

## A Lazy Sunday Going Into the Final Quarter

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}  
Sunday, August 15 2010 8:21 AM -

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While most of Northeast Ohio waits with bated breath for their just-ordered Seneca Wallace jersey to arrive in the mail, it is Sunday morning and (around these parts at least) that means hitting on that team that was supposed to cruise through the weak part of their schedule in the past week, your Cleveland Indians. Um...about that “success against the better teams in the AL” offering hope that this team would be able to thrive against the lesser lights in the AL, scratch that and let’s realize that the Indians (as they are presently constructed) represent one of those aforementioned “lesser lights in the AL”, regardless of the success that they saw in the nearly 40 games prior to this week.

That being said (and before getting too far ahead of ourselves), to go further on the way that the current Indians’ team is constructed, let’s all realize that a good number of the players that currently populate the Indians’ lineup are second and third options at their positions, not only for this year, but for next year as well. If you want to throw a football analogy out there (as that is what seems to be on the minds of most on the North Coast), the Indians have played nearly 75% of their games and watching the current Indians is akin to watching a battered and decimated football teams play their final 4 games with back-ups and third-stringers playing the majority of the time. While the complaints about a third-string CB getting burnt over and over or a back-up OL looking like a turnstile for the better part of a couple of games are cathartic, they often have little bearing on next year’s team.

That’s essentially what the Indians’ final month and a half is going to look like as players that don’t necessarily figure to play prominent roles in the organization (even simply after this year) are being given a chance to be on the field to see if they are worth a 40-man roster spot, much less a 25-man spot.

Even with that knowledge in hand, it doesn’t make what’s happening on the corner of Carnegie and Ontario this past week any more compelling or encouraging, particularly if you look at the offensive nature of the Indians’ lineup. However, to get back to the point of the fact that most of the players who currently find themselves striding to the batters box don’t really factor into any kind of long-term plans and really shouldn’t color your view of the 2011 lineup, let’s all realize

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that there are basically 4 position players currently playing that are almost assured of being in the 2011 lineup – Brantley, Cabrera, Choo, LaPorta. That would be 4 of the 9 spots for the 2011 team that are going to be playing for the next month and a half.

While Brantley's inclusion there is a bit presumptuous (given that he's struggled in two stints with the parent club so far and is just now getting his sea legs under him), every indication is that the Indians are going to give Brantley a starting job in 2011 based on his on-base ability and his defense, with the idea that those two skills are just two that may be enough to justify his inclusion in the lineup for the remainder of 2010 and for the 2011 season. Not included in that list is Jason Donald, who has the opportunity to assert himself as the 2B for next year (and he might want to think about bringing his glove – the one without the hole in it – to the field with him to assist in that venture), but the competition for him (Phelps and even Kipnis) certainly doesn't allow his name to be placed into the 2011 lineup automatically.

The rest of these players that we're seeing (Duncan, Marte, Marson, Crowe, Nix, Gimenez, Valbuena, and Brown) project as mere stop-gaps, bench players, or depth options for 2011 and that arrangement doesn't come without precedent with the current Indians' regime. If you remember back to 2002 (or even if you don't), the final month of the Indians' lineup included Karim Garcia, Greg LaRocca, Chris Magruder, Earl Snyder, and the never-to-be-forgotten Bill Selby.

Is that to say that we're back to 2002 in terms of the lineup?

Given the recent spate of injuries and the fact that Santana and Sizemore should be in that lineup, I would assert that the offense is further along than they were back then, particularly when you go back to the four players that obviously figure into the 2011 lineup – Brantley, Cabrera, Choo, and LaPorta. Perhaps instead of cursing the names of Shelley Duncan and Andy Marte as the team plays out the string, the thing to watch through the end of the season is to see if any real sense of optimism can be gained going forward by looking at the performances of that quartet.

