

Lindor puts stellar defense on display vs. Cubs

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

GOODYEAR, Ariz. -- Francisco Lindor focused on his fielding over the winter and made it a priority for this spring. The Indians' All-Star shortstop has earned a reputation as one of the best defenders at his position, but he felt like that aspect of his game slipped last season.

"I definitely feel like I let down a lot of the pitchers last year," Lindor said earlier this spring. "Not by making errors, but by not getting to the baseballs and not getting those two outs when they were needed, instead of only getting one out. I want to improve on my defense."

During Wednesday's 11-6 loss to the Cubs, Lindor wasted no time in wowing the fans at Goodyear Ballpark with some dynamic plays on the field. The shortstop was involved in a pair of defensive gems in the first inning, but a diving stop against Chicago's Tommy La Stella was the real jaw-dropper.

With two outs, La Stella sliced a pitch from Indians righty Trevor Bauer up the middle, but to Lindor's right. The shortstop took a few quick strides, snared the roller with a dive and then swiftly shifted to a knee. In one smooth motion, Lindor popped up to his feet and fired the ball to first baseman Yonder Alonso, who scooped the two-hopped throw as the shortstop tumbled to the ground.

That third out served as an exclamation point to an inning that also featured a strong relay throw by Lindor. One hitter before La Stella, Albert Almora Jr. doubled to center field, where Bradley Zimmer slipped as he gathered the ball. Zimmer recovered in time to get the ball to Lindor, who then sent a pinpoint throw to catcher Yan Gomes to complete an 8-6-2 relay to cut down Ian Happ at the plate.

Lindor -- a Gold Glove Award and Platinum Glove Award winner in 2016 -- is hoping to continue to flash that kind of defense in the upcoming season. During 2017, Lindor had five Defensive Runs Saved in 1,377 innings at shortstop, while posting a 6.6 UZR/150. That was a dropoff from '16, when he had 17 DRS in 1,364 2/3 innings with a 20.7 UZR/150.

"Pitchers work as hard as they can," Lindor said. "When they execute and I don't help them, that's not right."

Lineup matters

The lineup that Indians manager Terry Francona fielded against the Cubs might be close to how things look come Opening Day.

Lindor led off, followed by Jason Kipnis, Jose Ramirez, Edwin Encarnacion, Alonso, Lonnie Chisenhall, Gomes, Zimmer and Melvin Upton Jr. The only caveats are that Upton is in camp as a non-roster invitee and is trying to win a spot on the roster, and Michael Brantley's presence could shake up that order, if his surgically repaired right ankle is 100 percent in time for the regular season.

Lindor led off 63 games last season and thrived in that role, hitting .281 with 18 of his career-high 33 home runs and a .904 OPS atop the order.

"Frankie really liked it," Francona said. "So, when you have a guy that is that much of an impact player that really enjoys it, well, that's [helpful]. ... For a number of reasons -- having a guy that is a switch-hitter, and when you turn the lineup over, you've got a guy that can drive in some runs -- I think it makes a lot of sense."

Injury updates

- Right-hander Danny Salazar (right shoulder) has advanced to playing catch up to a distance of 90 feet. Francona said pitching coach Carl Willis, the medical staff and Salazar will now discuss whether the next step will be a mound session or first building to a longer distance in a long-toss program.

- Brantley went 2-for-4 against live pitching in a simulated game setting during Wednesday's team workout. He continues to work through controlled outfield work and agility drills in his running program.

Worth noting

- Bauer started against the Cubs on Wednesday night, but endured a tough outing. In 3 1/3 innings, Bauer was charged with eight runs (seven earned) on eight hits, including two home runs. The Tribe's No. 3 starter struck out three and issued three walks.

- Tyler Naquin, Brandon Barnes, Mike Napoli and Brantley were among the Indians batters who got at-bats during Wednesday's simulated game. Minor Leaguers filled out the defense and pitchers Stephen Fife, Louis Head and Josh Martin each got work in.

