

## Going Around the Developmental Curve

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Thursday, September 30 2010 7:50 AM - Last Updated Friday, October 01 2010 8:20 AM

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Despite the Indians experiencing a last bit of success as 2010 comes to a welcome finish, the overwhelming bad taste in the mouth from a season gone horribly wrong remains as there are nights when the light at the end of the tunnel seems to be getting smaller, instead of things coming into focus throughout the course of the season.

Back when the season started, lo those many days ago, the thought was that the young offensive players for the Tribe would make their way in Cleveland while the pitching would remain a work in progress. The youth of the team was unmistakable, as was the sense that 2010 represented a year that would be looked upon as providing some building blocks for the future.

Since the Indians had just undergone a massive tear-down and build-up earlier in the decade, the question emerged as to where this 2010 season would fit in that developmental curve that lasted from 2002 (the bottom) through 2005 and 2007 (the peak) and into 2009 (the bottom once more) and while some (ahem...me) floated the idea that t [he 2010 Tribe would line up favorably](#)

[to the 2004 Indians](#)

, comparing the 2010 season prior to the season with the 2004 team was presumptive and more than a little optimistic, given that the 2004 Tribe finished with an 80-82 record and chased the division lead into August.

Knowing what we know now, and with the season nearly complete, little doubt remains that the 2003 Indians (68-94) remain a much more apt comparison to the 2010 Indians (68-91) and it brings up something that needs to be done in terms of putting the proper context around this trainwreck of a season.

That context is that it needs to be asked where the Indians (as they are currently constructed) truly are in this developmental life-cycle in terms of how it relates to the build-up of the previous incarnation. Since some schools of thought existed that the Indians' offense would be able to mature and develop into a productive unit (it didn't) and that the rotation would be completely devoid of bright spots (it wasn't, with Fausto, Carrasco, and to a lesser degree, Masterson), the 2010 season is pretty much finished and the question of where this team sits, in comparison to past incarnations, is worth a look.

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The review, which could be seen as an exercise in futility by attempting to tie two separate teams together, becomes necessary because the 2002 to 2005 build-up is a body of work that exists from this Front Office and it undoubtedly is being used as a blueprint to get this team back into contention in short order. Additionally, outgoing [GM Mark Shapiro had this to say to the Akron Beacon Journal](#) in terms of where he thinks the team is in the life-cycle of a small-market team:

*"I try to get back to '02 and '03 and what it felt like and look at us now and think we're in a better position now than we were in '03 and probably even '04. If you go around the diamond, we've got more talent and our system is in a better position than it was then."*

Rather than reading this and simply sitting around, exchanging "harrumphs" - hey, I didn't get a "harrumph" out of that guy – how about taking a look at this from a rational standpoint and try to determine whether the Tribe is really are better off than they were in 2003 and "probably even 2004"?

The 2004 team went 80-82 and probably represents a best-case scenario for 2011 so, again, let's dismiss this as wishful thinking (and I'll show you why in a minute here) and go back to that idea that the team is "in a better position now" than they were in 2003.

To that end, here are the numbers put up by the offense and the pitching staff, in terms of runs scored and runs allowed, for each incarnation of the Tribe, with 3 games left to play in 2010:

2003 Runs Scored – 699

2010 Runs Scored (to date) – 632

2003 Runs Allowed – 778

2010 Runs Allowed (to date) – 737

"Year of the Pitcher" and all...I know, but the PITCHING in 2010 is the aspect of the team that surpassed where the 2003 team was at this stage of development and lest you think that we're comparing two unrelated groups of players in terms of age, check this out:

2003 Average Age of Hitters – 27.0

2010 Average Age of Hitters – 27.3

2003 Average Age of Pitchers – 26.3

2010 Average Age of Pitchers – 26.3

Going further on this, check out the number of players used each season:

2003 – 54 Hitters, 29 Pitchers

2010 – 38 Hitters, 22 Pitchers

Why is this so interesting?

