

A Lazy Sunday with “The Keys”

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Sunday, September 19 2010 9:47 AM -



On a morning when most red-meat eating sports fans that populate the North Coast are down near the lakefront eating...well, red-meat and quaffing away at something that will sufficiently lubricate them by 1:00 PM, Indians' fans (all couple hundred of us these days) are left to dissect an Indians-Royals series with the cellar in the AL Central on the line.

Despite some interminable rain delays, the Indians have taken the first two from the Royals as their climb out of last place has reached the 62-win “plateau”. Of course, that means that the Indians need to win only one more game in their final 14 to be assured of avoiding a 100-loss season and (while anything is possible with the current Indians' team) it would seem that the Indians will finish the year with a loss total somewhere in the low-to-mid-90's.

Nevertheless, those 14 games remain and while most eyes are fixed on the Orange and Brown and/or the Scarlett and Gray, the Indians' season...say it with me...rolls on in earnest and as long as it does and it is Sunday, we'll keep the white sphere rolling with another Lazy one.

And with that, we're off...

Starting from the top, whenever Anthony Castrovicce has broken open the mailbag and is working the Inbox, that's where we're going to get started and, as usual, AC doesn't disappoint.

As a quick aside, is it wild to anyone else that Castrovicce's “Inbox” is must-read material while the “Letters” to the other beat writers are simply fodder for humor and satire because of the ([borrowing a phrase here](#)

) anachronistic nature of some of the other beat writers?

Regardless, let's all enjoy AC and the Inbox before he moves onto bigger and better things as a sports journalist, which is inevitable and deservedly so. Back to the matter at hand, [the lead topic for the “Inbox” is one Matt MaTola](#)

and what can be gleaned from his 2010 season and how it relates to his future potential:

... the Indians don't like to judge a player on his first 500 at-bats, and LaPorta will have every opportunity to show improvement next season. He has shown the raw power to hit -- and even mis-hit -- balls out of the ballpark. But his general inconsistency has clearly demonstrated his

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immaturity as a Major League hitter. He's been accused of being pull-happy.

Whether LaPorta's inconsistency is derived from a lack of focus, lingering issues with the left hip or the simple acclimation process many young hitters go through at this level is a question I can't answer. All I know is the Indians have to hope for more from LaPorta next season, or the CC swap will receive even more scrutiny than it has already.

This is the LaPorta conundrum in a nutshell as he's been wildly inconsistent and prone to “Peraltan” (and this should find a place in the Indians' dictionary, along with the already-minted “Sowersian”) periods of ineffectiveness at the plate, looking bad on swings-and-misses and showing none of the power that was purported to be MLB-read a solid 2 ½ years ago. Among his hits (and there haven't been many this year), only 6.5% of them have gone for extra bases and if you want some context on that, 6.3% of Tofu Lou Marson's hits have gone for extra bases and 6.1% of the hits by Trevor Crowe (who should not be counted on to be much more than an easy DFA decision going forward) this season have gone for extra bases. No, seriously...

The addendum to that is that MaTola is not far off from his 26th birthday and his season compares not too favorably with an older former top prospect that is likely seeing his last couple of weeks in an Indians uniform:

Marte – 2010 (Age 26)

.212 BA / .288 OBP / .363 SLG / .651 OPS in 163 PA

LaPorta – 2010 (Age 25)

.220 BA / .304 OBP / .361 SLG / .665 OPS in 385 PA

While I'm not going to enter the realm of calling LaPorta a “bust” at this stage in his young career, he certainly has firmed up his spot on the “disappointment” side of the ledger for 2010. Of course, there remains the possibility that his hip issues have robbed him of some of his power or have forced him into some bad habits at the plate, and if that is indeed the case, the Indians better hope that LaPorta heals quickly and can translate his AAA success to MLB in short order for next year. Going further on this, [Jon Steiner has a great piece on LaPorta at WFNY](#), in which he paints the situation pretty accurately:

In 579 big league plate appearances (about a full season), LaPorta has a .232/.306/.384 line. Those are numbers you might tolerate from a slick-fielding SS who saves runs with his glove, but not from a lumbering first baseman with little-to-no defensive value. In short, LaPorta must adjust next season, or his big league career could be in serious jeopardy.

MaTola has shown power in the Minor Leagues, but this year his numbers have paled in comparison to even what “place-holder” Ryan Garko did in his final full year as an Indian (.273 BA / .346 OBP / .404 SLG / .750 OPS...as a 27-year-old, by the by) and if LaPorta was seen as an upgrade over the likes of Garko and Jordan Brown (whose slap-hitting tendencies simply aren't suited to translate for a LF/1B/DH in MLB), well...that “upgrade” isn't too evident these days.

Certainly, the pedigree is still there for LaPorta as a top pick/former top prospect who has

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mashed in MiLB, but his importance to the future success of this team (in the short and long-term) cannot be underestimated as a RH bat (and supposedly a power RH bat) to this lineup going forward. To that end, let's think about what the 2011 lineup figures to look like, and I'm listing these players in order of how much confidence I have in them in 2011 and not as a proposed 2011 batting order:

Choo – Left

Santana – Switch

Hafner – Left

Cabrera – Switch

Sizemore – Left

Brantley – Left

...you picking this up yet?

LaPorta – Right

Donald – Right

Fill in the 3B – Probably Right

Sure, Santana is a switch-hitter, but everyone knows that he posted an OPS of 1.002 as a LH hitter and a .582 as a RH hitter this year, right? By no means am I saying that this will be par for the course for Santana (MiLB OPS as a LH hitter of .879 and a MiLB OPS as a RH hitter of .960), but the team is otherwise completely devoid of RH power (and Weglarz and The Chiz are both...wait for it...LEFT-HANDED), unless LaPorta is able to step into that void...something he needs to do in short order.