In the 7 games since he returned from his most recent stint in Columbus, Brantley has posted a .357 BA / .419 OBP / .536 SLG / .955 OPS in 32 PA (during which he has also stolen 2 bases after stealing only 2 in his first 26 games over the first two stretches) and while those numbers are probably unsustainable (particularly that .536 SLG when he has never even sniffed a SLG over .400 in the Minors and had a .206 SLG in his first 112 PA this year), it sheds some hope that Brantley simply needs to make the adjustments to MLB pitching to post the high on-base numbers that he has throughout his Minor League career.

In the interest of full disclosure, Brantley is the same player who has been sent down twice this year because his first two stints with the team resulted in a .436 OPS(!) and he certainly will still have adjustments to make going forward. However, unlike some of the other OF options for 2011 (ahem, Crazy Eyes Crowe), he's still just 23 years old and the Indians should be putting him in CF to groom him for a spot there in 2011...yes, you read that right.

While Brantley has finally shown some promise, if there is a player who has consistently disappointed at the plate among this quartet this year, it is Asdrubal, whose .679 OPS to date

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bests Crowe's .664 OPS and Andy Marte's .656 OPS...but certainly not in the manner that was to be expected after what looked like his break-out year last year, when he posted a .799 OPS as a 23-year-old SS. Sure, he was injured and, yes, his defense makes him very valuable (particularly given the defensive talents around him in the infield on a team of groundball pitchers), but the Indians had better hope that Cabrera's 2010 season is simply an aberration and not the beginning of a trend the way that [another certain Indian SS was never able to replicate the success he saw as a 23-year-old in Cleveland](#), who you may or may not remember.

As a quick aside on Peralta, he's posted a .176 BA / .276 OBP / .314 SLG / .590 OPS line in Detroit, where he's been playing SS since Brandon Inge returned. Since that first game with the Motor City Kitties (in which he hit 2 HR), his OPS is .375 in 13 games. All that being said, here's [a story about the even-keel that Peralta maintains](#). The whole piece is worth a read because it represents a point of view of people who haven't been watching Peralta every day for the last 7 years and I'll provide a snippet that I absolutely love and that I use without further comment, as I don't think that commenting on these brilliant quotes need much support:

*"He's had calm at-bats, good at-bats," Leyland said. "I've been impressed. I've always liked him. He isn't jumpy. He's been a nice addition."*

*His personality is even keel on and off the diamond.*

*"From the first day I signed, I could slow the game down," Peralta said. "I try to be patient."*

The piece closes out with a quote from an AL scout commenting on Jhonny that, "He's a marginal shortstop at best, even when he played there before...third base was the place he needed to be." Given that the Tigers already may be looking to move Peralta (if he clears waivers), let's just say that getting Giovanni Soto (who has 20 K in his first 18 IP as a Lake County Captain) is going to be remembered as basically a gift between the organizations, regardless of how much success Soto ever attains.

Anywho, back to the players that bear watching in the INDIANS' lineup for the rest of the year because of the way that they factor in so prominently in 2011, the player who has revealed himself to be one of the best players in MLB is playing RF for the Indians these days – you know him as The BLC.

To date, Choo has the 14th highest OPS (at .855) in the AL, just ahead of Evan Longoria and Magglio Ordonez and is the 10th most valuable player in the AL, according to WAR as he sits between Joe Mauer and Nick Swisher. We all know about the Boras issue and the threat of Korean military service, but if nothing else can be taken from the end of this season, enjoy watching The BLC turn into one of the best players in MLB (and don't think that Boras doesn't have those ranks listed above at his right hand) and realize that despite the presence of Boras (who can only make the arbitration process ugly for the Indians), Choo is under club control for three more years, through the 2013 season.

Choo should be sitting in the middle of the Indians' lineup for the next few years, where he'll likely be joined by Santana (who will probably hit behind him) and the final player whose performance in 2010 should be taken seriously as it relates to the offensive future of this team, Matt LaPorta, who looks like the only real RH-only power option on a team and in an

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organization otherwise bereft of them. Although it's old news, LaPorta shook off the injury bug early in the season and benefitted greatly from Branyan making his way back to Seattle and has now found himself in the Tribe lineup every day.