One would think that when development is the main thrust of the organization, that the number of players that cycle through the lineup and the pitching staff is going to be long and varied. Despite the fact that the Indians did battle injuries and moved a number of veterans at the Trading Deadline, the turnover and number of players used in 2010 is significantly lower than what we saw in 2003. Just to bring in the 2004 team that the Indians will aspire to next year, here are the 2004 numbers:

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2004 – 52 Hitters, 30 Pitchers

What's amazing as the 2010 season draws to a close is that they didn't just continue to throw guys out there (while it certainly seemed like they were) and stuck with the players (for the most part) that they figured on when the season began. Interestingly, the number of players used in 2010 is actually closer to what the 2005 team looked like, as they used 38 hitters and 17 pitchers. Though that's the last time that you see the 2010 team and the 2005 team used in the same sentence, or even in comparable terms, let's get back to the idea that we're attempting to compare the 2010 team with the 2003 team to see if the current team really is "in a better position" than they were in 2003, when they were still two years away from winning 93 games.

Since we've already looked at the overall numbers and ages, how about taking it by hitters and pitchers, grouped into smaller designations to see how the two teams stack up. Starting off, here are the hitters listed by plate appearances (more than 150 PA), age, and OPS+ for that year, taking it position-by-position grouping for the sake of simply not listing these guys:

### **Catchers – 2003 Indians**

Josh Bard (Age 25) – 329 PA, 78 OPS+

Tim Laker (Age 33) – 176 PA, 72 OPS+

Victor Martinez (Age 24) – 174 PA, 84 OPS+

### **Catchers – 2010 Indians**

Lou Marson (Age 23) – 287 PA, 59 OPS+

Carlos Santana (Age 24) – 192 PA, 143 OPS+

Santana and Victor certainly represent the duo worthy of comparison and I say this while wearing my tear-stained Victor jersey, I would certainly prefer Santana v.2010 over Vic v.2003 in terms of prospect pedigree, power, and overall upside. While the injury that The Axe Man sustained tempers the enthusiasm, it is not enough to say that I would say that the Indians aren't better off now at catcher than they were in 2003...and I say that with an El Capitan-sized hole in my heart.

### **Corner Infielders – 2003 Indians**

Casey Blake (Age 29) – 621 PA, 93 OPS+

Ben Broussard (Age 26) – 429 PA, 100 OPS+

### **Corner Infielders – 2010 Indians**

Matt LaPorta (Age 25) – 413 PA, 88 OPS+

Jhonny Peralta (Age 28) – 373 PA, 95 OPS+

Jayson Nix (Age 27) – 291 PA, 99 OPS+

Russell Branyan (Age 34) – 190 PA, 127 OPS+

Andy Marte (Age 26) – 180 PA, 95 OPS+

This grouping is absolutely fascinating as the Indians find themselves in the same place they were in 2003 in terms of 3B, in the middle of cycling through a litany of marginal retreats (one of whom turned out to be Casey Blake) in the hopes that those "stop-gaps" could provide some time before a more compelling prospect came along. While that "more compelling" prospect didn't exist for the 2003 Tribe until Andy Marte was acquired (and is anyone else shocked that Marte has an OPS+ of 95, which is admittedly still low for a corner infielder), the Indians do

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have an internal stop-gap in Cord Phelps and perhaps another one in Nix (if his glove improves SUBSTANTIALLY, though his numbers compared to Blake are intriguing), who would eventually give way to the “compelling prospect” in The Chiz.

As for 1B, the inclusion of Broussard on this list and the fact that he out-performed LaPorta in these respective years points again to the disappointment in the 2010 season for LaPorta. When you figure that that Broussard was generally seen as more of a placeholder (although the team did eventually turn him into Choo) or a platoon player as MaTola has been unquestionably painted as a potential member of the next “core” group of players. While giving up on LaPorta (or taking PA away from him in 2011) is irresponsible, next year represents the year that LaPorta needs to separate himself from the Broussard/Garko mold and into what was envisioned when he was acquired back in 2008.

