

The Cycle: Introducing, the Challenger...

Written by {ga=ninocolla}

Tuesday, May 17 2011 8:13 AM - Last Updated Tuesday, May 17 2011 9:25 AM



Welcome to The Cycle, where we take a look at the most recent news items concerning Cleveland Indians baseball and go swimming in the outfield of Progressive Field while the team hits the road.

Two days off too many. When a team comes off a walk-off energy shot like the Indians did on Friday, you want to see them get back out there and continue the momentum, especially those precious home games against a scuffling Seattle team. Who knows what Seattle will be like when those games get made up in August and September. Or even how Cleveland will be playing then. Although it looks like they saved some of that pent up aggression for Kansas City on Monday, Seattle was ripe for the picking.

I point you to the standings and if you haven't noticed...Detroit is back. The Tigers are hitting everything in sight and while you may have noticed Justin Verlander throwing his second career no-hitter, you may have not noticed Brad Penny, Max Scherzer, and Rick Porcello all coming together. Penny has been the best of all the Detroit pitchers, even better than Verlander, going 3-0 during the month of May with just two earned runs surrendered. He's doing it in a different way though, having struck out just four hitters. That's Josh Tomlin stuff there.

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We've wondered aloud who was going to step up and challenge the Tribe, or even if for that matter. After a few bouts of wonderment, it looks like Minnesota might be dead on arrival. Losers of nine straight after Monday, they've got the worst run differential in the game and it isn't even close. They're scary bad and it just goes to show you that their clink and clank offense is their demise if they don't have the pitching. I'm going to stick the white flag in them.

And much to everyone's surprise, Kansas City is still going strong with one of the best offenses. But as we know, that can't last and their holes are starting to show, especially now with their best pitcher (we're talking about the Royals here), Bruce Chen, on the disabled list. And that showed last night with the 19-run drubbing the Tribe put on them. They even called up Eric Hosmer, their highly touted hitting prospect and he's already eclipsing the performance of Kila Ka'iahue at first.

And that brings up to two of the main three topics that need to be discussed in The Cycle.

In this version of The Cycle, we take a look at the Tribe's competition, a switch at third base, and Grady Sizemore making his return to the disabled list.

[OH GRADY]

Here's the positive spin. Grady Sizemore "missed" two games that didn't happen, could be back as soon as next weekend before the Indians hit the road to visit Tampa Bay, and the knee he hurt wasn't the surgically repaired knee that kept him out for most of 2010.

The negative spin, it's still a knee injury and Sizemore is back on the disabled list.

More positive spin, Austin Kearns and his .160 average in 16 games will be sent back to the bench more often than not. Travis Buck, who did start to hit right before getting optioned down when Sizemore was activated, returns to Cleveland after hitting .333 in 16 games for the Clippers.

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More negative spin. [Grady Sizemore is hurt again](#) . You can't replace the dynamic difference Sizemore makes in the Tribe's lineup. You simply can't account for a guy who hit six home runs (tied for the team lead now) in just 18 games out of the leadoff spot. You can't makeup someone who had the ability to also hit 10 doubles and knock in 11 runs and score 15.

Then again, Michael Brantley seemed to pick up in the leadoff spot where Grady left off, and Buck was fantastic on Monday.

Look, the word "contusion" is scary. The fact that he has yet another knee injury is even scarier. But the good news is that he actually may be able to get right back into the swing of things next weekend when he's eligible to come off the disabled list.

And here's the kicker. This may be the way for the Indians to A) treat Sizemore like he's a newborn and not let him risk any further injury, period and B) dump Austin Kearns.

Hear me out. Say Sizemore was going to be out the rest of the week, at the least. You can't possibly go that long platooning Kearns and Shelley Duncan with Sizemore in limbo. Tack on the extra few days, call up Travis Buck and see if he can hit well enough to justify replacing Kearns as the fourth outfielder. How else can you do that? Sure, you could "just do it" as they say, but it would be classy to show Kearns that he's run out of time and is getting out performed.

Living in the moment, we baseball fans seem to forget that a season is 162 games long. So even if Sizemore misses 10 or some games, in a way, he's only missing a week and a half of action. He's barely missing six percent of the season with this stint, which is far better than, say, 25 or 30 percent. That's like 50 games.

It may not be the same knee or the same injury, but the last thing you want Sizemore doing is second guessing himself. Let him be 100 positive nothing is wrong so he doesn't get himself caught in between or doing further damage to the current injury, or re-damaging the old one.

[HERE COME THE TIGS]

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Luckily for the Tribe, Detroit isn't on the schedule again until mid-June. So the Indians won't have to attempt to cross the fire trail the Tigers have been blazing. Since leaving Cleveland, the Tigers returned home to face the Yankees. They dropped the first game to the Bombers and proceeded to turn their entire season around, pulling off wins in 10 of their last 11 games, including seven straight, until Monday's loss to Toronto.

And in addition to the pitching mentioned earlier, they've got some aid in a few former Tribe bats. Miguel Cabrera has been tamed, not having hit a home run in the month of May, but being avoided like the plague with 13 walks. Instead the opposition is selecting to pitch to Victor Martinez, whose hit .415 with 14 RBI since coming off the disabled list. Joining him at the party table has been Jhonny Peralta, who has seen a hot-streak of his own, clubbing five homers in his past 12 games.

