

Tomahawks Saying Hello and Goodbye

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Thursday, April 28 2011 5:00 AM - Last Updated Wednesday, April 27 2011 9:53 PM



While we all enjoy this “battle” among the top teams in the AL Central (hey, look at the standings), as the Indians ready themselves to play 16 of their next 26 games at home, the 3-game losing “streak” is now just a memory with two straight victories. With the Indians’ offense once again hitting their stride and with the realization that Josh Tomlin could be Paul Byrd v.2.0, the Indians have now won 9 in a row at home and, as we creep closer and closer to May, the feeling starts to grow that this isn’t a mirage we’re watching at all.

With that, let’s get some Tomahawks up in the air...

Though the news that CarCar is bound to join The Fury on the DL certainly puts a damper on the Indians returning home (and to their winning ways), the intimation that the Indians are considering bringing Al White up to replace Carrasco in the rotation instead of Dave Huff shows that the Indians have perhaps switched gears in terms of the way that they’re approaching the season. By that I mean that the Indians of the recent past would have gone with the obvious replacement – the one on the 40-man roster who had options to burn – rather than adding a young player to the 40-man roster, burn the first option, and start an arbitration clock in April.

Some of that has been predicated by the success (or lack thereof) of the teams of the last few years, but the fact that Al White could be starting a game less than 2 years after he was drafted out of UNC feels like a step forward for an organization that needs to keep taking them. While it is still possible that Dave Huff gets the call to replace Los Carrasco, The fact that they lined up White’s next scheduled turn to come on Saturday (when Carrasco was next scheduled to start) may perhaps tip the Indians’ hand as to what they’re planning to do.

If they do, in fact, call White up, the hope would be that White will parlay his success in AAA to

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make a quick transition to MLB. While he's only thrown 23 2/3 innings in AAA in his career, White's numbers in AAA actually dwarf those put forth in his stops in AA and A-ball. During his 2010 in Kinston and Akron, White posted a 2.45 ERA and a 1.12 WHIP while whiffing 7 hitters per 9 innings and walking 2.7 hitters per 9 innings. Thus far in 2011, White has improved his ERA (1.90 this year) his WHIP (1.01 WHIP) and – this is the important part – improved his K rate (10.6 K/9 this year) while lowering his BB rate (1.9 BB/9). After being pegged by many as a reliever waiting to happen, White's secondary stuff has developed to the point that he's more than a 2-pitch pitcher...and perhaps even a viable one in MLB.



It remains to be seen what the Indians do on Saturday as they still could promote Huff (who is on the 40-man and does have options remaining), but the mere mention of White represents more than just a possible change in organizational philosophy. Additionally, having a player like White (Baseball America's #47 ranked player prior to this season) at the ready to perhaps make an impact and not just fill a hole could be a major step that this organization is taking.

By that I mean that no longer do the likes of Aaron Laffey, Jerry Sowers, Dave Huff, Ben Francisco, Chris Gimenez, and Jordan Brown represent the homegrown "cavalry" arriving from the Minors to augment the parent club. The Indians have a number of upper-level prospects that could be impact players at the MLB level, from White to The Chiz to Kipnis, all the way down to Drew Pomz, that could be arriving to Cleveland to join this burgeoning group of players already on the Indians.

The lead rider of that "new" cavalry may arrive on Saturday...

Going into the season, my thought on Grady Sizemore's recovery focused on WHICH Sizemore returned to the Tribe, not WHEN he donned the #24 again for the Indians. Well, if early returns are any indication, the "generational talent", that SI cover boy is back...and how.

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After Tuesday's game, Sizemore's OPS stood at 1.332 while he has shown obvious effects from the microfracture surgery on the basepaths or in the field. Anyone who saw him tearing around 2B on Tuesday, contemplating a triple with a sudden stop thrown in for good measure, or diving for a fly ball in front of him on Wednesday as if it were 2006 realizes that the restrictions on Grady's knee don't seem to be discernable to the "eye test".

Of course, there are "use" restrictions as Sizemore has been given days off to keep him healthy, but [here's what a scout told John Perrotto of B-Pro](#) about Sizemore:

"He's finally healthy for the first time in two years, and he's back to being the dynamic player he was before he got hurt. He's given that a club a lift, no question about it, not just with his production, but from a morale standpoint. They are playing with confidence, and I really think part of that stems from knowing he's batting leadoff and playing center field."

