

## Tapping the Brakes on A Lazy Sunday

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Sunday, March 13 2011 9:09 AM - Last Updated Sunday, March 13 2011 8:13 PM

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With apologies to Andy Williams, sports fans stand at the precipice of what truly is “The Most Wonderful Time of the Year” with the NCAA at our doorstep and Opening Day not too far down the front walk. There was a time in the not-too-distant-past (OK, maybe about 15 to 20 years ago...which I guess is a while ago) that waiting for the bracket announcements on Selection Sunday was an all-day affair. Before the advent of simply printing the brackets off of a website moments after the seeds were announced, I would spend the latter part of my Selection Sunday afternoon formulating some home-made brackets, then spend the entire announcement show furiously scribbling in the teams as they were announced. After copying the now-completed brackets down onto about four different sheets of paper, I would devise my “initial” bracket which would be affected by the glorious depth that the USA Today NCAA Tournament Preview section would provide the next day.

Now that the whole process has been filtered into a “science” created by the 4-letter word in Bristol, some of that has been lost and while more information is certainly at everyone’s fingertips, the NCAA tournament (and particularly the first wild weekend) begins a stretch of sports that is initiated with those non-productive Thursday and Friday afternoons, stretching all the way to the (unquestionably now-diminished) Monday night debut of “One Shining Moment”, now just a few short weeks away.

Nevertheless, between that first moment when “the ball is tipped” right down to the cutting

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---

down of the nets, Opening Day will be upon us (in less than three weeks) and with it comes all of the promise of another season of Indians' baseball. From now until then, the Tribe will continue to gear up for April 1st as the roster starts to come into view as do expectations for the coming season.

With that, let's get loose on a Lazy Sunday attempting to provide some context on expectations that seem to have emerged under the Arizona sun for a couple of youngsters who count themselves as some of the Indians' top prospects...

Of course, the reference there is to the spell that The Chizard has cast over the North Coast as conversations over whether Lonnie Chisenhall should be the Indians' Opening Day 3B have stretched from the Interwebs to the inanity of sports talk radio. While a great Spring story is just that and needed for a team in need of a good hopeful story, let me see if I have the most incendiary of the arguments for the Indians starting the season with The Chiz at 3B, and how they relate more to the organization than necessarily to Chisenhall. Here goes – “the Indians are stupid for not going with their best team on Opening Day because Chisenhall is their best 3B...RIGHT NOW” and “the Dolans are too cheap to allow the Indians to bring Chisenhall north with them and it's only a matter of time before they trade him off with every other great player they have.”

First, let's hold off on the designation of The Chiz as a great, or even potentially great, player and give the kid a chance to prove himself over more than 25 PA in Spring Training before he's anointed as much more than the Indians' 3B of the Future. Chisenhall is unquestionably a good prospect, with a short stroke who is able to make solid contact and whose future appears bright as an Indian.

However, in terms of this argument that The Chiz should be manning the hot corner for the Tribe on April 1st, let me put this in non-Indians related terms as clearly as possible with a very tangible example, and I'll go slowly with this so I don't lose anyone...

Going into 2010, Jayson Heyward and Buster Posey were two of the most highly-regarded prospects in MLB. Heyward started the season on the Braves' Opening Day roster while the Giants waited until May 29th to call Posey up from AAA. Because of that two-month difference in service time accumulated – and here comes the important part – Heyward can become a Free Agent after the 2015 season while Posey will remain under the Giants' control through the 2016 season. The Giants gained a full year of control over Posey (who will be 29 in that 2016 season) by delaying his first game played in MLB in 2010. Finally, remember that the Giants won a World Series last year despite holding Posey off of their roster for 2 months.

While nobody is suggesting that the Indians are going to win the World Series this year (Chiz or no Chiz...and Buster Posey was/is worlds ahead of The Chiz as a prospect), the bottom line is that if the Tribe keeps Chisenhall down until June or so, they control him through the 2017 season, when Lonnie will be 28 years old, instead of only through the 2016 season, which would be the case if Chisenhall were to be on the Opening Day roster.

