire in this ugly state of limbo that's been on hand since the Sizemore/Cabrera injuries, as the Indians attempt to walk the balance beam by "showcasing the veterans" and working in the young players who, with the exception of Santana, simply aren't taking the opportunity and running with it. If the Indians have been trying to walk that aforementioned balance beam, the result in the first half of the season has been that they've put a product on the field that has given the feeling of straddling the balance beam...and I don't mean in the good way, more of the painful variety.

This state of limbo, where players that have no future in Cleveland have not yet fully given way to players who are supposed to have a future in Cleveland is what we've been waiting for all year to finally come to an end as the strategy of treading water until the veterans would be moved and the prospects would arrive en masse has eluded us thus far. Of course the beginning of that "strategy" possibly changing occurred late last night as the [Mariners inexplicably acquired Rusty Bryan, giving up AAA OF Ezequiel Carrera and Single-A SS Juan Diaz](#). Just a day after Paul Hoynes asserted that the Indians might be looking to finally make some moves, [referencing the fact that the Indians turned Benuardo \(that's Ben Broussard and Eduardo Perez to the uninformed\) into The BLC and Asdrubal](#), the Indians move another limited 1B/DH to the Emerald City for a AAA OF and a younger middle infielder.

While the comparisons to Choo and Cabrera should end there, the move was made obviously to make room for Matt MaTola to FINALLY perhaps get some consistent AB as an Indian, something that has eluded him since entering the organization, at least for the parent club. LaPorta's struggles in Cleveland qualify as one of the greater disappointments of the early season (though he was given no favors in the way that the Indians bounced him around the lineup and sat him regularly) and he returns to Cleveland hoping to continue the success he found in his (albeit brief time) in Columbus.

As for what was ailing MaTola in the early going, [according to Terry Pluto](#), "when he was playing with a bad hip and turf toe (both requiring surgery), he stopped using his legs to power

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his swing -- swinging mostly with his arms. After he was healthy, the bad habit remained, robbing him of power. He has returned to his original swing.”

We're now nearly two full years removed from the Sabathia deal in which LaPorta was purported to be the “near-MLB ready bat” and he now returns looking to finally make good on those projections...or at least show some signs that he is capable of being the middle-of-the-order hitter that this team sorely lacks. That being said, I'm not sure when this revelation on MaTola's swing was made and it could certainly be argued that MaTola could have possibly made adjustments in Cleveland, but he was able to regain confidence (and hopefully his power stroke) in 68 AB in Columbus, so any lineup that doesn't include “1B – LaPorta” from this point on in the season is akin to gross negligence on the part of the Indians.

LaPorta should be playing 1B every day from now on and “The Curious Case of Russell Branyan” ends without much fanfare as his inclusion on the team to begin with was odd (other than it being insurance against LaPorta's injuries...the extent of which are still not really known and to provide some pop in what was obviously a power-starved lineup) and he heads back to Seattle to play for a team that is as far away from the top of their division as the Indians are.

In terms of the players coming to the Indians, Carrera is a 23-year-old who likely projects as a fringe CF/4th OF because of his speed (27 SB in 2009, 28 SB in 2008) and his high-OBP, with a career MiLB OBP of .374, including an OBP of .441 last year in AA, where he actually won the Southern League batting title by hitting .337. [John Sickels put him as the #12 prospect on the M's farm](#), with the description of a “speed demon, hits for average, draws walks, good glove, no power, future reserve outfielder but a useful one”. Just to put a bow on it, Kevin Goldstein of Baseball Prospectus [lists him as the 14th best prospect](#), including this money line on Carrera – “he's a tiny, speedy outfielder who led the Double-A Southern League in batting and on-base percentage, but he has less power than my cat.”

While not knowing Kevin Goldstein's cat, Carrera likely slots into the Trevor Crowe/Mike Brantley mix to see if the Indians can get two of the three of them to fill the LF (or CF, depending on this microfracture surgery that Sizemore underwent) and 4th OF roles for the foreseeable future.