### **Middle Infielders – 2003 Indians**

Brandon Phillips (Age 22) – 393 PA, 48 OPS+

Omar Vizquel (Age 36) – 250 PA, 78 OPS+

Jhonny Peralta (Age 21) – 270 PA, 67 OPS+

John McDonald (Age 28) – 233 PA, 45 OPS+

### **Middle Infielders – 2010 Indians**

Asdrubal Cabrera (Age 24) – 412 PA, 86 OPS+

Jason Donald (Age 25) – 325 PA, 93 OPS+

Luis Valbuena (Age 24) – 294 PA, 53 OPS+

Whereas the 2003 team gave both Phillips and Peralta their first taste of MLB, both players were extremely young and showed it at the plate as each was given a pretty long leash (in Peralta's case because of an injury to Vizquel), something that was afforded in 2010 to both Donald and Valbuena. While Valbuena hung himself with the length of the rope, Donald contributed to the team, even if it was not at a level that will guarantee him anything in terms of a position for the entirety of the 2011 season. Regardless, both Donald and Cabrera outperformed their 2003 counterparts, and while the disappointment is unquestioned in terms of Cabrera's offensive output, the Indians' middle infield seems to be further along the developmental stage in 2010 (with Kipnis waiting in the wings) than they were in 2003, when promise was certainly there in Phillips and Peralta, if not results.

### **Outfielders – 2003 Indians**

Jody Gerut (Age 25) – 525 PA, 120 OPS+

Milton Bradley (Age 25) – 471 PA, 147 OPS+

Coco Crisp (Age 23) – 447 PA, 76 OPS+

Matt Lawton (Age 31) – 429 PA, 104 OPS+

Shane Spencer (Age 31) – 232 PA, 103 OPS+

### **Outfielders – 2010 Indians**

The BLC (Age 27) – 630 PA, 145 OPS+

Trevor Crowe (Age 26) – 460 PA, 82 OPS+

Austin Kearns (Age 30) – 342 PA, 116 OPS+

Mike Brantley (Age 23) – 304 PA, 68 OPS+

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Everyone remembers when Jody Gerut and Milton Bradley were two of the “building blocks” of this organization in 2003, right? This grouping, to me, shows how quickly perceptions and realities can change as the idea that Gerut, Bradley, and Crisp represented the future quickly gave way to Bradley taking a cab home from a Spring Training game, Gerut bottoming out, and Crisp being seen as an easily-replaceable piece, dealt after the 2005 season.

What that means for the 2010 Tribe, I can't really say as Choo operates on a different plane than anyone that was on the 2003 team, in terms of realized production AND potential and Crowe and Kearns won't (or at least shouldn't) be a part of this team past this year. As for the youngsters, Brantley and Crisp are an interesting little pair here as Brantley is often touted as a future “core” player while Crisp was often dismissed as a useful, if not necessary, piece and their performance as 23-year-olds with more than 300 PA make the comparison an intriguing one as Brantley will likely do what Crisp never did next year – move Sizemore (not on this list because he only had 140 PA this year and who was the one real addition to the mix in 2004) to LF.

### **Designated Hitters – 2003 Indians**

Travis Hafner (Age 26) – 324 PA, 115 OPS+

Ellis Burks (Age 38) – 228 PA, 109 OPS+

### **Designated Hitters – 2010 Indians**

Travis Hafner (Age 33) – 449 PA, 129 OPS+

Shelley Duncan (Age 30) – 248 PA, 105 OPS+

If you think of Hafner's career on a bell curve, 2003 represented his path up the curve and 2010 represented another year coming down from the top...it just so happens that we have no idea where the bottom of the curve lies for Hafner. While Acta's recent comments that, “we're going into Spring Training with the hope that he has no limitations” is a song that I can't seem to get out of my head, Hafner showed in 2010 that he is, at the least, a productive part-time player. Not the level of “productive” that you'd want from the salary number going his way, but it would seem that hope springs eternal from the Indians (even if that HAS to be their public face) when

[Acta had this to say on Hafner](#)

:

Last year he was unable to play more than three games in a row, and this year he started the season without restriction. We were just managing him to 5-6 games a week. He hurt his shoulder and went on the DL [in August], but after that he's been able to play 4-5 games a week, which is better than what he did last year.

