

Spring Training 2011: Indians Bullpen and Bench Preview

Written by {ga=tribefan6180}

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We're heading into the home stretch of Spring Training 2011, and after assessing what the Indians have to offer in terms of position players [here](#) and starting pitching [here](#), it's time now to take a look at the team's relief pitchers and bench players.

In this installment of my Spring Training Preview (part three of four), we'll take a look at the non-starting players on the roster who make up the team's supporting cast: bullpen pitchers and bench players.

We'll assess relief pitchers with guaranteed spots in the bullpen as well as those in the running for the 'pen jobs that are still up for grabs, and then make some predictions on the position players who will snag the four bench spots the Tribe has available.

Bullpen:

The Indians bullpen turned in a respectable performance in 2010 (3.83 ERA overall) and looked particularly sharp at the close of the season. Tribe relievers posted an impressive 2.95 ERA in the second half of 2010, second in the AL only to New York. In a disappointing season for the Tribe overall, the bullpen, at least, got their job done.

Will the group be able to continue their solid showing or (even better) improve upon it in 2011? In Spring Training thus far, we've seen relievers who are well ahead of where we expected, relievers pitching far, far worse than expected, and a number of relievers humming along at exactly the pace one would have predicted.

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Here's how the major players in the bullpen mix are faring so far this Spring...

Chris Perez:

One thing you can say for sure about Chris Perez: he is a font of personality.

On a team mostly comprised of quiet, mild-mannered players, Chris Perez stands out with his fiery energy, the occasional oddly charming rage blackout, and of course his notorious hair.

For the curious, Perez's attention to his mane long predates his time with the Indians. Thursday night I spoke to Cardinals OF John Jay (who played on the University of Miami baseball team with Perez) during a radio interview , and asked him about Perez's famous locks. Jay says he was rocking his signature 'do back then as well, but added that Perez did comply with the team's ritual initiation practices for freshmen and had his head shaved along with the rest of the group.

Aside from his hair though, the other reason Perez stands out? Well, he's a pretty darn good closer too. He had the second best ERA (1.71) in the AL for closers who logged 60+ innings, and blew just one one-run save situation all season. He can hit 98 mph on a radar gun and generally throws a fastball around 95. Then there's the fact that he doesn't rattle easily on the mound, which is perhaps the most important intangible for a closer.

Perez is obviously of huge importance to the Tribe bullpen because he plays one of the most critical roles in it and because he plays it well. But he's also important because he's the unspoken leader of the group, another role he excels in despite being just 25 years old. On a young team, it's important to have someone willing to take charge who has the motivation and right personality to do it as well as the talent to back up his authority. Perez is that person for the Indians bullpen, making him the owner of the two most important roles among relievers: closer and group leader.

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That Perez can handle the leadership role with both responsibility and panache is almost indisputable. The thing we'll have to wait and see on? How well he does this season in his other role: closer.

Watching Perez this Spring, he doesn't appear to have lost anything in terms of mechanics, strategy, or execution. His ERA as of Saturday was 1.08. It's unlikely he'll be taking any steps backward this season. But will he be able to get even better? We haven't seen enough this Spring to make that kind of call, but the potential is certainly there.

Admittedly, it feels a bit greedy to ask for more from one of the team's best players, whose 2010 performance was unquestionably nothing to sneeze at. But that's the thing about baseball: it's usually the guys who don't absolutely HAVE to get better who always end up having the drive and talent to do just that.

Rafael Perez:

It's been a bumpy ride for the other Perez (Rafael, that is) in the Indians bullpen over the last few years. In 60.2 innings in 2007, he posted an ERA under two, a WHIP of 0.923 and seemingly emerged from nowhere as one of the league's best relievers. He had a solid 2008 as well, but then struggled mightily in 2009, when he posted a 7.31 ERA in 48 innings, got tagged by statisticians with a WAR of -1.4, and was demoted to the minors. In 2010 he bounced back, posting a respectable 3.25 ERA and a 6-1 record in 61.0 innings, but still struggled at times.