As for Diaz, he comes to the Indians as a 21-year-old SS who will go to Kinston as the Indians continue their obsession with middle infielders developed by Seattle. He was named to the All-Star team in the California League, if anything can be gleaned from that. Overall, his numbers for 2010 are promising (.295 BA / .345 OBP / .433 SLG / .779 OPS), particularly for a young middle infielder, but at this point he simply enters into an organizational need at SS, evidenced by the presence of Andy Hernandez, Brian Bixler, and most recently Sonny Nix.

Maybe the two prospects the Indians received turn into something as even [Rob Neyer doesn't seem that dismissive of the return](#)

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*In addition to that promising young outfielder (Carrera), the infielder (Diaz) isn't exactly chopped liver, either; he wasn't listed among the Mariners' notable prospects this spring, but*

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*he's only 21, has been solid for two straight seasons in the California League, and seems to have at least a moderately decent shot at someday making the majors.*

*But just moderately. And Carrera, who played well enough last year in Double-A to establish himself as a decent prospect, is hitting .268/.339/.315 this year in Triple-A. He's 23 with room to grow, but didn't figure to beat Ichiro Suzuki or Franklin Gutierrez or even Michael Saunders out of a job anytime soon.*

Where they eventually fit will come out in the wash over the next few years as this move was made nearly exclusively to get a now-healthy (body and confidence, apparently) Matt LaPorta back into the mix. While it can be argued that his inclusion in "the mix" should have come from Opening Day, the extent of his injuries have never fully been revealed and Branyan essentially came in the form of a lottery ticket of sorts, as the Indians hoped that Branyan would hit well enough that the prospects they would eventually receive from would be worth 3 months of Branyan providing the insurance against LaPorta's injuries and putting some pop (albeit intermittently) into the lineup.

What happens next is anyone's guess on the trade front as the timing of the Branyan deal was made to get LaPorta up to Cleveland now, with the sense of urgency of getting a young player onto the parent club simply not as compelling in LF (where Kearns will be dealt), 3B (where the Indians will hope to find a landing spot for Jhonny), or in the rotation (with Westbrook probably going once all of the bigger names find new addresses). It's likely that Kearns is the next one to go, perhaps after the All-Star Break as the Indians will begin to filter in more of the names that we've heard about in trade hauls over the past few years.

As [Buster Olney points out](#), "Kearns is owed approximately \$417K the rest of the season" and while he's struggled in recent months (while remaining in the middle of the order because no better alternative exists), some team will look for Kearns as a cheap bench option. While that may not merit much by way of a return, let's all remember that at this time last year, Mark DeRosa was moved to St. Louis, netting the Indians a player that immediately factored into the back end of their bullpen in Chris Perez with him projecting as a Future Closer, regardless of [how the "WAR-obsessed" FanGraphs staff may see it](#)

What's going to be interesting to see is what kind of return the Indians get for the likes of Kearns and others as last year the obvious emphasis was on adding arms, arms, and more arms. As much as the Indians would probably like to continue to add arms (as their organizational failure to build even a league-average bullpen from year to year continues to baffle), they're no longer sitting on what could be perceived as big trading chips the way that they were in 2008 and 2009.

To that end, maybe I'm the only one still interested in this, but I'm fascinated by what the Mariners are going to get for CP Lee, with an answer perhaps even coming soon [as per Rosenthal](#) ...

although their acquisition of Branyan certainly muddies those waters:

*A number of other teams, however, could enter the mix, attracted by Lee's relatively low salary*

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*and the idea that the acquisition cost should be less than what the Indians received for him last season, when he was a year and two months away from free agency.*

*The Phillies obtained Lee and outfielder Ben Francisco for four young players – catcher Lou Marson, infielder Jason Donald and pitchers Carlos Carrasco and Jason Knapp.*

*Of the four, Knapp had the highest ceiling, and he has yet to pitch this season after undergoing shoulder surgery last September. None of the other three projects as an impact player. Only Donald is currently in the majors.*

*The Indians actually might have fared better in their return for half a season of Sabathia the previous year, landing outfielders Matt LaPorta and Michael Brantley as part of their four-player package from the Brewers.*

That idea that Lee's "acquisition cost should be less than what the Indians received for him last season, when he was a year and two months away from free agency" certainly looks to be tested in terms of what he's doing (again) this season and will again give us names against which we can compare the Carrasco/Donald/Marson/Knapp package in perpetuity.

