

Tomahawks Rising Once More

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Thursday, July 07 2011 10:25 PM - Last Updated Thursday, July 07 2011 10:42 PM



Remember that whole idea that July was “Moving Day” in a baseball season?

As Hafner’s walk-off Grand Slam soared into the Cleveland night, the Indians found themselves winners in 6 of their last 8 as the team has shown that they’re not willing to let injuries to players derail what certainly feels like a magical season. Just when it seemed that the persistent flaws on the team – inconsistent offense with an inability to capitalize on opportunities and a spotty performance from a pitcher not named Masterson, Carrasco, or Tomlin (although McAllister gets a bit of a pass in his 1st start) – the Indians continue to put together a stretch of games like the one they’re currently enjoying that causes a simple phrase like “What If?” to carry more meaning than most Indians’ fans ever thought possible.

Just when it looked like the team was heading down toward the canvas for good after that series in Northern California (that cost them their best player coming into the season), the Indians simply pulled themselves off the canvas once more and started throwing punches again. Maybe this team has a little Chuck Wepner in it, but they’re surviving and thriving through a portion of the schedule that could allow them to build some serious momentum heading into the final two months of the season.

Thus, after watching the pile-up at home plate tonight on TV and after taking in Wednesday night’s gem at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario, and because there were a couple of things floating around in my head (other than Mitch Talbot this week), I thought that I’d let loose a couple of quick Tomahawks, if only because the good feelings are pervasive, so let’s allow them

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to pervade...

Not sure who has noticed this (though yours truly, who said that the "platoon" to replace Choo was "doomed to fail), but here is what Travis Buck, Austin Kearns, and Shelley Duncan have combined to do in games in which they were the RF since Choo's injury, heading into Thursday's tilt against the Jays:

.307 BA / .357 OBP / .487 SLG / .844 OPS as a group in the 43 plate appearances

It is true that the total is only in the 11 games since The BLC went down, but since that group started out 0-7 in the first 2 games as a "platoon" (with Duncan striking out 4 times in the 2nd game in which the troika were asked to handle RF), they've done their best to quiet the calls for another bat for the OF. Now that Buck is healthy once again, it will be interesting to see how Acta employs Buck and Kearns out in the OF (and I wouldn't mind seeing Mike Brantley get a few days off here and there as he has a .204 BA / .263 OBP / .301 SLG / .564 OPS slash line in 114 PA over the past month) as the Indians attempt to fill the hole created by a Jonathon Sanchez fastball. Since Choo's injury, I've felt that the team would be best served giving RF to one player (and they seemed to do that, starting with Buck until his injury, at which point they turned to Kearns), so how the plate appearances shake out from here is anyone's guess.

Of course, buried in Thursday morning's paper is this bombshell (which has some bearing on the whole RF situation), as [Hoynes reports](#) that "Outfielder Shin-Soo Choo had the cast removed from his broken left thumb Wednesday. Choo is telling friends he could be playing by the second week in August."

Whoa, whoa, whoa...the second week in August?

Isn't this the guy that was supposed to be gone for 8 to 10 weeks, perhaps putting in jeopardy whether he'd even be coming back this season?

Maybe Choo is being overly optimistic to "friends", but the second week of August is really only about 4 weeks of baseball from now (with the All-Star Break removing 3 days of games from the schedule in there) and if Choo's timetable for return is really in 4 weeks, how involved should the Indians be getting in acquiring that OF bat that seems to be at the top of everyone's list?

By that I mean that the trade market probably won't develop until the last full week in July (and do a Google search on a team...any team, with the keyword "buyer" or "seller" after the team name and see how many articles are written about how teams don't know which they're going to be) and if Choo's going to come back a couple of weeks after that, perhaps the best course of action is for the Indians to look to perhaps add any kind of RH bat (regardless of position) or even stand pat and continue to promote from within. Reason being is that buried in all of this nonsense about Jeff Francoeur and Ryan Ludwick being players that could help the Tribe are

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the actual performances of Francoeur and Ludwick, particularly recently.

Want to know what Jeff Francoeur has done in about the last 2 months after his hot start:

Frenchy since May 5th – 55 games

.238 BA / .285 OBP / .360 SLG / .645 OPS in 235 PA

So, that's the upgrade that the Indians should be looking to make?

Sorry, I'm not seeing that being much better than Buck or even Kearns, even considering Francoeur's right-handedness as the Royals are apparently not talking to teams about Francoeur and, if Choo REALLY is targeting the 2nd week of August as a return date, is acquiring Francoeur as a two-week platoon partner and a RH PH really what's going to put the Indians "over the top" in the AL Central?

Maybe you prefer Ludwick, the former Indian who is still close with certain members of the team...but if you do, check this:

Ludwick since May 23rd – 43 games

.262 BA / .327 OBP / .349 SLG / .678 OPS in 169 PA

Better than Francoeur, but again, that's in the NL (where Ludwick has a career OPS that is more than 100 points higher than his AL career OPS) and Ludwick is still owed about \$3M on his current deal. Given what we've seen from Buck, Kearns, and Duncan recently, is THAT how you'd like to see the Tribe spend money, particularly if Choo's ready to take back the reins in RF a couple of weeks after Ludwick would be acquired?



