

New Season, New Hope?

Written by {ga=jerryroche}

Tuesday, April 03 2012 5:00 AM - Last Updated Tuesday, April 03 2012 6:42 AM



“A straggling few got up to go in deep despair. The rest clung to that hope which springs eternal in the human breast...”

—From “Casey at the Bat,” by Ernest Thayer

On Thursday by 3:05 p.m., 43,345 enthusiastic fans will have descended upon Progressive Field for the Cleveland Indians’ home opener against the Toronto Blue Jays. They will be filled with all the optimism that a 0-0 record brings. Between bites of mustard-laden hot dogs, they will closely observe a team that has emerged from spring training still seeking answers.

Despite the optimism of Opening Day, a cloak of darkness seems to haunt this team. Many fans, like me, see a front office that’s not making the strides toward a pennant contender that we’ve been promised—especially in contrast to the Detroit Tigers and Los Angeles Angels, both of which made huge deals over the winter. We fans have been under the (apparently mistaken) impression that our Tribe was being built for the 2012 and 2013 seasons, but nothing we’ve seen in the way of recent roster changes points in that direction. What it seems is that GM Chris Antonetti has thrown the proverbial bowl of spaghetti against the wall to see what sticks—and it’s all slithering to the floor.

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Just two or three years ago, Mark Shapiro and Antonetti had high hopes for players like Jensen Lewis, Austin Kearns, Aaron Laffy and Cord Phelps. Shall I go on? Fernando Cabrera, Jeremy Sowers, Trevor Crowe, Nick Weglarz, Lonnie Chisenhall, Adam Miller, Alex White, Matt LaPorta, Drew Pomerantz. There are more, but I've made my point: None of those highly regarded former prospects has panned out, at least not in Cleveland, or at least not yet.

Last season, the Indians ranked 9th or 10th of 14 teams in the American League in most offensive categories, including batting average (.250), OPS (.714) and runs scored (704). Essentially, the only "everyday" players they added from other organizations over the winter were Casey Kotchman, Jose Lopez and Aaron Cunningham. Here are the career major-league hitting statistics of those three:

NAME	BA	HR/550 AB
Casey Kotchman	.268	12.5
Jose Lopez	.263	1.7
Aaron Cunningham	.231	9.3

Among those three, only first-baseman Kotchman will be starting. He is expected to add a lot more defense and a bit more offense than his predecessor (LaPorta), who hit .247 last year with 11 home runs.

Last year, Tribe pitchers ranked 10th in the A.L. in ERA (4.23), 13th in strikeouts (1,024) and 11th in batting average against (.261). New are Dan Wheeler, Jairo Asencio and Derek Lowe. For the record, here are the newbies' career major-league pitching statistics:

NAME	W-L	IP	S	ERA
Dan Wheeler	25-43	628.1	43	3.88
Derek Lowe	166-146	2515.2	85	3.94
Jairo Asencio	0-1	13.0	0	6.23

Caution must be taken in evaluating Lowe's statistics. The last three years, pitching for Atlanta (facing very few lineups containing DHs), he's 40-39 with an ERA of 4.57. Last year, he was

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9-17 with a 5.05 ERA, indicating that he may be nearing the end of his 15-year major-league career.

Admittedly, I don't follow the team as closely as my TCF.com colleagues Adam Burke, Nino Colla, Paul Cousineau and Al Ciammiachella, who know by heart the career OPS+ and WHIP of every player on the major-league roster and every player in the minor-league system. But I can say that I've followed the Tribe *longer* than any of them (and probably longer than you): 54 years, by my count.

When all is said and done, this current Tribe's lineup more resembles the 1970 team that finished 76-86 (with Ray Fosse, John Lowenstein and Ted Uhlaender), or the 1980 team that finished 79-82 (with Gary Alexander, Mike Hargrove and Toby Harrah), or the 1990 team that finished 74-88 (with Keith Hernandez, Brook Jacoby and Felix Fermin). It absolutely does *not* resemble the 1994, 1995, 1996 or 1997 teams, which we remember with much more fondness.

Despite all the negative implications of another mediocre season, I am certainly looking forward to visiting Progressive Field a few times in the next few months. I can still get it on for Shin-Soo Choo, who's got a beautiful swing when he's healthy. But I'm still skeptical about catcher Carlos Santana, who had a disappointing 2011 (.239 BA, 79 RBI). I'd prefer to attend games being pitched by Justin Masterson, who may be the next big thing. But I really don't care to see Lowe or Josh Tomlin take the mound.

Here's what else I do and don't expect this season:

>> I don't expect a 30-15 start out of the gate like last year.

>> I do expect to finish about 15 games behind the Detroit Tigers—just like last year.

>> I don't expect the team to be very exciting (meaning high-scoring). But I also generally don't expect the games to be totally boring.

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>> I do expect some chilly games in April, even though the March weather was more like June.

>> I don't expect Travis Hafner to appear in more than 100 games.

>> I do expect Ubaldo Jiminez to have a slightly better record this year than last.

>> I don't expect Grady Sizemore to do much of anything. Except strike out a lot when/if he returns to the lineup.

>> I do expect Masterson to flirt with 17 or 18 victories, if only he can get some offensive support (and that's a big "if").

>> I don't expect manager Manny Acta to get angry at his players, but I do expect him to eventually show some impatience and/or frustration.

>> I do expect to get rained on occasionally, but...

>> I also expect plenty of sunny, warm days at the ballpark with a gentle breeze blowing in from the northwest and the smell of freshly-cut Kentucky bluegrass and red-hot weenies wafting to my nostrils.