

The Memorial Point: Where the Indians are and Where they are Going

Written by {ga=ninocolla}

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They say Memorial Day is the unofficial point in the season where you start to evaluate the MLB season and accept what is unfolding. They say teams in contention at this point are likely to remain in contention all season.

Baseball is a game of statistics, superstitions, analysis, tradition, sections, and grilling.

Wait, that last one was about Memorial Day. But Memorial Day is about grilling and it is also about breaking down baseball teams and analyzing their long term value. Remember what they say?

So if what they say is true, then our Cleveland Indians, who have the largest lead of any division leader, are in it for the long haul.

Oh, the long haul. It has been just two months and a lot has happened, but a lot more will also

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happen.

So here's your Memorial Day look at the Cleveland Indians. Where they came from, where they are, where they are going, and what they need to do. And because this is Memorial Day and it isn't just about the Tribe, we'll take a trip around the diamond and visit all other 29 teams.

Catcher

Where they came from: Carlos Santana has looked as good as you can in the health department from the get-go. His backup, Lou Marson "won" the backup job by virtually being on the 40-man roster.

Where they are: Santana hasn't looked as expected at the plate. His defense has had its good moments, both at first and at catcher, but he has also had some teachable moments in that regard. The biggest thing is Santana's bat and right now, although he's found ways to produce runs and reach base, he hasn't hit a prime stride. That could be a good thing that the best has yet to come, or it could be a bad thing that maybe he's struggling to find the best. Marson started off on fire and to this day is still killing left-handers to the tune of a .563 average. But he doesn't play every day against the leftie.

Where they are going: This looks to be the tandem for the entire season. Marson is sound defensively and the two have rebounded from an early season funk that just was a mixture of bad luck, some inattentive starters, and facing teams like Kansas City who ran a lot. Marson has hit the left-handers, so there will likely be no change there.

What they need to do: Hopefully Santana turns it around and gets "it" after being moved down in the order away from the clean-up spot. If not, panic?

First Base

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Where they came from: For once, Matt LaPorta didn't have restraints, he didn't have Russell Branyan or anyone breathing down his back, he didn't have to worry. LaPorta came in to the season with the first base job all to himself, a clean bill of health, and the entire season to prove things right.

Where they are: LaPorta has had flashes of greatness, but also flashes of worry. For one the past series against Tampa Bay is a microcosm. He will strike out four times one game, hit a big home run and go 2-for-3 the next. He has his good games, he has his bad games. He shows he can be a legitimate power hitter in the middle of the lineup, but then he doesn't. LaPorta has hit six home runs, which is good, but the Indians expect more. Good news? He has hit 10 doubles, good enough for second on the team.

Where they are going: This team will continue to play LaPorta at first and put in Santana on the off-days. What needs to be looked at most is the place LaPorta occupies in the lineup. He's moved all around but the team will be happy if he eventually settles in at a fifth or sixth spot, giving a guy like Santana better protection as a "power" guy.

What they need to do: Stick to the plan with Matt. He's showing good moments and his 2011 so far leads you to believe he can be the long term answer. Maybe not as dominant of a power hitter as once thought, but perhaps he is a more powerful or productive version of Ryan Garko, with a better glove.

Second Base

Where they came from: The position was up in the air coming into the spring. With Jayson Nix and Jason Donald battling for third, it was thought one of them would occupy second as well. That was until the Indians signed Orlando Cabrera and claimed him to be their second baseman. Who would have thought?

Where they are: Cabrera has been an integral part of this team and their success. Has his defense been spectacular? No, but he's steadied the infield up the middle, even if he doesn't have the range he once did. Remember he is playing a position he hasn't been accustomed to for some time. Has his offense been incredible? No, but he's provided some clutch hits and always goes up and puts a good at-bat. He doesn't give outs away.

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Where they are going: He can't continue to be the guy hitting behind players like Hafner and Santana though. Cabrera may eventually move down in the order. He may be able to hit second against some select left-handers, but Cabrera needs to anchor the bottom part of the order, not back-up the middle. He's not that type of hitter. Cabrera can very well be the second baseman for the rest of the season, however...

