

Tomahawks Moving Forward

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

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Despite dropping the final two games in Orange County (by a total of three runs), the Indians are set to return to the North Coast 8-4 after winning 4 of their 6 games on the Left Coast swing. While you can already hear the chorus for the two losses in a row that the Tribe's fast start is merely a mirage, that this is unsustainable, and that they're destined to have their numbers come down, excuse me while I enjoy the first couple of weeks of baseball with my team looking as good as it's looked since the second half of 2008.

In the recent road trip, the Indians' starters posted a 2.16 ERA and a 0.93 WHIP in 6 games, averaging just under 7 IP per start, striking out 34 batters and walking only 14 as a unit. Up and down the rotation, the Indians' starters seemed to be playing a game of "can you top this" and the result is the Indians coming back to Cleveland for a Friday game in which they'll start the game perched atop the AL Central.

Obviously, we all know that the Indians' won't win 2 out of every 3 games all season long, and you've seen the national media jump on the Tribe story, full of perfectly reasonable caveats, but I don't think anyone is suggesting that the back-end of the Indians' bullpen simply won't let up a run this year or that Asdrubal Cabrera is going to lead the league in HR or SLG. Instead of using those specific instances to assert that the Indians' time at the top of the Central won't be long, let's simply start to believe that this is a better team than most realized when the season started and they've been inching forward for some time now.

Going further than that, this success (while overwhelmingly exciting) isn't likely to continue at this pace, but it also isn't coming completely out of the blue as it would have had the Indians lost 50 of their last 80 games, which they didn't. Actually, realizing that the All-Star Break is an arbitrary day on the MLB calendar, consider what the Indians have done since July 13th of last year. Heading into the All-Star Break last year, the Indians were 34-54. Since that time, they're 43-42 and if you want a better gauge as to where they are in that "developmental curve", how

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about comparing what they've done since the All-Star Break of last year to today, in the context of the AL Central:

Post-All-Star Break of 2010

MIN – 52-32

CHI – 46-41

CLE – 43-42

DET – 37-50

KC – 34-60

The Indians have been a .500 team since that time and given the depths from which they emerged in the second half of 2009 and the first half of 2010, doesn't that constitute a pretty big step forward?

Given that the average age of the players on the Indians is 27.8 years (4th youngest in MLB, and would be younger if not for The OC and Everett), the Indians are playing with a group of younger players that have started 2011 on a winning note and who have played better than .500 baseball since the All-Star Break of last year.

Going into Wednesday's game, the Indians had the 4th best run differential in MLB (behind the Rangers, the Phillies, and the Reds...3 playoff teams from last year) in the young season and while the question on everyone's mind seems to be whether they can sustain this, the better question would be what's more fun than finding out.

Over the last 85 games, the Indians have won more games than they have lost as the cornerstones figure to emerge this season (if inconsistently, as evidenced by the early-season struggles of The Axe Man and The BLC), and we're having fun with our heads in the clouds...for a change.

With that said, let's get some Tomahawks up in the air, amongst those same clouds...

While there was this increasingly pervasive thought that the Indians would never lose again (OK, that's stretching it...but that streak sure was fun), the disappointment of the win streak ending has to be tempered by who the Indians were facing on Tuesday night. To say that Dan Haren was on is obviously an understatement (he pitched a one-hitter), but while Haren may not be the household name that other elite pitchers are in MLB, consider that since the beginning of the 2008 season, Haren has a cumulative 1.11 WHIP. Here is where he ranks among pitchers with more than 600 IP over the last 3+ seasons:

Halladay – 1.07 WHIP

Haren – 1.11 WHIP

Lee – 1.13 WHIP

Oswalt – 1.14 WHIP

Sabathia – 1.15 WHIP

Lincecum – 1.16 WHIP

Other than noticing that 3 of those guys are in the Philly rotation (and Hamels is 7th on this list), isn't it amazing that Haren (the same age as CC) just doesn't get the publicity that the other

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pitchers on this list do?