He was obviously expecting more production this year, but he's hit 29 doubles and 12 home runs. We've talked to Travis, and the hope for next year is he'll have had one more offseason under his belt on that shoulder.

“One more offseason under his belt on that shoulder” eventually gives way to the fact that he's going on 34 years old and that the issue doesn't seem to be simply going away. That being said, there are other positions at which the Indians seem to be better off in 2010 going forward than they were in 2003...it's just that DH isn't one of them.

All told, if you had to judge the offense of the 2010 Tribe versus the 2003 Tribe in terms of

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future expectations (and it's here that I'll drop in that the player with the most PA from that 2003 Tribe was a 29-year-old 3B in Lacey Cake and the OPS+ leader among players with more than 150 PA was a 25-year-old player who would be traded PRIOR to the 2004 season in Milt Bradley), I'd break it down that the Indians are better off behind the plate, in the middle infield, and in RF right now with the positions of 1B, 3B, CF, and LF largely dependent upon the maturation of LaPorta, Brantley, and eventually Chisenhall as well as what type of player Sizemore (who, again, was the only real "prospect" not included in these 2003 groupings who arrived the next year and, even then, Grady had only 159 PA in 2004) returns as determining whether the Indians are truly "in a better position now than they were in 2003"

The question has been asked ad nauseum, but it comes down to whether the young players that cut their teeth in MLB this year (Santana, LaPorta, Brantley, and Donald most notably) can make the same leap that Martinez, Hafner, Peralta, and even Crisp did between the 2003 and 2004 season as the Indians went from scoring 699 runs in 2003 to scoring a whopping 858 runs in 2004, largely because of the steps taken by Hafner (OPS+ of 162 in 2004), Martinez (OPS+ of 125), and even Coco Crisp (OPS+ of 110) towards becoming known quantities. Back in 2004, even Ben Broussard (OPS+ of 127) and Casey Blake (OPS+ of 122) posted the best offensive years of their career while neither was seen at the time as much more than placeholders until something better came along.

In Choo, the Indians of 2010 have a player that didn't exist in their lineup in 2003 and when Shapiro says that the Indians "are in a better position now than" they were "in 2003 or even 2004", the truth is that they're probably somewhere between those two and whether they continue to develop offensively relies on a number of factors, none of which would seem to be sure things.

Interestingly, the entire Shapiro quote that served as the impetus for this is that "we're in a better position now than we were in '03 and probably even '04", which continues with "if you go around the diamond, we've got more talent and our system is in a better position than it was then" and that notion of "around the diamond" is interesting because while the 2010 offense may compare favorably to the 2003 team with the hope that some of the 2004 break-outs await particular players in 2004, the pitching remains another story.

With that little intro laid out there, here are the pitchers for both the 2003 Tribe and this season's club, listed by innings pitched (more than 35 IP), age, and ERA+ for that year

### **Rotation – 2003 Indians**

CC Sabathia (Age 22) – 197 2/3 IP, 122 ERA+

Jason Davis (Age 23) – 165 1/3 IP, 94 ERA+

Brian Anderson (Age 31) – 148 IP, 119 ERA+

Jake Westbrook (Age 25) – 133 IP, 102 ERA+

Billy Traber (Age 23) – 111 2/3 IP, 84 ERA+

Ricardo Rodriguez (Age 25) – 81 2/3 IP, 77 ERA+

Cliff Lee (Age 24) – 52 1/3 IP, 122 ERA+

Jason Stanford (Age 26) – 50 IP, 123 ERA+

### **Rotation – 2010 Indians**

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Fausto Carmona (Age 26) – 204 1/3 IP, 103 ERA+