Lest anyone forget, Sizemore's average year from 2005 to 2008 (when he was that "dynamic player) and when he was fully healthy, was an .868 OPS, 42 2B, 9 3B, 28 HR, and 30 SB. Watching him out there now, the extra-base hit machine that Sizemore was when he was the motor that made the Tribe offense go in the mid-to-late-2000s certainly seems to be back.

Not many people realize this, but back in 2006, Sizemore posted 92 extra-base hits, a number that has only been topped by Pujols' 93 XBH in 2009 since that time. Now, Grady has TEN extra-base hits in his first NINE games back and while that pace is unsustainable (there have only been 15 instances of a player topping 100 XBH in a single season), to see Sizemore driving the ball with authority and flying around the basepaths provides some hope that this start is a harbinger of things to come.

What Sizemore (who doesn't turn 29 until August) is doing now is providing a glimpse of the player that he was becoming, before injuries derailed his promising career. Now, back on track, Sizemore's back to being the motor that makes the Tribe offense go although how much a burden his knee can carry may determine how far the team ultimately goes in 2011.

Speaking of pleasant surprises, with Jack Hannahan (somehow) living up to the moniker bestowed upon him by MLB.com's Jordan Bastian of "Supermanahan", and as Donald goes through more injury issues while The Chiz's performance in AAA showing why the Indians were right to not take him north with the parent club, it would seem that Hannahan will find himself in the everyday lineup for the next few weeks...at least. His defense has been as advertised and his bat has been surprisingly (and perhaps unsustainably) solid to the point that he has contributed to the point that there doesn't seem to be an issue with keeping Hannahan as the placeholder at 3B until Donald gets fully healthy and is able to contribute or until The Chiz forces the issue by righting his ship as a Clipper. Of course, it is here that I note that his current OPS of .872 is more than 200 points higher than his career OPS (.658) coming into the season, with 290 MLB games played to compile that lower OPS.

However, while Hannahan has been a pleasant surprise and a welcome addition, the other veteran added to the infield mix has (for some) reached the end of his usefulness, at least as an everyday player, as Orlando Cabrera now sits with a .279 OBP (69th among 88 AL qualified

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hitters), which is positively atrocious and, when combined with his .354 SLG (55th among 88 AL qualified hitters), makes him a liability in the lineup.



Realizing that his bases-clearing double in Wednesday's game was a significant moment in the game, realize that [The OC is the ONLY Tribe regular with a negative WAR](#) (as calculated by Fangraphs...and Hannahan is first, with a large portion of that coming from Hannahan's defensive prowess) as he's underwhelmed both at the plate and in the field. While the prevailing narrative on Uncle Orlando is that he's provided veteran leadership and a steady glove at 2B, the fact is that The OC ranks at or near the bottom of most of the defensive metrics among regular 2B. While defensive metrics remain (to me at least) a work in progress, Orly's defense at 2B hasn't passed the eye test either as his range is...um, limited and he has had trouble going to his left.

For as much as Cabrera is being credited with having a positive influence on some of the younger players (notably Asdrubal), I would assert that I don't have a problem with Uncle Orlando espousing some of his veteran leadership on a young team. What I do have a problem with is him doing that in the everyday lineup, and particularly in the 6th spot. While I generally abhor the whole "where should he hit?" discussion, Cabrera is an absolute offensive abyss and the fact that he's "protecting" a rejuvenated Hafner is laughable.

That being said, I don't even think that simply dropping Cabrera in the lineup is the answer as the real solution is demoting him to the Utility IF role, where he can remain to impart wisdom on the young players on an everyday basis without sabotaging inning after inning at the plate while waving at groundballs to his left in the field

As for who would replace Cabrera at 2B, it's time to see Cord Phelps in Cleveland. While it goes against the organization's current philosophy of moving infielders all over the diamond to positions that ARE NOT their natural positions, calling Phelps (a "natural" 2B) to take over for Cabrera at 2B could represent a major offensive upgrade while not removing Uncle Orlando from the 25-man roster. The player that would be removed would be Adam Everett who would clear waivers (without a problem) and head to Columbus to serve as the AAA SS.