Up next

Right-hander Josh Tomlin is scheduled to start for the Indians on Thursday, when Cleveland hosts the Dodgers in an 8:05 p.m. ET Cactus League clash at Goodyear Ballpark. The matchup will be available live on MLB.TV. Closer Cody Allen, lefty Tyler Olson and bullpen candidate Carlos Torres are among the other Tribe pitchers slated to appear. Lefty Alex Wood will start for Los Angeles.

Brantley bats in sim game, eager for more

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

GOODYEAR, Ariz. -- Michael Brantley tried to imagine he was stepping into the batter's box at a Major League ballpark, where the crowd is in a constant hum and reacting in bursts with every pitch. The only problem is that a Spring Training practice diamond is a far cry from the big league atmosphere.

On Field 2 at the Indians' complex on Wednesday afternoon, Brantley had four at-bats against live pitching in a simulated game, which comes with an environment more akin to golf than the big leagues. There are few fans in attendance, and those watching from the small aluminum bleachers talk in hushed tones. There might as well be someone hoisting a "Quiet Please" sign when the batter prepares to swing.

It can be a challenge to channel extreme focus in that setting.

"I need to take it professionally," Brantley said. "These at-bats are on a Minor League field, but at the same time, I've got to take the same mentality going into it. Those at-bats mean more to me, because [other] guys get more games in. So any extra at-bats I can get down here on the lower fields, I have to make sure I take them game-like as much as I can, have a plan and a philosophy and try to execute it."

For now, this is as close to getting into a Major League game as Brantley is permitted. The All-Star left fielder -- returning from surgery on his right ankle in October -- has resumed controlled outfield drills and has advanced to agility work on the grass workout field at the team's facility. Brantley has not been cleared for baserunning, so he took his at-bats without running up the first-base line in Wednesday's game.

Brantley had a pair of hits -- both pulled into right field -- in his four plate appearances.

While this is the third consecutive spring in which Brantley has been returning from an injury, Indians manager Terry Francona noted that the positive part of this year is the outfielder's level of hitting activity. In the past two springs, Brantley's ailing right shoulder led to a slow, gradual hitting progression. This time around, Brantley has been unrestricted with his hitting and has been putting in hours in the batting cage.

"He's doing really well," Francona said. "This time, he's been able to hit the entire time, so when you ramp up, it's not like he's going to be playing catch-up, as far as physically, with his hitting. He's been hitting a ton. He's getting antsy. He's in a good spot."

Brantley, 30, had a \$12 million option picked up by the Indians this past winter, even after appearing in only 90 games due to an ankle injury last season. In those games, he posted a .299/.357/.444 slash line with nine home runs, 20 doubles and 52 RBIs. Brantley made the Opening Day roster a year ago and then was voted onto the American League All-Star team by his peers.

His campaign was one of the better comeback stories in baseball until the ankle injury cost him most of the second half. Now, Brantley is again trying to defy the odds and be ready to return for Opening Day.

"I wish I wasn't so experienced in it," Brantley said. "But, at the same time, I learn from it every time. I want to make sure that I'm paying attention to my body, making sure that I'm doing the right things, but also pushing myself a little bit to see where I'm at."

Tribe's farm offers balance of talent

By Jim Callis MLB.com @JimCallisMLB

GOODYEAR, Ariz. -- Even after the promotions of Francisco Lindor and Bradley Zimmer to the big leagues and the inclusion of Clint Frazier in the Andrew Miller trade with the Yankees, the strength of the Indians farm system remains its position players.

Twelve of the first 15 players on MLB Pipeline's Indians Top 30 Prospects list are hitters. That group includes players on the cusp of the Majors (catcher Francisco Mejia, first baseman Bobby Bradley, shortstop Yu-Cheng Chang, outfielder Greg Allen), on the verge of breakouts (third baseman Nolan Jones, shortstop Willi Castro, outfielders Will Benson and Conner Capel) and newcomers from 2017 signed via the Draft (outfielder Quentin Holmes, shortstop Tyler Freeman) and international market (outfielder George Valera, shortstop Aaron Bracho).