With the stability of playing 1B nearly every day and not worrying about an infrequency of playing, LaPorta's numbers since he returned from Columbus have been a line of .271 BA / .338 OBP / .471 SLG / .809 OPS in 157 PA over 39 games and while that may not jump off of the page, he has shown consistent power and has also shown to be a rapidly improving defensive 1B. He still takes too many feeble swings at third strikes for my liking and I'd prefer to see him walk with more frequency, but his 8 2B and 6 HR since his return would project out to a 34 2B and 25 HR season at the pace he's been able to maintain since the end of June. After the likes of Benuardo and Garko (and the rest of the cast of characters that have occupied 1B since Thome left), production like that from a 25-year-old is something to build upon.

Really, that's the crux of pointing all of this out as the Indians (as they are presently constructed) have pieces to build upon and while the completeness of a fleshed-out lineup isn't obvious to everyone, the way that the historically unbelievable 1995 team was, there are young players on this offense to build around.

Those aforementioned four just happen to be the only ones that we're seeing on a nightly basis these days. Throw Santana and Sizemore on top of those 4 with hope for Donald (assuming his defense improves...and not just a little bit), and the Indians could have 7 of the 9 spots locked down with the 3B and DH conundrums presenting the real question marks going forward into next year

Maybe some of those flotsam and jetsam names fit in at 3B (Marte, Nix, Valbuena) or DH (Duncan, Brown) in the short term (and you'll notice that I remain unconvinced that Hafner will be healthy enough to play regularly and, even if he is, has devolved into a platoon DH), but it's just as likely that players that we haven't seen yet (namely Jared Goedert and Nick Weglarz) play a role in 2011 at those positions as the current denizens of Carnegie and Ontario.

While sitting through an entire Indians game these days is particularly "offensive" (see what I did there?), let's be honest about this...

Crowe is depth going forward...

Marson is depth going forward, or maybe trade bait...

Gimenez is depth as a best-case scenario for him...

Duncan is "a guy" who is 30 years old...

Marte and Nix have no guarantees to be around in 2011 and Brown and Valbuena could ride the I-71 Shuttle for the next few years with their remaining options...

If you want to complain about seeing a AAA team for the next two months, have at it and enjoy the bitterness at which you approach your life, but the players that you're seeing right now are (for the most part) pieces and parts that aren't integral portions of this team going forward and those players (Crowe, Marson, Gimenez, Duncan, Marte, Nix, Brown, and Valbuena) are guys that are being given the opportunity to assert themselves for roles in 2011 and beyond, something that didn't apply to the alternatives (Peralta, Kearns, etc.) that were previously on

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hand.

With that off of my chest, the real issue that remains troubling to visualizing this team as any sort of contender in the near future remains the rotation. As Castrovince hit on it in [his most recent Inbox](#)

, the questions that remain for the 2011 rotation are almost too innumerable to keep up with: *Fausto Carmona went from outcast to All-Star, but I wouldn't classify him as a true No. 1, shutdown starter, by any stretch of the imagination. Mitch Talbot has revealed himself to be a nice option for the back end of the rotation. Justin Masterson has been unpredictable. David Huff was horrendous much of the first half and now has a chance to redeem himself.*

*We've seen encouraging things from Josh Tomlin and Jeanmar Gomez early on in their Major League careers, and the Indians hope that continues. I'm not sure I've seen anybody get hit as hard as Carlos Carrasco was last September; we'll see how he fares this September. Alex White looks to be the most promising starting option in the upper levels of the Minor League system, but he'll likely be getting his first taste of Triple-A in April. Double-A right-hander Corey Kluber was an intriguing addition in the Jake Westbrook trade.*

It's hard to argue with any of that and, at this point, the Indians are to a point where they need to find arms that legitimately fit into the 2011 rotation and beyond with Carmona and Talbot (remember, no options) being the only players that would obviously have a spot in the 2011 rotation. So we're down to this idea of the "open audition" with the rotation going forward (not that we haven't already seen it) to see if the Indians can fill some of these holes with legitimate starting options for 2011.