Perez's ups and downs within the 2010 season were concerning at the time but not necessarily indicative that there is cause for major worry about him entering 2011. In fact, his performance at the end of 2010 coupled with his performance in Goodyear this Spring seem to indicate (along with his proven natural ability) that we can expect a solid, even performance from Perez, or at least that he doesn't appear to be headed for any sort of major disaster.

What's perhaps more concerning than Perez's sometime bumpy performance on the diamond is how he's handled such adversity at times. After all, it was Perez's martyred meltdown last summer that prompted Manny Acta to sagely snap, "Life is tough. Get a helmet". Wise words, which Perez hopefully won't need to hear again.

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Still, in addition to the fact that such whining and self-pity provoke irritating visions of Jhonny Peralta, it also should cause us to wonder whether Perez can mentally handle the pressure required by his job. Perez has never had an issue like this when he was pitching well, but everyone, even the best hurlers in the league, hits the occasional rough patch. If Perez can't handle his rough patch when it comes (and it will), then he may make it very difficult for himself in terms of getting past it.

Let's hope Perez learned something from his manager's words last season and will gracefully and professionally weather whatever storms come his way this year.

Tony Sipp:

Left-handed set-up man Tony Sipp is a tremendous talent who has been plagued by tremendous inconsistency over the years. Long a favorite of mine (though at times, his performances make me shake my head and wonder why), Sipp remains somewhat of an enigma entering his third partial season with the Tribe.

Sipp is a product of the Indians draft and their farm system, spending his whole career in their organization. After posting a 2.93 ERA in 40 IP his rookie year, he slipped a bit in 2010. His ERA shot up over four, which was disappointing but not terribly concerning for a player in just his second season in the majors.

The bigger problem for Sipp was that in those 40 innings, he gave up 12 HRs. Doesn't sound so bad until you consider that's one dinger for every 1.7 innings pitched. Sipp is about as prone to giving up bombs as you can get while still maintaining a decent ERA and number of holds, and his walk rate is through the roof (38 BB in 2010).

Still, his strikeout rate is better than 10 hitters per 9 innings pitched in his two years in the majors, and while he of course has had more success against lefties than righties, he's held his own better than most left-handed relievers against right-handed batters as well.

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Chad Durbin:

The final pitcher absolutely guaranteed a spot in the bullpen at this point in time is righty Chad Durbin, who was the most recent addition to the bullpen this Spring, but entered the equation assured of a job.

Tribe fans will remember journeyman Durbin from his 2003-04 stint with the Tribe. Since then he's spent time in Arizona, Detroit, and most recently, Philadelphia, where he was a member of the 2008 World Series team and a valuable member of their bullpen in 2009 and 2010 as well.

Durbin has 10 years of major league experience and is 33 years old. While he's never been a truly top-notch reliever, he's been getting the job done adequately for a very long time and doesn't seem to be slowing down too much yet. The Tribe bullpen desperately needs reliable long relief, and if Durbin can absorb enough innings without getting injured or burned out, he could easily be the go-to guy for this role.

The Rest of the Bullpen Candidates:

That leaves three remaining spots in the bullpen. At the moment, there are four relievers left in camp. They are:

Frank Herrmann:

Every team needs its braniac Greg Maddux/Ross Ohlendorf type, and Harvard product Frank Herrmann is ours.

The cerebral Herrmann is, in theory, the perfect combination of brains and brawn one wants in a pitcher. But while Herrmann's brains always make it to the ballpark, his brawn has been a no-show on a number of occasions.

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Based on past performance and what he's done this Spring though (2.35 ERA, two runs on seven hits in 7 2/3 innings, one SV), Herrmann has a solid chance to make the 2011 bullpen. Injuries (Joe Smith) and shocking implosions (Jensen Lewis) this Spring have further solidified the chances for Herrmann, whose likelihood of making the roster appeared tenuous entering Spring Training.

Herrmann also has an edge over several other candidates in that he can pitch more than one inning (ditto for Justin Germano), a very important skill to have on a team where the starters often can't pitch past five or six innings in a game.

Justin Germano:

Germano has had a good spring for the Tribe, showing off his ability to strike out opposing hitters and keeping runners off the base paths. As of Saturday, he had thrown seven scoreless innings and ceded just seven hits to opponents. Like Herrmann, he also did a nice job pitching for the Tribe during the regular season last year.