Given what he did on Tuesday night, that could change this year and Dan Haren may have to clear some space in his trophy room if Tuesday night is any indication as to what Haren's going to be bringing to the mound this year. Truthfully, I'm not sure that many teams in MLB would have gotten to Haren last night and while the naysayers will say "nay" and the wailers and gnashers of teeth will do just that, the Indians were beat by a great pitcher at the top of his game.

The fact that they kept it close, with Carmona showing that his Opening Day outing looks to be the exception, not the rule, actually elicits more confidence than a typical 1-hitter might for a particular team.

With the success of the Indians capturing imaginations across the North Coast (I gave a complete stranger the ol' nod and smile in Heinen's this weekend because he was wearing Tribe gear), there seems to already be quite a bit of talk regarding how the roster is going to be affected when the players currently on rehab assignments in Akron and Columbus are able to return to the parent club. Obviously, the day is coming (soon) when some roster shuffling is going to happen and while the Indians may look like a well-oiled machine right now, let's realize that the players that are coming off of rehab assignments (Grady, Donald, Smith) figure more obviously into the teams' future plans than the players they'll be replacing on the 25-man roster.

That may seem obvious, but a good start can start to color some opinions on players and cloud the idea that some of the players that are contributing right now (and contributing at a high level) represent little more than placeholders or roster fodder, something that did not change over the first 10 games, W-L record considered.

What is interesting is that the lower expectations out of the gate for guys like Hannahan or The OC or Adam Everett make them immediate favorites as they've outperformed the level of production expected for them when they were signed. While that's all well and good (and makes for some exciting baseball), the Indians shouldn't change course based on a hot streak (or on the basis of one or a couple of games) if better options exist and ones that figure to be more than mere placeholders.

That said, the Indians are winning baseball games by playing very sound fundamental baseball and if what Hannahan and Cabrera are doing (particularly in the field) is contributing to that, they shouldn't rush to change that course. If Jason Donald needs to spend the next couple of weeks getting fully healthy or if Grady Sizemore is not yet 100%, then the Indians should not force these guys back to the parent club if they would be better served getting steady work and easing slowly up the ladder instead of racing up to the Indians, perhaps prematurely.

If you want to know what pieces are eventually going to be moved where, [John Perrotto from B-Pro had this prediction](#)

on the movement of players when Donald and Sizemore return:

Infielder Adam Everett and outfielder Travis Buck are the most likely players to lose their roster

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spots when center fielder Grady Sizemore and infielder Jason Donald (finger) end their rehab assignments at Double-A Akron and are activated from the disabled list. Sizemore will play center field when he returns, and Michael Brantley will shift to left.

That sounds about right with Everett (and the OF situation analysis is forthcoming) as Donald would go back to being the everyday 3B and Hannahan would slot into the Utility role (he played 37 games at 2B last year in AAA and The OC would be the back-up SS) for the time being. While the cries that "Supermanahan" has earned more than that will echo, I'd say that Hannahan has certainly lived up to his billing as a top-notch fielder and should be given everyday reps at 3B until Donald is legitimately ready. Once that happens though, it's time for Hannahan to step aside because, as wonderful as Hannahan's glove work has been all season long, he has proven why he was available as a Minor League FA this off-season at the plate.



Consider if you will what Jack Hannahan has put forth at the plate in the 9 games from Game #2 through now:

.172 BA / .273 OBP / .310 SLG / .583 OPS in 33 plate appearances

Certainly, it's just 33 plate appearances, but here's Hannahan's career MLB line going into the 2011 season:

.224 BA / .311 OBP / .347 SLG / .658 OPS in 981 plate appearances

So, is Jack Hannahan better at the plate than he has been in the last 9 games he's played in? Probably...but at 31 years old, probably not much better.

That's not to minimize the contributions of Hannahan in the early going as he's flashed the leather that he was expected to flash, but let's not make the broad (and incorrect) assumption that Hannahan suddenly "figured something out" to the point that he's more than what he is.