In an attempt to maximize opportunities (and limit inning counts), it certainly looks like the Indians are not far away from moving to a 6-man rotation, even [if Manny Acta is hesitant to characterize it as such](#) :

*"What we're thinking about is we could have a swing man, a type of guy where if someone like [Mitch] Talbot or [Justin] Masterson needs to be shut down, this guy can step in for one of those guys each week... That way, everybody will pitch, but not necessarily in a six-man rotation. We just don't want to shut anyone down completely. We want them to keep pitching through the year. That's the main thing."*

That arrangement sounds fine and it looks like Aaron Laffey would be that "swing man", with the [news that he's going to the bullpen](#) , but I could very easily see the Indians go to a more defined 6-man rotation (even with that "swing man" in the mix) very soon because of the way that these inning counts are accumulating very quickly for these starting pitchers.

Just to give you a taste of what that refers to, take a look at the inning tallies for the starting pitchers who legitimately have the possibility to start a game down the stretch and how they stack up against the totals for each player from last year, using all innings pitched for all players, both in MLB and in the Minor Leagues:

Carmona 2009 – 171 2/3 IP

Carmona 2010 – 151 1/3 IP to date

Talbot 2009 – 68 IP 1/3

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Talbot 2010 – 125 IP to date

Masterson 2009 – 129 1/3 IP

Masterson 2010 – 133 1/3 IP to date

Gomez 2009 – 147 1/3

Gomez 2010 – 139 1/3 IP to date

Tomlin 2009 – 145 IP

Tomlin 2010 – 131 2/3 IP to date

Huff 2009 – 167 2/3 IP

Huff 2010 – 130 IP

Carrasco 2009 – 179 1/3 IP

Carrasco 2010 – 128 2/3 IP to date

Perhaps you hear Rachel Phelps' voice asserting that "maybe we're babying these guys too much", but with as many options (as uninterested as you may be in continuing to see them) as the Indians have – and that list is 7 right there and doesn't include the Laffey "swing man" role – it would certainly seem to make sense that the Indians divvy up the remaining starts across these 7 players to not only limit inning counts, but to also give these young players more exposure to MLB to see if they can either build on their short-term success in MLB (Gomez and Tomlin) or establish any sense of momentum going into 2011 with late-season success after having uneven seasons (Masterson, Huff, Carrasco) this year.

While the inclusion of Carlos Carrasco is sure to induce some eye-rolling, can we all realize that this kid is 23 years old (younger than everyone but Jeanmar Gomez on the Tribe staff) and [as Terry Pluto writes](#) (in a piece that references some hack's thoughts on 3B), "in his past 10 starts, Carlos Carrasco is 4-2 with a 3.50 ERA. On the season, he's 9-5 with a 3.92 ERA."

To that bit of optimism, I would add that in those last 10 starts (where he has compiled that 3.50 ERA), he's limited baserunners with a 1.24 WHIP and struck out 50 while walking only 19 in 54 IP over those 10 starts. If you're unimpressed by that, here is Carrasco's line over his last 5 starts:

Carrasco's last 5 starts – 2.08 ERA, 0.80 WHIP with 24 K, 6 BB in 26 IP

More importantly, Carrasco has given up only 1 HR given up in his last 37 IP after giving up 15 HR in his first 91 2/3 IP meaning that his proclivity for giving up the longball has diminished. Whether that will translate into success for the parent club in the next month and a half remains to be seen, but to see what two pitchers who did not post numbers that were nearly as impressive as Carrasco's in Columbus make the situation all the more intriguing.

At this point, who knows if Josh Tomlin or Jeanmar Gomez are illusions or truly represent legitimate starting options going forward? What is known is that Tomlin (25) has compiled a

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2.96 ERA and a 1.07 WHIP with 13 K and 5 BB in 24 1/3 IP and Gomez (22 years old) is sitting on a 1.54 ERA and a 1.07 WHIP with 12 K and 5 BB in 23 1/3 IP.

Those peripherals don't jump out for either of them as they're not missing a lot of bats, and maybe it's just the "Jeremy Sowers Alarm" going off in my head that prevents me from getting too excited, but of the two, I just don't buy Tomlin as a long-term option because of the flyball tendencies and the HR numbers.