Moving on, in the midst of all of this change and coming upheaval, I found two pieces particularly striking as they represent the stability that the Indians value in their organization and present some "big-picture" ideas from the Indians, something that has been awfully hard to see in the early going of 2010 as prospects disappointed and lineups induced nausea.

The first comes by way of John Perrotto of Baseball Prospectus, who reports that [Manny Acta's sunny outlook on the future of the organization remains unchanged](#)

, despite compelling evidence from the first half of 2010:

*"There are a lot of things to feel good about here," Acta said. "Our record isn't as good as we hoped it would be and that's disappointing. If you look at the big picture, though, look at the organization as a whole, there are good things happening."*

--snip--

*The Indians will continue to look to the future, as they have three starting pitchers 26 or younger in Fausto Carmona, Justin Masterson, and Mitch Talbot, a closer-in-waiting in 24-year-old Chris Perez, and a young middle-infield combination of second baseman Luis Valbuena and shortstop Jason Donald. Acta also talks excitedly about many of the Indians' prospects in the upper levels of the farm system, including first baseman Beau Mills, second baseman Jason Kipnis, third baseman Lonnie Chisenhall, outfielder Nick Weglarz, right-handed starters Carlos Carrasco and Hector Rondon, and left-hander Nick Hagadone. Furthermore, Acta believes two players who were in the Indians' Opening Day lineup before being sent to Columbus, first baseman/outfielder Matt LaPorta and outfielder Michael Brantley, will eventually return to the majors and play big roles.*

While these types of pieces always present the "glass-half full" outlook (although Perrotto throws in some sobering facts in his asides) or, if you prefer, the "head-in-the-sand" outlook, I find it fascinating that the likes of Talbot, Valbuena, and Beau Mills (arrest not even taken into consideration) are thrown in there with the legitimately real reasons to be optimistic like CF

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Perez and The Chiz.

The second piece that explores the offices above Acta comes from [Albert Lyu at Full Count Pitch, who did an exhaustive piece on GM-in-waiting Chris Antonetti and the DiamondView system](#) that the Indians have had in place as far back as the Bartolo Colon deal in 2002. The piece is informative and attempts to rationalize the role that DiamondView plays in the Indians' decision-making process: *While DiamondView provides an objective look at players, Chris Antonetti and the Indians maintain that DiamondView is only one tool in the front office toolbox. Antonetti may rely on the business side of him when valuing objective evidence and technology, but he also understands that a team of 25 players that look great on a laptop does not necessarily translate into a winning ballclub. Not only does the organization want the best analysts to provide research, but also the best scouts to provide opinions and the best medical personnel to provide diagnoses. In nearly all cases, the Indians' scouting department has more of an impact on the front office's decisions than recommendations made solely on information that DiamondView provides. DiamondView is, after all, just a powerful tool that allows the management to gather information quickly in order to make informed and balanced personnel decisions.*

*In the end, however, the value of objective analysis in baseball is undeniable, especially with the declining economy, escalating salaries, and the rapidly approaching deadline of the current labor agreement set to expire after the 2011 season. Among the low payroll organizations, the Indians have remained a stable and statistically-informed organization, armed with several full-time statistical analysts in addition to a deep scouting department.*

The enlightening piece gives a bit of a glimpse into how the Indians make decisions and how they weigh particular variables when coming to those decisions. While it sheds no great light on how the Indians got to where they currently reside at the bottom of the AL Central, it's likely that it played a role in the decision to not only sign Rusty Branyan, but also to trade him for the two former Mariners that now find themselves in the organization.

The trading season has started and the Indians should begin to more closely resemble the team that most of us thought we would see in the rebuilding/reloading/whatever season of 2010 in the coming weeks. That won't make the "experience" of the first half of the season look any better in the rear view mirror, but hopefully it will represent the idea that the ugliness of the first half of the season is right there...in the rear view mirror.