

A Tangle in the Outfield

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Tuesday, March 08 2011 9:10 PM - Last Updated Thursday, March 10 2011 9:41 AM



While the Indians play away under the Arizona sun, these first few weeks of Spring Training always strike me as a little odd as fans have been waiting for months for actual boxscores and reports on any and all happenings out in Goodyear. Once the games start, the information and the stats fly out of Arizona, magnifying the difficulty in not putting too much credence in a couple of games or making judgments merely based on a couple of games. While fans have been waiting for something...ANYTHING, reigning in emotions and snap declarations are difficult, despite the fact that our heads tell us that we've only "seen" a week and a half of games where most of the regulars play half of the games and half of the innings of those games.

This Spring has not been without its early storylines as the folks in Cooperstown have apparently requested a photo of The Chiz so they can get started on the plaque as he now sits on a 1.659 OPS in Arizona. Oh wait, that's after 22 plate appearances? Never mind, just the Spring fever talking...

Regardless of the compelling storylines that have emerged (for the moment), while the 3B spot (should be Donald, should have been Donald from the moment they signed The OC) and the 5th starter spot (should be Huff, with a leash long enough to either hang himself or show he finally belongs) have been dubbed as the spots to watch or the "position battles", it is the outfield situation that is suddenly the area of the team that seems to be getting a little murky in

A Tangle in the Outfield

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Tuesday, March 08 2011 9:10 PM - Last Updated Thursday, March 10 2011 9:41 AM

terms of how the Indians are going to break camp.

First, the Indians announced (to the surprise of nobody paying attention) that Sizemore would likely miss Opening Day...and the news that he's just been cleared to run the bases with about 3 ½ weeks before Opening Day means his return date is certainly up for debate. While WHICH Grady comes back to the lineup is more important than WHEN Grady comes back to the lineup, [the fact that Lonnie Soloff](#) "noted recently that Sizemore might be cleared for game activities the week following the completion of his baserunning program" does not inspire confidence that Sizemore will be ready for MLB action – after having, you know, not played baseball in about a year – perhaps into the latter weeks of April or even May.

Right now, that's anyone's guess and the assumption that the Indians would simply go with Choo, Brantley, and Kearns in the OF with Crowe as the undeserving back-up seemed to carry the day after the "announcement" that Sizemore wouldn't be coming North with the team at the end of the month. Next, it was revealed that Crowe "battled" an elbow injury for the second half of the year last year, incorrectly blaming his struggles at the plate on the elbow, with the newest revelation regarding Crowe's shoulder, which has been "fatigued" and (apparently) caused all of the elbow troubles...which, as you remember in this web, caused the imaginary drop-off in performance.

Nevertheless, with Crowe experiencing "[rotator cuff soreness](#)", does anyone doubt that Crowe is going to be behind the rest of the team by the time that Opening Day comes around to the point that he's not going to be a part of the Opening Day 25-man roster?

As much as I would enjoy that omission (not because of Crowe's injury, because of his uselessness), suddenly the Indians find themselves down two outfielders who were thought to be in the mix (if you really want to include Grady here) coming out of Spring Training.

Think we're done yet?

Not even close, as the biggest bombshell was dropped by Manny Acta last week when (and remember that this was written after the Indians knew that Sizemore was not making the Opening Day roster AND that Crowe's shoulder wasn't allowing him to throw) [Jordan Bastian reported this on his blog](#)

:

*An interesting item worth noting is that, until Tuesday, Acta has maintained all spring that the outfield would be Kearns in left, Michael Brantley in center and Shin-Soo Choo in right in the event that Sizemore was not ready for Opening Day. Acta has changed his tune some. **The manager even suggested that the Indians might consider a platoon situation in left field.***

Wait...what?

A Tangle in the Outfield

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Tuesday, March 08 2011 9:10 PM - Last Updated Thursday, March 10 2011 9:41 AM

Of course, that little swipe by Acta could be a merely be a threat related to the Indians not finding out about Kearns' DUI until he was scheduled for a court appearance in Kentucky last week. But asserting that the team considering a "platoon situation in LF" when Kearns is the likely LF to start the season is folly, considering what Austin Kearns (who would be the LF in the alignment without Sizemore) has done in his career against LHP and RHP:

Kearns' splits - 2010

Kearns vs. LHP - .740 OPS

Kearns vs. RHP - .749 OPS

Kearns' splits - Career

Kearns vs. LHP - .798 OPS

Kearns vs. RHP - .766 OPS

The Indians are considering a "platoon situation" for THIS guy, whose splits are virtually non-existent over 2,500+ plate appearances in MLB...yeah, not much sense in that one.

However, the success of Travis Buck in camp may be playing a role in Acta dropping a little crumb like that as the player most likely to benefit from the absence of Sizemore and Crowe could be Buck, a former top prospect with the A's whose career was derailed by injuries and who now finds himself in Tribe camp as an NRI.