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---

Forget whether the Indians are going to contend this year or in 2017, the basic question is whether you would rather have two or three months this season of a 22-year-old Chisenhall or a full season of a 28-year-old Lonnie.

That's it...that's the end of the discussion, despite what some lazy sportswriters (and you'll notice that [Jordan Bastian seems to be the lone voice of reason out there](#)) desperate for an angle or another way to pile on the Indians (as if it isn't easy enough) have been involved in all Spring. Maybe 2017 feels like it is a long way away (because it is) and there is a sense among some fans that the Indians are always planning for a day in the future while not giving a moment to think about the present, but we're not talking about the Indians going with a guy like Jack Hannahan at 3B to "block" The Chiz, we're talking about a 26-year-old who just got his first taste to MLB and deserves a longer look...but we'll get to that.

For now, in terms of that player control issue, is it unfortunate that this is the way that MLB is set up, causing most teams to exercise this "clock management" strategy?

Of course, but those are your two options with guys like Chisenhall – to allow him to start the season in MLB and lose club control over him a full year earlier than you would if you simply kept him in the Minors for about two to two-and-a-half months. That's how the system is set up in MLB and the Indians are far from the only teams to utilize this "clock management", particularly with the top prospects. If you don't believe me, check how many of the players on the various top prospect lists make their MLB debut between Memorial Day and the Fourth of July.

But it's a money savings for the Dolans, right?

Actually, with the way that the arbitration process is set up in MLB, the opposite is potentially true – and that would actually be the best case scenario for the Indians because it would mean that a player like Chisenhall is performing at a high level prior to or in his arbitration years, meaning he'd be getting more money through the arbitration process. That is to say that The Chiz is likely to perform better as a 26-year-old than as a 22-year-old in MLB and since the arbitration process relies heavily on statistics accumulated, the idea that a "more ready" Lonnie Chisenhall would put up better numbers once he did arrive to MLB, which would in turn make him more expensive in the coming years, if arbitration was broached.

However with the Indians, that point could be moot, if the Indians hold true to the manner in which they've dealt with their young players, buying out FA years in guaranteed contracts for more money upfront the Indians could add on years past 2017 for a guy like The Chiz. Which is to say that if his final year of club control is 2017 and the Indians approach Chisenhall at some point in the next couple of years to give him guaranteed money while buying out FA years (as has been their modus operandi), those FA years start a year later and the Indians would be controlling a player like The Chiz even longer into his career.

Obviously, that's getting ahead of ourselves as the real question right now is whether Chisenhall is even the best option at 3B RIGHT NOW for the Indians, in light of all of this "Chizardry" that has so captivated the North Coast. To that end, Jon Steiner has [a great piece over at WFNY](#) playing the "PLAYER A, PLAYER B" game while asking that very question...among others:

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---

*Is Chisenhall the best option we have at third? I really don't know—we just don't have that much to go on. But let's keep in mind his minor league numbers. He's never played above AA, so we'll use those numbers as a gauge. Which of these AA careers belongs to the superstar infielder?*

**AVG**

**OBP**

**SLG**

**OPS**

**PLAYER A**

0.307

0.391

0.497

0.888

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---

### *PLAYER B*

0.311

0.385

0.502

0.887

### *PLAYER C*

0.373

0.432

0.642

1.074

### *PLAYER D*

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---

0.262

0.333

0.439

0.772

*Player A is Jason Donald. That guy you're already sick of and who was too crummy to be included in Cliff Lee trade.*

*Player B is Jason Kipnis. He's good. I like him. But keep in mind he's basically Jason Donald (whom I also kinda like).*

*Player C is Kevin Kouzmanoff. The guy who can't really hit or field well enough for MLB at this point in his career.*

*And Player D is Lonnie Chisenhall.*

*I'm not showing you these numbers because I don't like Chisenhall. I promise that I do. But the only real information that we have suggests that he's less ready to hit at the MLB level than the rest of these guys. We must at least consider this when we start advocating that he be handed the opening day job. He is really young, and really unaccomplished, and the facts suggest that he might not actually be ready for the Big Leagues.*

What stands out in that comparison...what Jason Donald did in AA, right?