Certainly, that doesn't mean that Tomlin doesn't have the potential to contribute to the team going forward, even as a 6th or 7th starter that can bounce up and down I-71 because of his remaining options, but Gomez represents much more intrigue for me, if only because of the Orioles' Adam Jones saying that Gomez beat Baltimore by simply throwing his sinker and [Acta's comment on him after the game](#)

that Gomez's three pitch arsenal may not even be tapped into yet:

*"For his age, his composure is above-average," Acta said. "One thing is to have three good pitches and to be able to command them, and another is composure, and he has that. He's mature beyond his age. He's able to slow things down. He hasn't been intimidated by anything up here so far. There are times out there when he looks like he's probably better off down there developing, but he's pitched well four times for us now...He just continues to go out there and pitch without fear. From what we've learned about him, he's not going to back down if a team hits him around. That's not the kind of guy that he is."*

For all of the talk about Gomez's AAA ERA of 5.20 prior to his call-up, this is the same pitcher who posted a cumulative 3.30 ERA with a 1.21 WHIP in Kinston and Akron last year as a 21-year-old, thriving against older players, particularly in Akron, where he threw a perfect game last year.

While Gomez may not be a finished product and could benefit from more seasoning (particularly when the league adjusts to him), the intimation that he may be getting by on "composure" and that the Indians are pleased with his results and (more obviously) his approach, leads us to the pitcher that actually may be the least likely to find himself in this convoluted 6-man rotation for the rest of the year as the disconnect between David Huff and the Indians' organization is palpable and neither party is going out of their way to conceal it from the media.

If you're wondering what I'm talking about, [Huff and Acta didn't see how his last start went exactly the same way](#) :

*"I felt even in the first four innings he was getting away with a lot," Acta said. "You can only do that for so long."*

*--snip--*

*"We felt like if he could have gone at least five, our bullpen has been very steady of late," Acta said. "I felt like we gave him enough for at least five innings, but he couldn't get it done."*

*Acta said Huff threw less than 50 percent first-pitch strikes.*

*"That's not going to get it done," Acta said. "That's why you don't see bloopers or anything like that. They hit him hard."*

*Huff wasn't completely onboard with his manager's assessment.*

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*"My first-pitch strike percentage was right there the first four innings," Huff said. "I was throwing my breaking ball for strikes. I was keeping them honest with my changeup."*

In case you were wondering, the manager and the organization have the hammer on this type of situation and Huff finds himself in Columbus as a result of that. Truthfully, I've long been working under the assumption that [Dave Huff is NOT Jeremy Sowers v.2.0](#) as their Minor League numbers separated Huff's ability to miss bats, something that Sowers was never able to do at any level. However, if Huff's 2009 and 2010 season have revealed anything, it's that is inability to miss bats (either due to approach or command) has caught him in the Sowersian Vortex and it's threatening to suck him down back to AAA.

Don't think that the Indians haven't noticed the tailspin and please take notice on how the two pitches that Huff talks about in the above quote are not referenced in [Acta's comments here](#) :  
*"He needs to command his fastball, simple as that" Acta said. "We've said it over and over and over, but that's what he needs to do."*

--snip--

*"He's got to work on keeping the ball down in the zone," Acta said. "Stats are not going to tell the whole story, because we already know he can go down to Triple-A and pitch well. He has to go down there and make adjustments. I think he understands that...Life is about adapting, adjusting and improvising. If it's not working, and obviously it's not right now, then he needs to change."*

--snip--

*"This is a guy who we need to be good," Acta said. "He's proven in the past that he has the stuff to have success up here. He's left-handed, has a nice, free delivery and can throw 91 mph for the duration of his outing, which is pretty good, if you can command it."*

--snip--

*"A lot of people don't realize that it's a big difference between Triple-A and the big leagues," Acta said. "This is the ultimate challenge up here. There's a reason why this is the top level and the elite guys are competing here every day. There are things down there that don't work up here...We need David to be successful, without a doubt. At this level, results count. Down there, you want to see development and all that, but when you're up here, results are what we look at."*

As if on cue, Huff's Friday night start for the Clippers was a 7 2/3 inning outing in which he allowed 5 H and 3 ER despite only striking out 3 and walking 3. [As Tony Lastoria writes](#) (in a great new feature at IPI if you haven't seen it as Al Ciammaichella and Tony go through the best and worst of the previous night's performances), "The Huffster now 7-0 with a 3.75 in 8 starts for Columbus this year. Maybe the Indians should have him wear a Clippers uniform in Cleveland?"