Lest anyone forget, Travis Buck has a .669 OPS in 122 PA and Kearns has a .604 OPS in 126 PA and while those numbers don't look that great, compared to what Francoeur and Ludwick have "contributed" as of late, is the difference that great that the Indians should be looking to add payroll or part with a prospect (however obscure) to get either of those guys into the fold?

Perhaps you could make a case that Buck and Kearns are playing over their head recently (and I'd listen on Kearns...if not Buck) and maybe Frenchy could be a platoon partner with Buck, but the truth is that this trade market is going to take a while to shake out and, while it does, there is suddenly the possibility that Choo (according to him, at least) could be on the fast-track back into the lineup. While so much has been written about how the Indians need to find another option for RF because of the severity and recovery time for Choo's finger, if Choo is TRULY ready to come back to the team in the second week of August, the Indians have more

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flexibility to add a piece to the team going forward.

Whether they do or not - and what team is even willing to talk trade - remains to be seen as the news that Choo could be back in about a month is cause for celebration and reason to turn a blind eye to what "available", mediocre OF around the league might be had for...

Want more good injury recovery news?

No, not that the Indians WILL send Fausto out on a rehab start as this also came through in the various notes section, [again \(buried\) from Hoynes as](#), "Right-hander Alex White (right middle finger) will stay in Cleveland over the All-Star break. He is scheduled to play catch at 120 feet on Friday. If things go well, he could be throwing off the mound coming out of the break."

Not trying to pretend to know what steps need to be taken from White "throwing off the mound" to "pitching off of the mound" at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario, this represents another chance to exhale. While visions of Atom Miller's finger danced in too many heads on the North Coast, if White is "throwing off the mound" next week, the Indians' cavalry for their starting rotation (read: Talbot's spot) could get their lead horse back.

As great as it is to see Gomez and Huff pitch well in AAA, it's important to remember that White leapfrogged both of those guys to get the extended call earlier in the season. Likewise with McAllister and Barnes (who, let's ALL remember came over in deals for 1/2 of a season of Austin Kearns and Ryan Garko and who are both 23 years old and have put up some eye-catching numbers in Columbus), as nice as it is to dream on that duo as evidence of more thievery for the organization, White is the one that topped all of the pre-season prospect lists, with the pedigree and the production to back it up.

Lest anyone forget, in White's first 4 starts in Columbus, he struck out 28 and walked only 5 in 23 2/3 innings, during which he compiled a 1.90 ERA and a 1.01 WHIP, then came up to Cleveland and struck out 13 (though he walked 9) in his first 15 IP during 3 starts before succumbing to the finger injury. As I said, I have no idea what "throwing off the mound" means (other than it seems to be missing an "of" in the sentence), but if White is able to return to the Tribe rotation this year, it strengthens one of the pillars of this 2011 club.

The promotion of White represented a paradigm shift for the Indians' deep thinkers (or at least the way they acted) and White returning to the rotation to possibly settle one of the spots in the back-end-of-the-rotation could represent another shift for the Indians, one in which their path to the AL Central title becomes easier to envision.

Speaking of the AL Central title, it is worth pointing out that the Tribe took 2 of 3 from the Yankees (in case you hadn't heard), winning a series in which the Bombers threw Sabathia, Burnett, and Hughes. Certainly, Hughes was coming off of his injury and CC dominated the Tribe, but those are the Yankees' top 3 starters coming into the season and the Indians won the series against that trio of pitchers.

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Of course, the accolades do not belong to the offense for the series win, but instead to 2/3 of the front of the Tribe's rotation as Tomlin and Masterson compiled this total against the Yankees, the highest scoring offense in MLB that was not missing any pieces or parts (unlike the Indians) from their offense:

Tomlin/Masterson vs. Yankees on Monday/Wednesday

15 IP, 6 H, 2 ER, 11 K, 3 BB

Coming into the Indians' series, the Yankees had scored 4 or more runs in 19 of their previous 26 games and hadn't lost a series in a month, since being swept by the Red Sox in Boston at the beginning of June. Yet here come the Indians, battered and bruised as anyone, with their often-overlooked, always-discounted, young, talented starting rotation ready to try to "tame" the Yankees. While Carrasco's off-the-rails outing on Tuesday was a quick reminder as to what New York usually does to opposing pitchers, seeing Tomlin and Masterson dominate the loaded Yankee lineup (in entirely different manne



rs) is a reminder as to why this Indians team has a legitimate shot of just sticking around in the AL Central, but taking control of it as well.

Taking control is certainly what the Indians seem to be doing as they remained dormant for 8 innings of tonight's game, as their lockdown bullpen came to the rescue of a rookie starter. However, when the final opportunity presented itself (and many were squandered before that), the Indians did what they've done for the majority of the year – some how, some way won the game.

Perhaps at this point, it is no longer reasonable to ask how...and more advisable to sit back and enjoy the ride we're being taken on.