You see the comparative numbers between Chisenhall and Donald in AA up there and while Donald was two years older than The Chiz when each was in AA (which should not be overlooked), here's how the two line up in terms of each players' second and third professional seasons, even if you've already seen the AA comp in the Steiner piece:

**Jason Donald: A-/A+ in 2007 (Age 22)**

.304 BA / .395 OBP / .473 SLG / .869 OPS with 31 2B and 12 HR in 574 PA

**Lonnie Chisenhall: A-/A+ in 2009 (Age 20)**

.258 BA / .325 OBP / .472 SLG / .797 OPS with 31 2B and 22 HR in 533 PA

**Jason Donald: AA in 2008 (Age 23)**

.307 BA / .391 OBP / .497 SLG / .889 OPS with 19 2B and 14 HR in 414 PA

**Lonnie Chisenhall: AA in 2010 (Age 21)**

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---

.278 BA / .351 OBP / .450 SLG / .801 OPS with 22 2B and 17 HR in 524 PA

That's not to throw cold water on all of this ChizMania that's taken Cleveland by storm nor to discount the future that Chisenhall may have; rather it's an attempt to point out that the Indians have a young(ish) player that figures to be their starting 3B in 2011 that has his own pedigree that compares favorably to that of The Chiz and all of this dismissal of Donald in favor of Lonnie reeks of favoring the "unknown" over the "known" as much as Donald remains an unknown in his own right.



It is important to remember that Donald was rated as the 69th best prospect by Baseball America after that 2008 season and, since Steiner told us to "keep in mind that he's basically Jason Donald", realize that Kipnis is the 54th best prospect, as currently ranked by Baseball America and you can see that they put up comparable lines in those years, spent mainly in AA, when both Kipnis (and [here's a nice MLB.com piece on prospects](#) , heavy on Kipnis) and Donald were 23 years old.

Can Donald handle 3B from a defensive standpoint?

We're about to find out, although early reports have been good and while many have derided Donald as a future utility IF (which may be valid), let's realize that [91 players in MLB spent most of their time at either 2B, SS, or 3B having accumulated 325 PA last year, with Jason Donald's 94 OPS+ placing him 48th among those players](#)

, right alongside what Jhonny Peralta (94 OPS+, will be paid \$5.25M in 2011) and Brandon Inge (94 OPS+, will be paid \$5.5M in 2011) put forth at the plate. While Inge's value is tied intrinsically to his ability in the field (and given that we don't know what Donald will look like at 3B), given that Donald's first exposure to MLB left him in the middle of the pack among AL infielders (excluding 1B), doesn't that merit at least half of a season to take a look.

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---

As a quick aside, if you're skeptical of that measure of OPS+, you should read [this from Joe Pos on stats as he attempts to rationalize these "new" stats](#) (of which he rightfully admits are sometimes too convoluted for consumption much less understanding), but Posnanski's explanation on why things like OPS+ are comparable to the old "back of the baseball card" measures of a player should change your mind, if your mind still needs to be changed.

Anywho, back to 3B and which direction the Indians should take for this season, it would seem that (thankfully) Sonny Nix is completely out of the mix, [as Bastian explains](#) :

*While Nix has worked out some at third base, he has spent the bulk of his time this spring -- during practices and Cactus League games -- manning second, which is his natural position.*

*Nix got the starting nod at second base against the Padres on Wednesday.*

*"They told me I'm going to play more second than third," Nix said. "But I'm still going over there and getting some work there occasionally. As of now, I'm going to play more second."*

While it's true that Nix's value is almost exclusively based on his above-average defense at 2B, Bastian drops this quote in from Acta on Nix - "right now, he's battling with Orlando for that second-base job," - which should indicate where Nix stands with the organization, and rightfully so.