So could the Indians be considering Travis Buck and Austin Kearns in a platoon in LF? One would hope not as Buck has posted these platoon splits in his MLB career, which – like those of Kearns – display no discernable platoon split:

Buck vs. LHP - .748 OPS

Buck vs. RHP - .756 OPS

However, if Sizemore is out until whenever, would the Indians consider giving Buck some starting time in LF? Maybe it wouldn't be in a platoon, but there was a time in the not-so-distant past that Travis Buck posted an .850 OPS (127 OPS+) as a 23-year-old in a ½ season for the Athletics. Certainly he's been atrocious since then, done in by injuries; but if he is healthy, it is worth noting that the only season that Kearns has outpaced that .850 OPS (127 OPS+) that Buck posted in 2007 was way back in 2002, when Kearns put up the best hitting line of his career as a 22-year-old in Cincinnati, posting a .907 OPS (134 OPS+) in 104 games that year for the Reds.

It bears watching if the Indians would consider Buck and Kearns in a competition for the LF spot in Sizemore's absence with the "loser" of the competition slotting into the 4th OF role. Of course, Kearns signed on with the Indians as the RH 4th OF with versatility to play all three OF positions and if Buck can keep up his torrid pace in Goodyear (he has a 1.237 OPS with the small sample siren blaring), there is a possibility that Buck could be the Indians' Opening Day LF with Kearns as the RH 4th OF that he was considered when he was signed in the off-season.

While I'm all for simply going with Choo, Grady, and Brantley straight out for all of 2011, the reality of the situation is that Grady's starting the season on the DL and keeping Kearns and Buck (who can both play all three OF spots, regardless of which one is starting) would afford the

A Tangle in the Outfield

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Tuesday, March 08 2011 9:10 PM - Last Updated Thursday, March 10 2011 9:41 AM

Indians some insurance against Brantley coming out of the gate as he did in 2010 as well as allow the Indians to carry Shelley Duncan out of the gate, almost exclusively as a RH bat, where [he does add value to a LH-laden lineup](#) , as flawed as he may be otherwise as a player.

If all of this presents a rather unappetizing start for the 2011 season in the Indians' outfield – “Llllladies and Gentleman, YOUR starting Opening Day Indians' LF...Travis Buck” – and the uncertainty around Grady's effectiveness going forward scares you as much as it does me, realize that a legitimate option may exist in AAA...and I'm not talking about a position change for Jason Kipnis. Nor am I referring to Zeke Carrera, whose presence on the 40-man roster makes Crowe expendable as I wonder what number Carrera (.484 OBP this Spring in 9 games) will wear when he gets to Cleveland so I can get a “ZEKE” jersey.



Rather, Nick Weglarz is a MAJOR wild card in this whole OF alignment as he remains a forgotten prospect, stuck in the shadows of The Chiz and even Kipnis. However, now might be a good time to pass along that [Wegz was listed as the #33 prospect in all of MLB by Prospect Project](#) just a couple of weeks ago...I kid you not. You can take that (just like any of these prospect rankings) with a grain of salt, but Weglarz remains unfairly overshadowed by other prospects in the organization, largely because of his inability to stay healthy because when he has been healthy, Weglarz has performed throughout his climb up the organizational ladder at a very young age compared to his level of advancement.

To that end, how's this for some perspective - Wegz turned 23 a couple of months ago and has 209 PA in AAA (.889 OPS there with 17 2B and 6 HR in 50 games for Columbus last year), while Kipnis (24 this April) has yet to see the regular season in Columbus. Certainly that's a

A Tangle in the Outfield

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Tuesday, March 08 2011 9:10 PM - Last Updated Thursday, March 10 2011 9:41 AM

function of Kipnis being a college draftee and Wegz being drafted by the Indians as a 17-year-old Canadian, but the age and level of advancement for these prospects is incredibly relevant, as is their performance.

In terms of performance, did you know that the only players that posted a higher OBP than Weglarz (who got on base at a .390 clip) that were in AA or higher last year were The Axeman (.427 OBP in MLB/AAA) and The BLC (.396 OBP in MLB) and the only player above AA in the organization that bested Weglarz's .503 SLG between AA and AAA was Santana again, who posted a .540 SLB between Columbus and Cleveland?

What's always held Weglarz back has been a variety of ailments that have caused him to miss large portions of the last few seasons (games played in past 3 years - 87, 105, 106) and news that he has back spasms from a collision endured in Winter ball is disheartening, but not too many people talk about Weglarz as the legitimate option LF (among other positions) that he really is for 2011.

Unfortunately, as "set in stone" as most would like to believe the Indians' OF looks to be for the 2011 season, the health of Grady Sizemore is going to play a major role in what the outfield alignment looks like. As much as the assumption that Kearns represented the placeholder for the Indians when he was signed, by the end of the season, the Indians may have relied more on two "unlikely" players – Buck and Weglarz – as 2011 reveals itself.