Justin Masterson (Age 25) – 178 IP, 82 ERA+

Mitch Talbot (Age 26) – 152 1/3 IP, 85 ERA+

Jake Westbrook (Age 32) – 127 2/3 IP, 84 ERA+

Dave Huff (Age 25) – 79 2/3 IP, 63 ERA+

Josh Tomlin (Age 25) – 68 IP, 87 ERA+

Jeanmar Gomez (Age 22) – 57 2/3 IP, 84 ERA+

Carlos Carrasco (Age 23) – 38 2/3 IP, 121 ERA+

What initially jumps out from that 2003 Rotation (other than the 2 future Cy Young Award winners) is the youth and how many innings those young pitchers threw that year as 526 2/3 innings were pitched by starters that were 24 or younger (Sabathia, Davis, Traber, and Lee) and even the pitchers that were over 24 years old weren't that much older as only Brian Anderson and Jason Stanford were starters over 25.

Additionally, 5 of the 8 starters from 2003 posted ERA+ over 100 with a 22-year-old CC posting an ERA+ of 122 in nearly 200 IP. Compare that to the 2010 version, where 2 of the 8 starters listed posted ERA+ of 100 or better and even those that were sub-100 performed at a level lower than what Jason Davis put forth in 2003. Some of this speaks to the volatile nature of pitching and trying to project success for any arm, but the fact that CC put together a nearly 200 inning season posting an ERA+ of 122 speaks to the potential that certainly seemed to exist in that young staff.

If 2010 showed the Indians anything, it was that they are currently full of back-end-of-the-rotation guys like Talbot, Tomlin, and Gomez and have a few arms that project as solid middle-of-the-rotation guys in Carmona and perhaps Masterson (assuming September shows that he realized the adjustments he needed to make), but short of Carrasco, who put up an ERA+ that was close to what CC did in 2003, albeit with nearly 160 IP and one year older, the Tribe lacks that pitching rotation that was the linchpin of those 2005 and 2007 teams. That is not meant to be overly dismissive of the current group (as I think that I have been overtly optimistic, particularly in the cases of Carmona, Carrasco, and even Masterson) as the potential has shown. Instead, it reflects on what was in place in terms of rotational arms in 2003.

This is all “old” news, I know, but if we're putting this 2010 team in the proper context in terms of development, that 2003 staff far outpaces what the 2010 staff did...and at a generally younger age. The argument could be made that the Indians currently have players in the Minors (White, Gardner, and even Pomeranz) who project to join this mix going forward, but Adam Miller and Jeremy Sowers were two names that were thought to represent re-enforcements for this 2003 group from within that either never arrived or never panned out. Whether a similar fate (knocking on any wood I can find) awaits any of the Indians' prospects (and Rondon has already undergone Tommy John) remains to be seen.

Essentially, the lack of a “CC”-type player is what separates these two groups. Certainly, it could be argued that Sabathia is the type of 22-year-old player who would separate just about group of pitchers from having an obvious “ace” from having a collection of arms who can be cobbled together to create an effective staff, but seeing as how the 2005 and 2007 teams were built on starting pitching around CC's left arm, the differences between 2003 and 2010 begin to

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emerge.

That being said, if the team is further ahead in terms of position players, although how far ahead will reveal itself in 2011, and behind in rotation options, where the 2010 team comes out in much better shape is in the bullpen:

### **Bullpen – 2003 Indians**

Terry Mulholland (Age 40) – 99 IP, 90 ERA+

Danys Baez (Age 25) – 75 2/3 IP, 116 ERA+

David Riske (Age 26) – 74 2/3 IP, 193 ERA+

Jason Boyd (Age 30) – 52 1/3 IP, 103 ERA+

Jack Cressend (Age 28) – 43 IP, 176 ERA+

### **Bullpen – 2010 Indians**

Tony Sipp (Age 26) – 62 IP, 93 ERA+

Chris Perez (Age 24) – 61 2/3 IP, 225 ERA+

Rafael Perez (Age 28) – 60 IP, 119 ERA+

Aaron Laffey (Age 25) – 54 2/3 IP, 85 ERA+

Hector Ambriz (Age 26) – 48 1/3 IP, 71 ERA+

Frank Herrmann (Age 26) – 43 2/3 IP, 96 ERA+

Joe Smith (Age 26) – 38 1/3 IP, 99 ERA+

If nothing else can be taken from 2010, at the very least, it represents the first time that the Indians can count on a young closer that became a bona-fide closer for the Indians since, well...I guess Jose Mesa, although even he was more of a failed starter (Joe Table started 33 games for the 1993 Tribe, but you knew that) than a lockdown reliever from the start. In Chris F. Perez, the Indians have the (young) player who brings the attitude AND the filth to the mound in the 9th inning that this team could have used...well, about three years ago.

Regardless of his arrival date, Perez brings some stability to the 9th inning and some pieces and parts are starting to emerge around him, albeit slowly. To simply compare the MLB 2003 relievers – of whom Riske and Baez, operating on an ill-concieved contract, are the only arms under 28 who logged more than 35 innings – to the 2010 mix with the likes Rafael Perez and Tony Sipp (interestingly both LH) establishing themselves (or re-establishing themselves) as viable relievers going forward doesn't quite do justice to the difference between the two situations. While the 2010 Indians had older relievers who may not figure into the team's future for too long, namely Jensen Lewis (ERA+ of 126) and Justin Germano (ERA+ of 178), who are not included on this list because of too few innings pitched, the bulk of innings went to young arms and while those results were...um, mixed, in terms of guys like Heck Ambriz and Joe Smith and Frank Herrmann struggling to find consistency, much less success, the difference between 2003 and 2010 lies beneath for the bullpens.

The 2003 team had Fernando Cabrera a year away, but little else on the horizon in terms of bullpen prospects as most of the relievers that waded through the bullpen from 2003 to 2009 represented either non-prospects, lottery tickets (although Rafael Betancourt would eventually emerge as a winning lottery ticket), retreads, and lost causes as the bullpen would eventually deep-six the 2006 and 2008 seasons, or at least play a major role in the team's struggles.

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If anything, the 2010 team looks to be better positioned with the likes of Perez, Sipp, and Perez already topside with the mix of Smith, Herrmann, Pestano, and even Lewis and Germano among the ranks to sift through that are already in Cleveland. Below them, arms like Bryce Stowell, Josh Judy, Zach Putnam, Jess Todd, Rob Bryson, and Bryan Price all looking like the swing-and-miss relievers that the organization failed at producing for far too many years. Attrition and injury will remove a number of those names from consideration as the years pass, but the Indians have built up a small stable of high-powered arms and designated them specifically for the bullpen, which puts the club unquestionably in a much better place going forward than where they were in 2003.

All told, if you really want to surmise where this 2010 team is on this developmental curve, they probably are somewhere between 2003 and 2004, although much of that is based on the promise and pedigree of the young hitters. The starting rotation has much larger question marks that means that it takes an awful lot of squinting through that half-full glass to see 2011 shaping up like 2004, given that so many of the young players (Carrasco, LaPorta, Brantley, and Masterson) need to take a major step towards consistency while other older players are fighting their way back from injury or ineffectiveness (Sizemore, Hafner, and Cabrera).

Beyond that, the Indians need to hope to avoid the regressions and injuries that are unforeseen in Spring Training and that have become a part of the seasons' narratives since 2008. Whether they can mature and develop while avoiding pitfalls elsewhere and plugging in more talent remains to be seen, but it has been done before as that 2003 team evolved into a contender in 2005 and again in 2007. The transformation wasn't done overnight and didn't have its surprise contributors (like Blake) and casualties (like Bradley and Gerut), but the Indians are attempting to pour the concrete again on the road that is sure to crest and dip and take many turns.

Whether that road leads anywhere better than where we've been...well, that's a question that will reveal itself as we go along for another ride.