To that end, as exciting as all of this is and as warm and fuzzy as it is to talk think about the play that ended the Red Sox series in terms of baseball acumen, Adam Everett is still Adam Everett and the Indians shouldn't be thinking about keeping Jason Donald in AAA because of Adam Everett or Jack Hannahan. In fact, the likelihood that Everett finds his way off of the roster heads to AAA to be the SS is strong, as I have trouble believing that any team is going to point to Everett's limited playing time with the Indians this season (with a career 67 OPS+ coming into the season) and decide that Everett represents that upgrade they need at the Utility IF position.

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When Everett was signed, the thought was that he was infield depth who would likely spend much of the season in Columbus. A fast start by the Indians shouldn't change that, nor should it change the fact that Jason Donald should be the everyday 3B when he's healthy with Hannahan moving to Utility IF, as high as the "pleasant surprise" factor might be with Hannahan in the early going, and with Everett shuffling off down I-71.

As for the situation with Sizemore returning, this one gets a little more interesting as the performance of Travis Buck (who made the team because of Sizemore not being available) in Spring Training had the Indians' radio team panting that the Tribe had just found the next Jayson Werth. In the early going, Buck's success in Arizona has not translated to regular season success, though he certainly hasn't seen much regular playing time to get into much of a rhythm.

If the assumption is that Kearns is sticking around as the RH 4th OF, the question revolves around keeping Buck (and his potential) around because he is out of options or whether Duncan (with his RH power bat) around, despite him still having one more option. At this point, Duncan makes more sense on the roster (RH power) than Buck, given that Brantley and Kearns can both play all 3 OF positions, but the question that the Indians have to answer is whether Buck would clear waivers if he was outrighted off of the 40-man roster or if some offensively-starved team would scoop him up, on the strength of his past in Oakland and his strong Spring Training.



Unlike with Everett (who would almost unquestionably clear waivers and head to Columbus), Buck represents a reclamation project that the Indians would probably like to keep around as insurance against injuries/regressions by any of the OF or even LaPorta. But by keeping him on the roster instead of Duncan, he almost certainly wouldn't see regular playing time with Sizemore, Brantley, Choo, and Kearns all ahead of him in the pecking order.

To that end, keeping Duncan around as a RH bat to complement Hafner at DH and as a RH power option off of the bench makes more sense, but his option makes it easy for the team to send him down to stash him away as insurance down the road.

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If the Indians think they can sneak Buck through waivers, I'd rather send him down to AAA to play everyday with the hopes that he'd be a more legitimate everyday option if something were to happen on the parent club. However, I think that some team would take a flier on Buck and that's why I think that the team will send Duncan to AAA (for no other reason than that option remaining) with the idea that he'll make it back up to Cleveland at some point later in the year.

As for Sizemore's return, as anxious as everyone is to slot him back into the lineup (and batting order discussion doesn't really interest me), how about letting the guy get his sea legs under him in the Minors for a while before pushing him back, perhaps prematurely. Obviously, Sizemore wants to come back and Acta wants a player of Sizemore's caliber on the team, but the team might be better served allowing Sizemore to get fully comfortable playing consecutive days in the Minors (even if it means waiting until the end of the month) instead of bringing him up to the parent club, only to watch him sit or – even worse – struggle.

As I've said before, I'm not interested in WHEN Sizemore returns, I'm interested in WHICH Sizemore returns, because getting him back two weeks earlier than expected doesn't make sense if you're getting him back at a reduced level of production. Waiting for him to be ready to legitimately contribute and attempting to replicate some level of success that he's had in the past – that is worth waiting for...