Mejia should be the first of that group to make an impact in Cleveland, though at which position remains unclear. The game's best catching prospect has an exceptional bat that made headlines when he set a modern Minor League record with a 50-game hitting streak in 2016, and he encored by batting .297/.346/.490 in Double-A at age 21 last year.

While Mejia has a plus-plus arm, he's still polishing his defense. The Indians like what Yan Gomes and Roberto Perez provide them behind the plate, so they experimented with Mejia playing third base during the Arizona Fall League. He looked rough in his first exposure to the hot corner and Cleveland has All-Star Jose Ramirez there anyway, so it's possible that Mejia's bat could be big league-ready before there's a place to play him.

"Mejia's bat is really good but we also have two very good catchers in the big leagues," Indians farm director James Harris said. "If we didn't, you wouldn't have heard about the possibility of him playing third base. We don't want him to be limited to playing one position."

"His receiving has improved gradually, Not as much as his leadership, communication and understanding of the game. All of those things can make his receiving look better and put him in a position to be a great catch and throw guy."

Harris good-naturedly objects to the notion that the system leans heavily in favor of position players. He points to right-hander Triston McKenzie, one of baseball's top young mound prospects, and elite strike-throwers Shane Bieber (first in the Minors last year with 0.4 walks per nine innings) and Aaron Civale (third at 0.8) as evidence that there's not much of an imbalance between hitters and pitchers.

McKenzie was the Carolina League pitcher of the year in 2017, topping the Class A Advanced circuit in wins (12), strikeouts (186, second in the Minors), strikeout rate (11.7 per nine innings) and opponents' average (.203) at age 19. His low-90s fastball plays up with extension and spin rate, his curveball is an out pitch and his changeup isn't far behind his other two offerings.

"His main development goal is to have consistency, game in and game out and for multiple innings," Harris said. "Turn the lineup over multiple times. We know he can do that at high Class A. Can he do it at higher levels? We think he can and we're preparing him mentally and physically to do it."

Camp standouts

Mejia hits everywhere he goes, and that has continued in Cactus League games this spring, as he has gone 5-for-10 and slammed a homer off the Brewers' Tyler Webb. Allen, whose speed and defense earned him a spot on Cleveland's playoff roster last October, has gone 9-for-20 with three extra-base hits and a steal.

Mejia isn't the only catcher who has made an impression on the big league staff. Eric Haase doubled and homered in his first game of the spring, showing the power he displayed a year ago when he hit 27 homers and led all Indians farmhands with a .578 slugging percentage. Club officials liked how he responded when he was asked to repeat Double-A and serve as Mejia's backup at the start of 2017.

"You can sulk or say you're going to put yourself in a position where they have to play me, and he sought the resources and the coaching and made himself a good hitter," Harris said. "He's not behind the plate as much as he would be if he weren't on the same team as Mejia. That's the challenge, to find more opportunities for him to catch. He receives well and has a strong arm."

Pipeline Q&A: Indians' Nolan Jones

By Jim Callis MLB.com @JimCallisMLB

GOODYEAR, Ariz. -- As part of MLB Pipeline's visit to all 30 Spring Training camps, we'll sit down with prospects and get to know them a little better. At Indians camp, it was No. 4 prospect Nolan Jones.

One of the best high school hitters available in the 2016 Draft, Jones dropped to the Indians in the second round amid signability concerns and landed first-round money (\$2.25 million). A third baseman, he followed a so-so pro debut with a strong performance in 2017, batting .317/.430/.482 and leading the short-season New York-Penn League in on-base percentage, OPS (.912), extra-base hits (25) and walks (43) at age 19.

MLB Pipeline: What was your Draft experience like? Were you surprised not to go in the first round despite being one of the best high school bats in your class?

Jones: I heard a lot of things and tried not to focus on any of that. It was very overwhelming to see all the scouts there to see me play, so I just took the approach that they like your natural ability so you don't have to try to impress them. I didn't really have any expectations before the Draft. I heard a lot of things, but I didn't believe any of it because anything could happen. I talked to the Indians a decent amount, but I talked to a couple of teams a little more.

MLB Pipeline: You come from a hockey background too, and your brother Peyton is a goalie at Penn State. How seriously did you consider a hockey career? Do you miss it?