For now, they're going with Donald who, as long as his wrist is healthy and as long as he can show that he can handle it defensively and tell Lonnie Chisenhall that this Spring proved that he can be an impact bat...as his 25 PA in March showed. Now it's time for him to go to AAA and take about 150 PA to make that remove any doubt that he can hit LHP (he had an OPS of .703 vs. LHP in AA, which is just below what Hafner – you know, the guy who shouldn't face LHP – batted against LHP in MLB) and to force his way onto the 25-man roster in Cleveland. He needs to continue his own brand of "Chizardry" in Columbus and work himself into the 3B mix in Cleveland while the Indians need to ensure that they retain control over a 28-year-old Chiz six years into the future by keeping him in AAA for a couple of months.

For a little diversion while keeping this with players acquired for Clifton Phifer, Paul Hoynes had a piece on Lou Marson in which he casually dropped in that "Phillies manager Charlie Manuel said Marson has the potential to hit between 15 and 20 homers a year"...you know, that old "hitting guru" Charlie Manuel?

But that's not the point, as the real puzzler comes when [Hoynes presents the Marson conundrum thusly](#) :

*Acta and GM Chris Antonetti are still trying to decide if there are enough available at-bats to keep Marson sharp should he open the season behind Santana in the big leagues. Depending on how much Santana is used at DH or first base, it could work, but Acta would probably have to wear out a few pocket calculators to make it happen.*

Let's look past the tired "pocket calculator" line and allow me to put this out there again – if Santana is going to be playing 1B even one day a week, Marson should be the back-up catcher. If Hafner is going to need more than one day off a week, he should be rested to maximize his effectiveness, with LaPorta or Santana playing 1B and DH and with...wait for it...Lou Marson catching.

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---

Is this that hard to comprehend?

Sure, it's a convoluted platoon, but can you take a guess as to which Indians' player posted the 3rd highest OPS on the team vs. LHP with at least 70 PA last year...yep, Lou Marson, whose blistering .759 OPS vs. LHP last year bested every semi-regular other than Shelley Duncan and Jason Donald.

So, if Hafner's going to sit against LHP (and he should) and Santana needs time away from the tools of ignorance to keep him fresh and healthy, keeping Marson on the active roster and getting semi-regular playing time shouldn't take a "pocket calculator" at all, just a simple substitution of Marson for Hafner with Santana and LaPorta moving around the diamond accordingly.

As for the other prospect (besides The Chiz) that made some waves this Spring, the Indians have already sent Drew Pomeranz down to minor-league camp and, in case you were wondering why, realize that he basically relies on two pitches – a fastball and a "spike curve" and while those pitches may have made some hitters look foolish in Spring Training, there's [this from Bastian](#)

:

*In the pros, having a third pitch is important and that is what the Indians want him to focus on throughout the upcoming season. Pomeranz will likely open the year with a Class A affiliate and Double-A could be reached before the end of the year.*



Yes, "having a third pitch is important", particularly if the Indians plan on using him in the rotation. Sure, the Indians could use Pomz in the MLB rotation until the rest of the league catches up to the idea that he only throws two pitches, but the reason the Indians drafted Pomz (and not...say Chris Sale) is because they wanted a player who legitimately projects at the

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---

front-end of a rotation. A pitcher with two solid pitches generally does not...at least not in MLB.

Let's remember that Pomeranz is 22, and doesn't turn 23 until October and while everybody seems to think that Pomz is on the "Al White Path", allow me to lay out another scenario that may look awfully tempting in terms of Pomeranz's development...at least until the reveal.