Read those quotes again from Acta and realize that for an organization that rarely airs its dirty laundry in public and for a manager who falls all over himself complementing players, particularly young ones (read those comments about Gomez above again), this situation with Huff is bad and actually getting worse. Between the whole Twitter flap and this obvious disagreement about approach, it wouldn't surprise me in the least to see Huff remain in AAA to finish the season, if only to send a message to him that the Indians will explore other avenues for the rotation that don't include him.

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As for the question as to why Huff wouldn't be given an opportunity instead of Justin Masterson, who some feel should be heading out to the bullpen right now, I ran across [this little comparison at Beyond the Boxscore](#)

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### **Another example of why ERA is flawed**

*Tim Hudson peripherals: 1.57 strikeout-to-walk ratio, 65% groundball rate, 4.06 xFIP*

*Justin Masterson peripherals: 1.73 strikeout-to-walk ratio, 63% groundball rate, 4.11 xFIP*

*Tim Hudson BABIP: .235*

*Justin Masterson BABIP: .347*

*Tim Hudson ERA: 2.24*

*Justin Masterson ERA: 5.47*

While I'm not going to assert that Masterson is Tim Hudson with worse defense behind him (as you'd have to be blind...or not watch the manner in which those balls having been coming off of opposing hitters' bats, whether they be grounders or not), the idea that Masterson should be moved to the bullpen now still feels premature.

Are his starts painful to watch?

Absolutely, even given how short they are, but Masterson has shown that he does have the capability to be a dominant pitcher and, while that dominance may eventually come out of the bullpen, the Indians are in a spot to give Masterson every opportunity to assert himself in the rotation because of a lack of options for the rotation that match his repertoire and his dominance (with the strikeouts and the groundballs when he's on...and he was for a short time) as possible front-to-middle-of-the-rotation options. Additionally, the depth of bullpen arms (11 relievers in AA and AAA have struck out more than a batter an inning this year) mean that the Tribe needs to parse through those relievers in the coming months and years. While Masterson may ultimately end up in the 7th or 8th inning (and I believe that he will), he is still 25 years old, with the potential of being a stalwart in the rotation. If that transition doesn't happen (and better options for the rotation obviously exist), then the Indians should move him to the bullpen as a fallback option with the idea that he can always be the reliever that he was in Boston. But until it can definitively be said that the ship has sailed on him being a starter, with better options existing, I would give Masterson a long leash in the rotation. Perhaps he hangs himself with it and ends up in the bullpen, but now is as good a time as any to find out.

Perhaps those words best sum up this last quarter of the season in 2010 – “now is as good a time as any to find out” – that can be applied to any number of players that currently populate the lineup, the rotation, and the bullpen.

It may not be inspiring or even enjoyable from game to game, but the glimmers of hope will come (hopefully from the players that figure most obviously on the team past 2010) and those are the ones that provide that hope and optimism for the future.

Since I realize that all of that suddenly got pretty depressing and serious, if you need a laugh after all of that, check [this](#) out (and I link this with the full disclosure that I'm pretty sure that I sported the same glasses frames seen here on Lee Tunnell and Tom Henke from Grades 2 to 6 of my life) and if you need something to drink after all of that, check

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[this out and support your local craft brewer](#)

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Finally, [here is a tremendous piece from Castrovine on Luke Holko](#) , the little boy who was struck in the head while attending a Mahoning Valley Scrappers game last year. It updates the amazing progress made by Luke and incorporates the life-changing effect that one moment in time had on more lives than just that of Luke.

It is an inspiring piece and extremely well-written, just be ready to swallow hard during it or maybe even grab a Kleenex, which may already be within your reach if you have been watching the Tribe at all this week.