Realizing that [this is a scenario that I suggested just two weeks ago](#), the idea that the Indians should keep Cabrera in the lineup into mid-May or so to see if he can right himself has now

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passed because THIS is who Uncle Orlando is as an MLB player at this point in his career. From 2008 to 2010, The OC posted this line in 444 games:
.277 BA / .319 OBP / .373 SLG / .692 OPS

So far this year, Uncle Orlando has put forth this line in his first 21 games:
.256 BA / .279 OBP / .354 SLG / .633 OPS

Lest you think that Cabrera is suddenly going to improve on his offensive numbers...he won't. This is who he is and with Phelps absolutely crushing the ball in AAA (.968 OPS) and getting on base at an absurd 46.8% rate that has upped his career AAA OBP to .405, the Indians should remove The OC from the everyday lineup, move him to the Utility IF spot, and call Phelps up to play 2B everyday to give him an extended look in Cleveland before Jason Kipnis and The Chiz arrive to take over 2B and 3B...assuming Phelps and Hannahan are ever willing to concede those positions.

Though Cabrera has represented a black hole in the lineup to this point, he still sits with the 3rd worst OPS on the team among regulars, besting the lines put forth thus far by...wait for it...Choo and Santana. While Santana's struggles remain understandable to a degree as he still is adjusting to MLB, Choo's slow start is surprising, if only for how long he's scuffled at the plate.



While his 3-run HR on Tuesday provided some hope that he may be coming out of his doldrums, the fact is that he had 95 plate appearances through Tuesday night and his .623 OPS put up during that PA have him ranked 63rd in the AL among the 88 qualified hitters, just below KC's Kila Ka'aihue.

Though the "it's still early, Choo will be fine" rhetoric is still valid, the performance of Choo from now through the end of the year bears watching as he and his agent have unquestionably decided to approach his years of arbitration eligibility on a year-to-year basis, with his paycheck

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reflecting his performance on the field to that point. With Choo's OPS at .623 (and his BA at .221 with just 5 extra-base hits in 22 games), there is a very real chance that Choo's end of the year numbers – which are what the arbitration panel focuses on – may be greatly affected by his start, regardless of how he performs from now through Game #162.

If you'll indulge me for a moment, let's assume that Choo has accumulated about 15% of his season AB in the first month. To this point, he's posted a .221 BA / .274 OBP / .349 SLG / .623 OPS, which falls well below his line from the last few years. That hitting line, since 2008 has been a phenomenal one to see compiled as The BLC's cumulative line from 2008 to 2011 has been .302 BA / .397 OBP / .500 SLG / .897 OPS.

What would Choo have to put forth in the final 85% of this season to reach that production, given the hole that he's put himself into with his early struggles?

Excuse me while I pull out my calculator, but it would take an OBP of .424 from this point on for Choo to come close to that .397 OBP that he put forth over a 3-year timeframe. Maybe that's possible, but that's getting on base more than 42% of the time over a 5-month stretch. As for his SLG, The BLC would have to post a Slugging Percentage of .540 to finish the 2011 season with a SLG at that .500 number that he compiled from 2008 to 2010.

Again, perhaps Choo has a .964 OPS in him for the rest of the season to come close to the bar that he set (so high) from 2008 to 2010, but he's going to have to be lights-out from here on out to put forth numbers on par with, much less exceed, what he's done to this point in his career. Now, given the arbitration situation with Choo (and Boras), it will be interesting to see what happens if Choo continues to struggle through May, digging himself a deeper hole in terms of compiling the 2011 totals that will be used in the arbitration process.

Am I rooting for that hole to get deeper for The BLC?

Of course not, as I'd love to see Choo put up a .900 OPS for the year (as a prolonged stretch at the top of the AL Central is easier to see with Choo producing), but given what he'd have to put forth from this point on to justify the arbitration number that is likely floating around in Scott Boras' head, it's going to be a statistical evolution that bears watching, particularly over the next month or so.

Finally, as the Indians look to separate themselves further in the AL Central, it is worth noting that the Indians have now been in 1st place for 20 consecutive days this season, a prolonged stretch of time perched atop the Central that they've accomplished only one other time (from mid-August to the end of the season in 2007) since the beginning of the 2002 season.

Seriously...