How does this look for a potential line for Pomeranz in his first full professional season:  
2.37 ERA, 1.07 WHIP, 8.4 K/9, 1.6 BB/9, 5.14 K/BB in 27 starts and 159 1/3 IP

You'll take that right? Now, imagine those numbers, with 13 games started in Kinston, 13 games started in Akron and with a final start for good measure in AAA...

Great, where do we sign up?

Now imagine him following it up with this in his second professional season, all in AAA, before getting called up on the basis of 15 starts to start the season in AAA:

1.37 ERA, 1.10 WHIP, 5.00 K/9, 2.7 BB/9, 1.86 K/BB in 15 starts and 97 1/3 IP

You'd take that, right...or did that K rate in AAA clue you into whose career followed that arc?

Yes, that is how Jerry Sowers, an SEC product who was the #6 pick in the 2004 draft, started his professional career with the Indians, with that success continuing in his second professional season in MLB, as he posted a 3.57 ERA and a 1.19 WHIP for the Tribe in 2006. Ultimately, Sowers was unable to transition into any kind of sustained success in MLB as hitters caught on to his limited repertoire and hammered Sowers into oblivion (or Columbus) with the promise that once sat on his narrow shoulders now looking laughable.

Just to further this, prior to the 2005 season, having never thrown a pitch, Sowers was ranked as the 90th best prospect in MLB by Baseball America and after his first professional season, he was viewed as the 53rd best prospect in MLB by Baseball America. Of course, Sowers was never really a darling of the scouting/prospect community because of his inability to miss bats and because "the next Tom Glavine" comes around every 3 months or so in MLB...with "the next Tom Glavine" who actually fills that shoe being the first.

Look at those prospect rankings for Sowers above and realize that Pomz has been rated the 61st best prospect in MLB by BA and while we're obviously comparing two vastly different pitchers, Pomeranz does not arrive to the Indians as a finished product by any means as he struggled with BB at Ole Miss...oh, and he doesn't really have a third pitch.

That's not to say that Drew Pomeranz is destined to follow the path blazed by Jerry Sowers (and others) to arrive to MLB quickly, only to fizzle out as Pomeranz is a hard-throwing LHP with a swing-and-miss second offering (two things that Sowers never had) that can dominate. Rather, it's a reminder that as much as we'd all like some of these guys to arrive with a bullet to MLB, some caution is necessary when pushing these guys as the Indians would like them to arrive to MLB as close to a finished product as possible.

That being said and with the word "caution" mentioned, it will be interesting to see what the Indians do if a player like Pomeranz (or Jason Knapp or Nick Hagadone) begin to dominate at all levels of the Minors this year, causing swings-and-misses at any and all stops. The reason it

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---

will be interesting is because the Indians may have “The Lesson of Atom Miller” somewhere in the back of their minds with the idea that these pitching prospects have only so many bullets in their clip before something can go inexorably wrong. There is a reason that the acronym TINSTAAPP (There Is No Such Thing As A Pitching Prospect) has gained so much traction in recent years as injuries and ineffectiveness befall too many terrific pitching prospects to count.

How the Indians strike that balance with Pomeranz (or Knapp) will be interesting as they certainly want them to arrive to MLB as prepared as they can be, but with the unavoidable fear that these pitching prospects (or any pitching prospects) could go KABLOOEY at any time. The Tribe certainly fast-tracked both Al White last year and Pomeranz and Knapp have much higher ceilings than those two, as unproven and as much as they may be unfinished products.

Despite those high ceilings that players like Pomeranz and Chisenhall unquestionably have and although the desire is for the bright future that these guys have in front of them to start as soon as possible in Cleveland, some restraint is necessary to ensure that they arrive to MLB to stay and ready to not just contribute, but to succeed. That “restraint” may be difficult if Talbot or Tomlin or Huff struggle out of the gate while Pomz dominates the Carolina League or if The Chiz continues his Spring Training numbers for the Clippers.

The future is coming for these guys...it’s just that “the future” shouldn’t start for them on April 1st of this year.