We all know Peralta though. He probably won't hit five more home runs until August, at which point, he'll hit five in one week. Rinse and repeat. The revitalization of Detroit though has mainly come from that rotation, which has no weak spot right now. Phil Coke has even been semi-serviceable, but with four big horses, it isn't any wonder they've lost two games since we've last seen them.

So is this the battle? The Tigers are now 4.5 games behind the Tribe for first place and have put that slow start behind them. Cleveland cooling off has put them close. Chicago is still struggling and it may be awhile before Minnesota returns to the discussion if they are to join the discussion. I say they are done. Chicago isn't, but they're treading on that water.

This was the middle-case scenario for Cleveland. Worst case was falling off completely and the Tigers or a team in the division going on a run like the Tigers did. The best-case scenario was Cleveland continuing to play with their hair on fire and everyone else, including Kansas City, continuing to putz around. I'll take the middle-case scenario of the Indians playing decent (against some stiff competition) and the Tigers catching fire.

The "Are they Real" talk around Cleveland has subsided and it would appear the world is believing the Tribe is here to stick around in the competition. The question has now been answered as to who the competition would be. It's safe to say that Detroit is everything that one-third of the preseason prognosticators thought they would be. That one third that had

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Detroit winning the AL Central can now gloat over the other two-thirds, but they've still got Cleveland to contend with.

[A LESSON FROM KC]

You may wonder to yourself, after seeing Eric Hosmer get promoted in Kansas City, if the Indians should be taking a page from the Royals' book and think about making a move with their top-flight prospect as well.

Hosmer and Lonnie Chisenhall have taken similar paths after both were drafted in the 2008 Amateur Draft. Hosmer, of course, was a higher pick, going third overall and with that comes more pressure and hype. For Hosmer, 2009 was a struggle as he hit just .241 in 106 games between Burlington and Wilmington as a 19 year old. In 2010 though, Hosmer broke out, hitting .338 and clubbing 13 long balls in just 50 games for Double-A Northwest Arkansas.

This season, came his first test against Triple-A pitching, much like Chisenhall.

Through 34 games Chisenhall has batted .280 with a .377 on-base percentage, three home runs, 22 RBI, and 26 runs scored. Through 26 games with Omaha, Hosmer hit .439 with a .525 on-base percentage, three home runs, 22 RBI, and 21 runs scored. Hosmer clearly had more than just a hot month, having made the Triple-A landscape his playground.

Chisenhall hasn't shown that type of dominance, but that hasn't even been his way throughout his career. Chisenhall hit .290 in 68 games with Mahoning Valley, .276 in 99 games with Kinston, and .262 with Akron.

There are other factors at play though, mainly who these prospects replace and what kind of production that position has been producing. In Hosmer's case, he is replacing first baseman Kila Ka'aihue, who was hitting .195 through 23 games with just a pair of home runs. This is a older prospect who's hit as many as 37 home runs in a minor league season and 24 with Omaha in 94 games last year. There is some expectations with Ka'aihue that if the time hasn't come now, it never will.

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Chisenhall on the other hand, would be replacing Jack Hannahan, hitting .245 after Monday with four home runs and 16 RBI. Not only that, Hannahan is a slick fielder who has probably saved as many runs as Ka'aihue knocked in this season (6), if not more. Chisenhall himself has committed five errors at third in Columbus this year.

This discussion came up a few weeks ago in April when Hannahan started to flat line offensively. Then Super Jack came alive and started hitting again. If anything, he provides runs of production offensively while staying sound defensively. This isn't like the Indians are bleeding at third base like the Royals were at first. This isn't like the entire offense needs a spark that Chisenhall will provide.

The move will probably come at some point this season, but not right now.

[RANDOM RUNDOWN]

Vin Mazzaro was bad. Like, historically bad. No pitcher, ever, and I'm not kidding when I say ever, has given up [as many runs in relief in as few innings](#) as Vin Mazzaro did on Monday. Ned Yost could have saved Mazzaro further humiliation and just yanked him with the 10 run inning.

Oh but no, he wanted Mazzaro to go down in history as the guy who had the worst relief appearance ever. The funny thing, poor Mazzaro is a starter, not a reliever. Still, this is the major leagues and if you give up 14 runs in less than three innings pitched, you stand to be questioned.

No reliever since Les McCrabb, back when they were fighting the Second World War, has given up 14 runs in a game. But even more impressively, no pitcher has given up that many runs in so few innings. The sad part is that there are two pitchers, Josh Beckett and Josh Johnson, who have yet to give up 14 runs this season.

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The Indians [opened up a new academy in the Dominican Republic](#) that will be their headquarters for the Latin American operations. People are always complaining about the money the Dolan family puts into the organization. But they look at one number, total payroll for a season, and just set it at that. They fail to take into account money spent on the draft and ventures like this one.

A facility in the Dominican like this one that can house 60 players can do wonders for your Latin American scouting effort. It can strengthen your organization with possible Latin Free agents. If only more people realized that and weren't so critical based off the one number that is so visible.

I've always said that Ohio weather is unexplainable, not unnamable. In fact, I usually just coin it as "frustrating." Manny Acta called it "Dracula weather." I have nothing left to say, and perhaps I should just end it there.

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