

Jon & Paul Plus Baseball: Springing Into A “Plan”

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Thursday, February 10 2011 9:00 AM - Last Updated Wednesday, February 09 2011 10:43 PM



Spring Training is just around the corner and while everyone on The Reservation is finally exhaling with the (albeit expected) news that [The Axe Man is ready for action in Arizona](#) , it's time to break out the latest installment of the oh-so-popular series of “Jon & Paul Plus Baseball” where

[Jon Steiner](#)

from

[WFNY](#)

and I go diving into the depths of the Indians. Today, we'll take a not-so-quick look (as is our wont) at whether the uneventful Spring Training that we stand at the precipice of is where the Indians should be in their “contention cycle” - which is to say, at the bottom...

JON: As the calendar turns to February, I've been thinking: what's the biggest Spring Training story for the Indians this year? Is it third base? Second Base? The fifth starting spot? I guess, but I don't really think we're going to learn much about the first two until late March, and the fifth starter thing? Let's be honest: fifth starters don't really matter.

No, what strikes me as the biggest story coming out of Spring Training is that this team is coming off consecutive 90-loss seasons, and nothing has really changed. We're left looking at largely the same roster that we had last year, with (hopefully) fewer injuries.

Does this strike you as a problem? Should there be more intrigue and moving parts for a team with so much room for improvement?

PAUL: That's a great question leading into a Spring Training that looks to be largely boring in terms of “position” battles, which is unquestionably surprising for a team at the bottom of the “contention cycle” as the Indians purport to be. Truthfully, the answer as to why there doesn't

seem to be any compelling “battle” lies in the fact that the pieces that are now lining up in Cleveland and Columbus were put in place for the last two years, pointing to 2011 as a vetting year and 2012 and/or 2013 as the legitimate timeframes as to when the Indians would be looking to contend.

When you think about it, despite questions up and down the 25-man, no moves were made this off-season because the Indians have been making so many moves in an attempt to line up this specific young talent, so it’s time to see what happens with that “young talent”...that’s the idea, right?

Certainly that has some merit, but even with those “pieces” lining up for the parent club, what I find myself increasingly convinced of is that the Indians’ ideas for how these guys line up is already set in their minds. That is to say, they know what they’re going to do and have known what they’re going to do with the 25-man from the time that Kearns signed on. Certainly that’s a good thing – to have a plan – but the drumbeat of what’s coming out with the local scribes seems to presuppose that Donald is likely to start the season at 3B, Nix at 2B, and...well, “Who the Hell Really Cares” in the 5th starter spot.

They’ll spend the Spring defending Donald at 3B or Crowe’s inclusion on the roster or why Marson is going to start the season in AAA because the decisions have already been made and, whether what happens under the Arizona sun justifies that or not, the Indians seem to have a “plan” in place and if history provides the prologue, that’s probably how it plays out in Goodyear over the next few months. That being said, given the dearth of proven options and some of the talent that seems to around the MLB level, why don’t the Indians open some of these spots up legitimately for “open competition”?

The best-laid plans are great and all and certainly a team in the Indians’ position (market-wise and at the bottom of a mountain that may or may not be climbed) needs best-laid plans, but there’s something to be said for elasticity in these “plans” and to “playing the hot hand” and see where it goes from here.

You know what would make Spring Training interesting?

How about a young guy coming out and laying claim to a spot on the 25-man roster, whether it

be a starting spot (like Phelps at 2B or 3B) or even in a back-up role (like Zeke Carrera outplaying T. Crowe) or come out of nowhere to earn a spot in the bullpen.

Know what would make that “earned” spot even more compelling?

If the Indians abandoned their best-laid plans on Day 1 of Spring Training and went off script.

By no means is that to suggest that guys like LaPorta, Brantley, Carrasco, or players like that should be on notice for their jobs in Goodyear, but there seems to be some flexibility at the edges of this roster and maybe seeing if one (or more) of the players that come to Goodyear without much of a chance to break camp with the team insert themselves into the short-term (and long-term) plans of this team.

Given what we keep seeing regarding what’s going to transpire in Goodyear and what is likely to come northeast at the end of March, do you think the Indians are willing to go “off script” in Arizona?

JON: Perhaps what I’m about to say is less cut and dried than reality might suggest, but this organization does not strike me as one that embraces improvisation. They seem to act judiciously and decisively--occasionally even viciously. But they do not deviate from their plans for the sake of appeasement. Not bloggers or fans or newspapermen. For better or worse, they strike me as an obstinate bunch. A more poetic man than I dubbed them *LaCoste Nostra*, and for good reason.