At this point it would seem as though Germano has an excellent shot to win a spot in the bullpen. The rub is that Germano isn't on the 40 man roster, which means someone would have to be removed from it to create a spot for him. A move like this is obviously not out of the question, but it does make the chances he makes the team less likely than another pitcher showing comparable worth who is already part of the roster. Whether or not another candidate who might play a spoiler such as this exists is still unclear.

Vinnie Pestano:

Originally not one of the favorites for a bullpen job when Spring Training kicked off in February, Pestano has turned out to be a pleasant surprise, posting a 1.35 ERA and a save in camp thus far. He's logged eight strikeouts and no walks.

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Those who love a good underdog should be enamored of Pestano, who was a 20th round pick in 2006. He also pitched well for the Tribe at the end of last season after being called up in September. Pestano's impressive camp and good showing with the Tribe at the end of 2010 are certainly major factors contributing to why he's still competing for a bullpen job despite the fact that he looked like such a long shot entering camp. But another big reason for it is the way the rest of the pen has fared this Spring. Lewis falling apart and Joe Smith's injury opened up two spots in the bullpen that, in theory, should not have been there.

The good news is that Pestano, along with the others competing for those two surprise spots, seems completely capable of handling the job. Had there not been unexpected job openings, we likely still would have seen Pestano in the Tribe bullpen before too much of the season went by.

Jess Todd:

Then there's Jess Todd, who seemed to have a far grimmer fate awaiting him before Spring Training began. Todd had appeared in danger of not only failing to be part of the competition for a bullpen job, but also of losing his spot on the 40-man roster and being exposed to the Rule Five Draft.

Luckily for Todd though, that never came to pass. Turns out, it's pretty lucky for the Indians too, since Todd has pitched so well this Spring that he is the last of the four pitchers remaining in camp competing for the remaining three bullpen spots. Todd has a 1.35 ERA in camp this Spring, and while he's done a commendable job, he's probably going to wind up being the odd man out. But of course, that isn't set in stone yet, and if nothing else, we should certainly expect to see Todd called up to help out the Tribe bullpen this season even if he doesn't make the squad out of the gate.

The Bench Players:

Choosing the four players who will make the Indians Opening Day roster as bench players has been a messy business. Austin Kearns was supposed to be one of those four as a bench outfielder, but it became clear a while ago that Grady Sizemore would not be ready for Opening Day. That moved LF Michael Brantley over to center, made Kearns the team's starting LF for

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the time being, and left his bench spot up for grabs.

Then there's the all too familiar mess over at third base. Orlando Cabrera won the second base job, taking him out of the equation for an infield bench spot. Jason Donald was supposed to be the starting third baseman on April 1st, but he broke his hand and the job went to Jack Hannahan, thus removing him from the group vying for that infield bench spot as well.

And just to further complicate matters, Adam Everett sprained his thumb last week, which jeopardized his status as the favorite to win the job at that point. All of that is frustrating, but not surprising. We're talking about the left side of the Indians' infield after all. What, you were expecting a utility infielder who could catch AND hit? Not in this town.

Then there's the backup catcher's position. Defensively, Lou Marson is the no-brainer winner. But his bat is close to non-existent, meaning Paul Phillips and Luke Carlin are still in the mix there as well.

Let's take a look at the candidates for each bench job...

Outfield Bench:

Travis Buck:

While uncertainty still exists at other spots on the bench, Travis Buck has already wrapped up the outfield bench spot.

Buck has had a monster Spring, going 21 for 50 (.420) with five doubles, four HRs, and 12 RBIs. Most of us didn't consider Buck a viable option in the outfield when the Indians signed him during the offseason. His career numbers at the plate were terrible up to that point and injuries had kept him from ever playing more than 100 games in a season. But it turns out Buck made some adjustments to his swing, started using the whole field, and transformed himself from

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perennial Quad-A player to respectable major league hitter.

The fact that Buck has tried (and succeeded) playing a little first base this Spring probably also helped his cause, along with the fact that he's been positively gushing about how much he loves the way the Indians run their organization, indicating that he and the Tribe must be a good fit.