What they need to do: There may be a point where another option provides more production and more solid defense. This isn't to say Orlando becomes useless. This is still a guy you can move to the bench to make it really strong. Who wouldn't want a veteran like Orlando Cabrera on their bench? Cord Phelps has really lit it up offensively for the past two months in Columbus and is knocking on the door. He may be the guy that provides more production and more solid defense than Cabrera. As steady as Uncle Orlando has been, he can still contribute, but there may be an option that can contribute far more.

Shortstop

Where they came from: Like LaPorta, Asdrubal Cabrera came into the 2011 season with a clean bill of health and his normal defensive position all to himself. For Cabrera, we've seen him at his best, so perhaps this situation would breed a big year for young Asdrubal.

Where they are: Batting average, run, home runs, runs batted in, on-base percentage, doubles, hits, triples, total bases, and steals. Those are all statistics that Asdrubal Cabrera leads his team in. He's one of the best offensive shortstops in the game; let-alone the American League right now. The healthy arm has given Cabrera the confidence he needs and he is really running with his success.

Where they are going: Right now Cabrera is the MVP of this team and perhaps maybe the American League. He'll be in the All-Star game, that's for sure.

What they need to do: Cabrera fits in the two-spot in the lineup and he's playing excellent defense at short. They need to continue to get this type of performance out of him because if the guys behind him turn it on, his production increases even more.

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Third Base

Where they came from: Jason Donald appeared to have the spot locked down. That was until he was hit on the hand by a pitch. It was perhaps an unfortunate blessing that Jack Hannahan took over at third, because he's had the job ever since.

Where they are: Hannahan has been everything you could ask for and more. He's really filled what was a black hole defensively for the Indians last year. A good defense can breed a lot of things and Hannahan is a main factor in the stellar defensive play. He even started off pretty hot with the bat and came up with some big hits. He has trailed off, but did anyone expect him to contribute at all offensively in the first place? Everything he's given with the stick has been a huge bonus. His glove alone has saved enough runs to make everything worth it.

Where they are going: They may be headed in a different direction though. As mentioned, Hannahan's stick has trailed off and eventually with a guy in the minors who can give this team

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some production, which they currently may need, a move may have to be made.

What they need to do: Eventually, they need to make that move. As awesome as it is to watch Hannahan at third, a move should probably be made when Lonnie Chisenhall is ready. He may be ready now. The club is in contention, so they won't be worrying about service time at this point. When, and not if, the Indians go to Chisenhall, it will be because they believe it is the right time.

Left Field

Where they came from: With Grady Sizemore out, Michael Brantley shifted from left to center and gave way to an awkward Austin Kearns/Travis Buck platoon. Brantley was slated to start there, but it was Kearns who actually did.

Where they are: When Brantley hasn't been in left and Sizemore has been on the disabled list, it has been a bit of a revolving door. Kearns has had his opportunities and has looked, not very good at spots. Since his return from Columbus, Travis Buck has provided a decent offensive force. This has mainly been Michael Brantley's spot though and it may continue to be, fingers crossed.

Where they are going: If Sizemore can return and not return to the disabled list, they are headed towards Brantley being the everyday left fielder. Grady Sizemore won't be in left, so don't suggest it. If Sizemore runs into more issues, Travis Buck will continue to vulture more regular time.

What they need to do: Brantley has been stellar in left and in the leadoff spot. He needs to continue to hit there, regardless of Sizemore and his status. Brantley gets on base, point blank. He's got a great eye at the plate and is willing to not only work the walk, but just put the ball in play and hope for the best. Brantley is this team's leadoff hitter and he's earned that position. It also makes the most sense in terms of aiming for the most production.

Center Field

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Where they came from: As already noted, Grady Sizemore would be in center and is in center, provided health checks out. Brantley has patrolled center more often than not though.

Where they are: As of Memorial Day, Sizemore is still working back from his latest knee episode and with a run of games in domes with artificial turf, it makes sense to play it safe. Brantley can play center and so can Sizemore, so that isn't of concern. When Sizemore made his 2011 debut though, he did so with a vengeance. He looked not like the Sizemore of old, but more like a re-born Grady Sizemore with a much tougher swing. It didn't take long and at one point, he led the team in doubles, even was high up in the AL rankings. Of course the second knee injury has de-railed things.