So while I see some merit to “shaking things up” in Goodyear by opening up a spot or three to competition, it would seem highly unlikely that we’ll actually see anything along these lines. As you point out, the organization has gone out of its way to establish a course of action over the last several years. And the front office believes, rightly or wrongly, that the appropriate course of action in 2011 involves a hearty and thorough evaluation of the talent on hand. An evaluation that needs playing time to be carried out.

And yes, I happen to agree with this train of thought--that 2011 *must* revolve around the task of fact-gathering. Do we know enough about Michael Brantley or Matt LaPorta or Carlos Carrasco or Jason Donald or Lou Marson or Josh Tomlin to say with any authority what they will or won’t become? I would say that we do not. So while adding pieces and parts at this point in the game might (*might!*) result in a

slightly (
tly!

sligh
)

better record, those gains would be, in my mind at least, offset by hindering the evaluation of the players who are most important to the next decade of Cleveland baseball. And we're not going to find any of those on the scrap heap. (Yes, I'm sort of ignoring your points about the younger guys like Carrera and Phelps; sorry for the detour here.)

I should admit: I was struck with an odd feeling of happiness when I realized that the Indians were not, in fact, on the verge of signing Jeremy Bonderman. That happiness was harpooned when word of Kevin Millwood started to surface. In trying to rationalize these feelings, I found myself in the odd position of *rooting to see David Huff pitch for my team*. This, quite obviously, necessitated multiple showers.

But that's not it, really. It's not that I want to see David Huff. It's not that I believe in Jason Donald or Lou Marson. It's that I believe that this organization owes it to the fans to bring their plan to fruition. We were told, in the wake of the trauma of 2008, that the trades were being used to restock the shelves. As a sign of organizational reckoning, it's time to open the pantry and see what we bought. Even if it's canned yams and spoiled tuna fish, we have to see it. It's owed us.

Maybe that means I value process over results. Maybe that means I still refuse to believe we got snookered. Maybe that means I will perpetually care more about next season than this one. Whatever it is, I find myself excited for this season specifically because we are about to see an experiment three years in the making. Signing a scrap heap guy will cheapen that for me, and, in a way, would create a crisis of confidence in the front office that the rest of the city seems to have been experiencing for years.

Yes, that sounds drastic and reactionary. It's all the rage these days.

PAUL: The detour and the reminder of where the team has been over the past two-and-a-half years and where it sits now is an important one and, while it has been largely ignored by the “teeth gnashers” and the “agents of harrumph” that have been aghast at the inactivity of the off-season, for the most part, the [Indians have been pointing to this year](#) as the developmental year that it should be to, as you so eloquently point out, “open the pantry and see what we bought”.

The idea of avoiding the scrap-heap signings is also well-placed (although I have at times convinced myself that Jack Hannahan's glove at 3B is more compelling than Nix's at 2B and could probably get on board with that Bonderman/Millwood signing because I really don't want to see Dave Huff), but I think that this team sometimes values that “process” over “results” in as much as they arrive at a situation (like Spring Training) with a plan in hand and rarely stray from it.

Call it obstinance, call it being doctrinal...whatever you'd like, but LaCoste Nostra has a well-deserved reputation from devising a plan and sticking to it.

Jon & Paul Plus Baseball: Springing Into A “Plan”

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Thursday, February 10 2011 9:00 AM - Last Updated Wednesday, February 09 2011 10:43 PM

From 2003 to 2007, that certainly bore fruit, but I remember a couple of press conferences with Acta last year in which he made intimations that the likes of Donald and Gomez “weren’t supposed to be” in Cleveland - that the plan was for both to get their first tastes of MLB in September, not June or July. But in baseball (as in life), things happen that force events and improvisation upon any situation and, when those arise, the Indians always seem to be begrudgingly reacting instead of being proactive with a particular situation. By that I mean, they use the talking point of a player “forcing himself into a spot”, but rare is the example of an Indians’ player of the past few years legitimately “forcing himself” and not just sliding into a spot vacated by injury.

Perhaps it is that track record (and watching the way that things fell apart from July of 2008 to today...with a plan unquestionably in place) that makes me want the Indians to embrace some modicum of “bend” to their seemingly rigid plan. While I’m not intimating that they should be stocking up on retread players that are going to obviously take time away from realizing what’s been bought in the past few years and what sits in “the pantry” at present, a simple “competition” at a particular spot (like, say 3B or 2B) this Spring would be a welcome departure from the Indians going to Spring Training fully aware of how the team is going to look when it heads North and using Spring Training to justify those conclusions instead of using Spring Training to more fully come to those conclusions.

History suggests that those “competitions” may not only have a leader in the clubhouse, but a “winner” already tabbed before anyone steps under the Arizona sun, with the pieces on the chess board already lined up.