Jones: I played until my junior year in high school and I believe I did have some options. I had a lot of talent in hockey as well, but I also had some concussion problems, so it's all worked out fine. I was a center. I miss it a lot. I love the competitive factor. In baseball, you have to accept failure and learn from mistakes. In hockey, if you make a mistake it can end up in your net. I think hockey has played a huge role in me as a baseball player from the competitive aspect. You have to be mentally tough and physically tough.

MLB Pipeline: What was your biggest adjustment to pro ball?

Jones: For me, the most difficult adjustment was the pitching. Coming from the Northeast, I didn't see the hardest-throwing high school pitchers every day. I had to adjust so I was on time and that affected my swing path because I was rushing. I simplified my swing, and I started to be on time.

MLB Pipeline: What do you think led to your improvement from 2016 to 2017?

Jones: I wanted to be the guy up there hitting home runs. I think I started playing better when my attitude went from trying to hit home runs to trying to hit the ball hard. That helped me lay off pitches that weren't in the zone. When I was trying to hit home runs, I was chasing pitches.

MLB Pipeline: How has the transition gone from playing shortstop in high school to third base in pro ball?

Jones: It's been harder than I thought it was going to be. At shortstop, I was always attacking the ball, coming toward the ball and using my momentum toward first base to make throws easier. At third base, I have to go back on balls at times, go to the side. Now there are a lot of times where I'm not throwing with my feet set. It's something I had to adjust to. I'm trying to have rhythm with my feet and my hands. When I can smooth that up and make those off-balance throws, it will really boost my game to the next level.

Trevor Bauer, Cleveland Indians pounded by Chicago Cubs, 11-6

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com phoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Indians right-hander Trevor Bauer pitched high in the strike zone Wednesday night and the Cubs made him pay on the way to a 11-6 victory at Goodyear Ballpark.

Bauer allowed seven runs on eight hits in 3 1/3 innings in his third start of the spring. Efran Navarro hit a two-run homer and Albert Almora hit a three-run shot off Bauer.

In his first two starts, Bauer allowed one earned run in five innings with seven strikeouts and no walks. Wednesday night he walked three and struck out three before being removed in the fourth.

Kyle Schwarber homered in the sixth for Chicago's third long ball of the night. It came at the expense of Nick Goody.

Tribe catcher Yan Gomes pulled the Indians and Bauer into a 5-5 tie with a grand slam in the third. Almora answered with his blast in the fourth to give the Cubs the lead for good.

Yonder Alonso and Rob Refsnyder also homered for the Indians. Alonso homered in the second after Navarro's two-run homer in the top of the inning. Refsnyder homered in the with two out in the seventh.

The Cubs worked the Tribe's pitching staff over for 13 hits. Zach McAllister pitched a scoreless fifth for the Tribe. He's allowed one run in 6 2/3 innings this spring. Dan Otero allowed two runs in the seventh.

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Terry Francona likes Francisco Lindor up and Bradley Zimmer down in Cleveland Indians' lineup

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com phoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Manager Terry Francona was asked where he'd like to hit Francisco Lindor and Bradley Zimmer in his lineup when the regular season starts on March 29 in Seattle.

Francona, not one to mess with success, said he saw no problem keeping Lindor in the leadoff spot. Last year Lindor batted atop the lineup in 68 games, hitting .281 (75-for-267) with 18 homers and 47 RBI.

"Frankie really likes it," Francona told reporters on Wednesday afternoon in Goodyear, Ariz., before they played the Cubs. "When you have a guy who is that much of an impact player and he really enjoys it (that's good).

Francona particularly likes the idea of having the switch-hitting Lindor in the leadoff spot when the lineup turns over.

"When you have a switch-hitter, and you turn the lineup over, and you've got a guy who can drive in a lot of runs, I think that make sense," said Francona.

Lindor hit .273 (178-for-651) with 44 doubles, 33 homers and 89 RBI last season. The 33 homers set a franchise record for middle infielders. Lindor's 89 RBI were a career high.