The final player that figures to come off of a rehab assignment in the next week or so is RHP Joe Smith and, with the Indians' bullpen being a strength of the team in the early going, it again gets difficult to determine which player finds himself out of luck with Smith's return. While a case could be made already for Chad Durbin in the early going (one made more compelling by Wednesday's loss) or even Justin Germano, the two relievers that have options that figure most obviously into this "decision" are Vinnie Pestano and Frank Herrmann. Given how Pestano has been used – as the RH set-up man, used in high leverage situations pretty regularly – it seems to be pretty obvious that Herrmann will be the one drawing the short straw as he has those options remaining and could go down to get more regular work (or perhaps work on his secondary stuff) as the arms in Columbus slot themselves to arrive to the parent club.

Perhaps an argument could be made that the Indians shouldn't change anything with Smith returning, given the success of the bullpen thus far and given Smith's underwhelming tenure as an Indian. However, if there is one thing that Joe Smith does well, it is get RH hitters out...well, actually that's the only thing that he does well. While I'm not ready to trumpet the return of Joe Smith as a reason to celebrate, the make-up of the set-up men in the Tribe bullpen make Smith's (one) ability rather valuable.

By that I mean that because Smith gets RH hitters out, with the Indians using Rafael Perez and Tony Sipp in the late innings, Smith could be used as a one or two batter pitcher against tough RH bats that could complement either Perez or Smith in the middle of one of their innings, assuming Acta continues to play the match-up game so perfectly.

Given the arms that figure to slot themselves in Columbus (and below), Joe Smith may go the way of Jensen Lewis at some point in 2011...but isn't that kind of what the Indians have been

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trying to accomplish for the better part of a decade now – developing productive arms from within that actually perform well when they reach Cleveland?

Looking at all of these possible moves and how some of the decisions to move a player or players off of a winning team seem “difficult”, isn’t it nice to be talking like this, how to fit in guys that are proving their worth to the MLB club and how we’re talking about “who can be sent out” rather than the “who can we call up” game that we’ve played for the past couple of years?

In terms of the “who can we call up” question that should never be ignored, the performance of Cord Phelps is starting to look like one that the Indians aren’t going to be able to ignore. In case you haven’t noticed, Phelps is off to a hot start in Columbus, posting a 1.317 OPS over the first 5 games this year for the Clippers and while some of that can be chalked up to Cord being hot, here are Phelps’ cumulative numbers in AAA from 2010 and this year:

.328 BA / .399 OBP / .534 SLG / .932 OPS in 302 plate appearances over 72 games

While that still isn’t a full half-season in AAA and dwarfs any numbers that Phelps put up in the lower levels of the Minor Leagues, given that Phelps just turned 24 back in January (Kipnis turned 24 in April), it’s time to start giving some serious thought to Phelps as an option for the infield.

Watching the performance of Phelps in AAA (and realizing that he was there last year), I’m starting to think that Phelps gets a chance before either Kipnis or The Chiz. Some of that will obviously be tied to the performance of The OC, who is still the same player that had a has a cumulative OPS+ of 83 since 2008 over 1,975 PA and 444 games, and could always slot into the Utility role if his offense falls off, but Phelps could assert himself as a compelling option for the infield in 2011 – one not named Kipnis or Chisenhall.

Of course, that’s not to diminish the impact that Uncle Orlando has had on the young Indians or to dismiss The OC outright as a valuable player on this team, but the Indians need to continue to fold their young players in this still mixing batter. Certainly, the improved defense has been a revelation and the Indians shouldn’t sacrifice that completely in the interests of looking forward if (or is it when) Orlando Cabrera falters at the plate.

Truthfully, after spending the off-season railing against poor defense, I realize that it’s disingenuous to dismiss The OC (and Hannahan) on the basis of their offensive limitations (even if they have yet to rear their ugly heads), but the Indians need to continue to foster the development of the players that figure prominently into the next couple of years, particularly if they’ve excelled at the upper levels, which Phelps certainly has.

Finally, the Indians return to the corner of Carnegie and Ontario on Friday and I’ll be reveling in the majesty of attending the Saturday afternoon baseball (an casualty of TV) with my 4-year-old and 30,000 of my closest friends.

Hey, we’re on a roll...why get off of it now?