Shelley Duncan:

Like Buck, Duncan seems to have locked down a bench spot for the start of the 2011 season. Duncan has had a good Spring and has a lot of experience, including enough time spent in the Indians' system (dating back to 2010) to know the organization well. He's also infinitely attractive to the Indians as a bench player because he can play both first base and outfield.

The Indians have to be especially mindful of the first base situation when it comes to having options there. The starter, Matt LaPorta, is unproven and may be ultimately unable to handle the job. And even if that doesn't happen, he'll need the occasional day off.

The Indians don't have the luxury that many teams do of using their DH to spell their first baseman, given that Travis Hafner's arm falls off if he so much as looks at first base. That makes having a guy like Duncan, who can be an additional option in the outfield alongside Buck as well as a backup first baseman, absolutely essential to the 25-man roster.

Infield Bench:

With Buck and Duncan both making the team and one utility spot reserved for a backup catcher, there is just one remaining opening left on the Tribe's bench. It will go to a left-side utility infielder who will be expected to relieve Hannahan at third, Asdrubal Cabrera at short, and possibly Orlando Cabrera at second whenever the occasion arises.

Adam Everett:

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Despite his struggles at the plate over the years, it's tough not to love Adam Everett. With his big ears, friendly face, and never-say-die attitude toward fighting hard for an infield job in various cities around the league year-in and year-out, he's like the poor man's Aaron Boone. And despite his struggles at the plate, his slick fielding at short and third base make him a very attractive option for a team that hasn't had adequate fielding from a starting third baseman or a left side backup in years.

Despite his career-long struggles at the plate, Everett has hit surprisingly well in Spring Training, posting a .324 average, which is why it was disappointing and heartbreaking when he injured his thumb last week and his ability to compete for the job was jeopardized. Luckily, Everett has recovered nicely and should be the favorite to win the utility infield job.

Luis Valbuena and Jayson Nix:

Unfortunately for those of us who had to endure watching Valbuena and Nix last season, Everett has not officially won the job yet. While it will be surprising if he doesn't ultimately come out on top, as far as we know, Valbuena and Nix are still in the running.

The 2/3 of last season's three-headed monster at third base, Nimartuena (Andy Marte, lucky for us, was traded to Pittsburgh) have played just well enough this Spring to once again try to dupe the Indians into keeping them on the roster. While neither has hit very well (Nix is batting .167 and Valbuena is hitting .239), Valbuena has shown decent power at the plate and Nix has done a decent job in the field, so both are still in big league camp.

Backup Catcher:

The final bench spot for the Tribe will go to a backup catcher.

Lou Marson:

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I know, I know, he can't hit. But I still maintain that if you don't absolutely love Lou Marson, there's something wrong with you. Marson may well be the team's best defensive player at any position, and his attitude and work ethic are beyond admirable.

Unfortunately for Lou, even as a backup catcher, you do have to be able to hit. Marson is hitting .143 this Spring, which is pretty consistent with how he fared at the plate last season. Despite this, Marson still may be the best candidate for the job, but he may open the season in Triple-A anyway. This is because the Indians still hold out hope that he can improve as a hitter. He is, after all, even younger than Carlos Santana. Joining the Triple-A team in Columbus would allow Marson to play every day and have one last shot to prove he can hit well enough to play in the majors down the road.

Luke Carlin:

Another likable guy who comes up short at the plate is Luke Carlin. Carlin is hitting .158 on the Spring and can't compare to Marson defensively, making him appear to be the least attractive candidate of the three players in the running for the backup catcher's spot.

Paul Phillips:

Paul Phillips, signed this winter and a non-roster invitee to camp this Spring, may be the guy who winds up with the job on Opening Day. He can't touch Marson defensively, but he's hit .407 this Spring and is adequate behind the plate.

Any of the three candidate would likely be able to handle the job if it only amounts to having to fill in for Santana during scheduled days off. If, god forbid, Santana were to get hurt though and one of the above three was expected to be the temporary every day catcher, the Tribe would be in a world of trouble.

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