The LaPorta “issue” is emblematic of the MAJOR issues facing the Indians going forward as Vince Grzegorek absolutely nails (in [a “Dear John” letter saying goodbye to the Indians’ season for Yahoo! in a piece that you must read](#)) when Vince captures the importance of the recently-acquired prospects in the grand scheme of things as to how the Indians find themselves where they are and where they're going: *We get it. You had to trade Lee, Martinez, and Sabathia. You couldn't afford to sign them. Economic landscape of baseball... blah blah blah. We get it. (It's here that I'd add you didn't have to fork over \$57 million over four years to Travis Hafner, but whatever.) Really, we get it though — small market team, narrow window, gotta trade and draft well, build through the minors, everyone has to stay healthy. This year wasn't unexpected. We knew you would be bad. But...
... well, it's almost time for those prospects and acquisitions to come through. Probably not next year, but definitely the year after. **You had to unload your gaudy soon-to-be free agents but you had better show us something in return. Brantley, Santana, LaPorta, Carrasco and others need to play and produce and not turn into Trevor Crowe or Marte or Jeremy Sowers Part II.***

Admittedly, that last line was bolded by me for emphasis and I will say again to [please click on the piece as Vince does completely nail the tenor of the season](#)

and avoids the easy cheap shots at the organization that so many of those that write about the team are so quick to simply fall back on, putting together an accurate assessment and recap of the nightmarish season that still hasn't ended.

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Again, what stands out is the realization that “Brantley, Santana, LaPorta and others need to play and produce” will ultimately determine how quickly/slowly this “Reload/Rebuild/Whatever” starts to bear fruit or dies on the vine, with the future of the Indians perhaps at stake.

Among all of the players that have been acquired over the past two years, the two most important pieces are the aforementioned LaPorta and Carlos Carrasco, mainly because the complementary pieces acquired via trade are nice (and don't mistake that for me calling Santana or CF Perez just “complementary pieces”), but the middle-of-the-order hitter and the front-end-of-the-rotation starter are what you're looking for when you're trading reigning Cy Young Award winners.

As much as Jason Knapp is claimed as the “key” to the Lee deal, Carrasco's importance to the return to contention for the Indians is much more critical and his recent success hopefully serves as a harbinger of things to come, [as Terry Pluto writes](#), “at 23 with a 93 mph fastball, excellent control and a sharp slider he can throw at any point in the count, he seems ready to take a prominent spot in next season's rotation.”

For the sake of the Indians and their short-and-long-term future, they had better hope so (and here's where I drop in the fact that the collective numbers for Carmona, Carrasco, and Masterson in the month of September are a cumulative 1.72 ERA, a cumulative 0.97 WHIP, and 56 K against 16 BB in 68 innings over 10 games), and if what [a scout tells B-Pro's John Perrotto on Carlos Carrasco](#)

is true, the Indians may have a young pitcher who has turned the first proverbial corner towards effectiveness:

Indians right-hander Carlos Carrasco: *“He looks a lot more confident than he did when he was up in the big leagues last September. He throws 93 mph but the big difference is that he's throwing his curveball and changeup for strikes now. If he can keep doing that, he's going to be a very effective starter for a long time.”*

While the “going to be a very effective starter for a long time” line conveys a bit of a dismissive view of him, (and I don't know how many times this has to be repeated, but I'll keep repeating it) he's 23 years old and if he's progressed to this point and the Indians control him for 6 years as a “very effective starter”, some optimism does return in terms of Carrasco's future, something that didn't exist at this time last year.

The 2010 Indians find themselves in the bed that they've made and while [the “analysts” at FanGraphs fall all over themselves over Kyle Drabek's debut](#)

(in a piece that is interesting to note in that it mentions that Drabek really doesn't have an effective change-up yet) and t

[he Phillies' return for Lee](#)

has amounted to the “key” to the trade being demoted from AA to Single-A, another player being arrested on cocaine possession, and the third player (a pitcher no less) having hip surgery after posting a 4.82 cumulative ERA as a 21-year-old in A+/AA, there's no question that the returns for CC and Lee are going to determine where this team goes from here.

Chief among players that are going to determine the short-and-long-term future of this team are

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LaPorta and Carrasco and, while that may scare the pants off of you, those two players are going to be given every opportunity to justify their inclusion in those trades and the prospect pedigree that led them to be ostensibly the main players acquired for the two biggest trading chips in the breakdown of the Indians' team of the mid-to-late-2000s.

If LaPorta turns into a middle-of-the-order presence from the right side of the plate, things get a lot easier for the Tribe going forward, just as the future of the rotation looks much brighter if Carrasco's brief stint with the Indians this year is a glimpse as to what's coming and isn't remembered as simply being a tease.

That may be stating the obvious, but it cannot be stated forcefully enough that those two players are the key players for the success (or, let's be honest...for the failure) of the Indians over the next 3 to 5 years as we've seen that the pipeline was essentially dry and covered in cobwebs when both were added to the organization and their presence as “ready” or “near-ready” contributors to the middle-of-the-order or the front-to-middle-of-the-rotation will go a long way in determining what the Indians' 2011 and 2012 season looks like and whether the Indians truly are stuck in a vortex that will continue to drag them down or if the seeds of success have already been sown and simply need time to germinate and bloom.

While optimism can be gleaned from the recent performance of Carrasco, the same cannot be said for that of LaPorta (who, as Rick Manning said, [“did what you're supposed to do” to a fastball down the middle last night](#)) and the importance of BOTH of those players to turn into more than “mistakes” or “miscalculations” on the part of the Indians will ultimately determine whether better days are on the horizon because it's always darkest before dawn or if the Indians are on the precipice of an extended period of darkness.