Where they are going: The hope is things get re-railed for Sizemore and he can return to the production we had been accustomed to in that short amount of time. Sizemore really augments the lineup in a huge way and even if he isn't producing at his highest peak, he brings some fear. He brings more than just an automatic Austin Kearns out.

What they need to do: Hope Sizemore stays healthy. Period.

Right Field

Where they came from: This one was easy. Shin-Soo Choo.

Where they are: The Indians best hitter has not been their best hitter. Choo has struggled. As easy of an answer this was at the beginning of the season, it is a complicated riddle at this point. The part that makes it a riddle is the fact that this team is in first place despite their star player's struggles. Not only has Choo struggled at the plate, he's looked awkward defensively. Sure he's thrown out an AL-high six runners from the outfield, but he's had his own misadventures out in right in terms of chasing down balls, playing them off the wall, and just overall not taking good routes.

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Where they are going: Clearly, they need their best hitter. If this team is going to remain in contention and the offense is going to survive this current period of missing Travis Hafner and Grady Sizemore, Shin-Soo Choo needs to become a force. Right now he's just a guy in the lineup. He's not giving that production you look for in someone hitting from the three spot.

What they need to do: Hire Choo a driver for one thing. Then find a way to bring 2010-Choo to the present.

Designated Hitter and Bench

Where they came from: Travis Hafner came into the season healthy. Sure we've heard the song and dance before, but he really came in healthy. After last season where we saw what the "new" Hafner was all about, expectations were him to just be productive, not necessarily, "Pronk." The bench took shape when the starting spots started to get filled. Adam Everett deservedly won the back-up utility job and the rest of the bench has formed with the likes of Travis Buck, Shelley Duncan, and Austin Kearns.

Where they are: Surprise! Pronk returned! At least for awhile, until a midsection injury sidelined him for a month or so. Right now, Hafner is on the disabled list, but his re-birth had given the Indians a solid presence in the middle of the lineup. Duncan and Buck have tried to fill things, and in the outfield Austin Kearns has been forgettable. Everett brings a nice defensive infielder to have in reserve, but isn't all that crucial to the success of this team.

Where they are going: Duncan and Buck can't adequately fill the void left by Hafner. They can try and be decent, but you can't replace a productive Hafner, because a productive Hafner is feared and that fear produces more production from the players around him.

What they need to do: They need to get him back... Or if they can't, they need to make a move to do so. Additional moves to the other spots in the team may strengthen the bench. We saw what Ezequiel Carrera brings to the table and it makes the idea of getting rid of Austin Kearns even more of a possibility.

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Starting Pitching

Where they came from: Josh Tomlin wrapped up the rotation battle by winning the final job and settling on a starting five of Tomlin, Fausto Carmona, Justin Masterson, Mitch Talbot, and Carlos Carrasco. Four were expected and even in the "battle," Tomlin had little to do to prove he belonged.

Where they are: And so far, Tomlin has done a lot to prove he is the best the Indians have to offer. He clearly is not "stuff" wise, but he's pitching like it and is more than just a serviceable number five starter. Carmona has had his ups and downs, but hopefully the best for him has yet to come. Justin Masterson is clearly the story of the rotation and his leap has really been a catalyst for the rotation and the job they've done this season. Carrasco seems to be hitting his stride after returning from a DL stint, while Mitch Talbot may be the one name that is in jeopardy.

Strangely, we are where we started, even though the rotation underwent several changes throughout the season. If you stopped watching the team after the first week and just started up this week, you would have missed the entire Alex White episode. The first rounder made quite the name for himself and actually now makes us wonder what if he didn't hurt himself. Would Mitch Talbot still be around?

Where they are going: They may be going in that direction when White gets healthy. Talbot needs time to get his feet under him and hopefully, he does just that. You'd hate to dip into the Columbus depth right now. White was the big reinforcement and now he's hurt.

What they need to do: When White comes back; they will likely need to make the move to get him in. As we always say in baseball, things have a way of working themselves out, but if Talbot is struggling, White's presence would be much welcomed. If things get to a point where Talbot is unbearable and White still isn't ready, Zach McAllister may be the guy that receives an opportunity.