"Back in the day you always had the fastest guy on the team batting leadoff whether he got on base or not," said Francona. "I think Frankie really profiles well there."

Lindor scored 99 runs last year, drew a career-high 60 walks and stole 15 bases in 18 attempts.

Last season Zimmer hit all over the lineup - 17 times in the leadoff spot, two times in the second spot, twice sixth, 12 in the seventh spot, 34 times at No. 8 and six in the ninth spot.

This year Francona said he'd like to hit him lower in the order.

"We could hit him anywhere," said Francona. "You could hit him at the top of the order. For his development it probably makes sense to hit him down lower.

"We've got some pretty good hitters up top: Jason Kipnis, Jose Ramirez and potentially Michael Brantley. Letting him sit down there toward the bottom takes some of the glare off and he can run more aggressively knowing we don't have one of our big bats up.

"It works in multiple ways. I don't think it's bad at all for guys to grow into more responsibility in the lineup."

Zimmer hit .241 (72-for-299) with eight homers and 39 RBI in 101 games last season. He spent most time in the eighth spot, batting .262 (33-for-126) with three homers and 11 RBI. Zimmer scored 18 runs in 35 games in that position.

In the leadoff spot, Zimmer hit .229 (16-for-70) with three homers and 12 RBI. He scored 14 runs in 17 games.

Zimmer led the Indians with 18 steals in 19 attempts.

Testing, testing: Brantley went 2-for-4 in a simulated game on Wednesday. Brantley, recovering from right ankle surgery, did not run the bases.

The Indians set up the game to get Brantley, Mike Napoli, Tyler Naquin and Brandon Barnes some at-bats. Right-hander Stephen Fife pitched, Ryan Hanigan and Jack Murphy caught and some minor leaguers played defense.

"Brantley is doing really well," said Francona. "He's been able to hit the entire time. So when he ramps up, he won't be playing catch up. He's been hitting a ton. He's getting antsy. When he's a pain in the butt, you know he's feeling good. That's a good sign."

After the Indians were eliminated in the ALDS by the Yankees, Brantley underwent surgery on his ankle, which had limited him to 90 games last season.

Finally: The Indians are still trying to decide if Danny Salazar (right shoulder) should continue to throw long toss or start to work off the mound. He will open the season on the disabled list. ... The Indians will play the Dodgers on Thursday at Goodyear Ballpark at 8:05 p.m. Josh Tomlin (0-1, 11.25) will face Alex Wood (2-0, 10.80) of the Dodgers. WMMS/100.7 will carry the games.

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Cleveland Indians C Yan Gomes belts grand slam to tie the score against Chicago Cubs

By Joe Noga, cleveland.com jnoga@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Trailing Chicago 5-1 in the bottom of the third inning on Wednesday, Yan Gomes erased the deficit for the Cleveland Indians with one swing of the bat.

Gomes belted a grand slam to deep left field off Cubs reliever David Garner to score Jose Ramirez, Edwin Encarnacion, and Lonnie Chisenhall. It was Gomes' first home run and first runs driven in of the spring.

Gomes' game-tying homer came after the Indians had loaded the bases with two outs on a Cubs error and base hits by Encarnacion and Chisenhall.

Yonder Alonso got the Indians on the board in the second inning with a solo home run to dead center field off Chicago starter Jose Quintana.

Cleveland starter Trevor Bauer surrendered a combined five runs in the second and third innings, including a two-run home run to Cubs first baseman Efran Navarro.

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If this is Lonnie Chisenhall's last chapter with the Cleveland Indians, he'd like to write a winner

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com phoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio - If this is Lonnie Chisenhall's last chapter with the Indians, he's written quite a story and not just for himself.

Sometime, somewhere, a team is going to draft a player near the bottom of the first round. The player will be talented, but not that talented. He'll be cocky and stubborn, but not to the point where he'll refuse to change or recognize an opportunity.

That player, if he's smart enough, will be willing to repeat Chisenhall's story. It's a story about a third baseman who cruised through the minors with a smooth natural swing after being the 29th pick in the first round of the 2008 draft. When he got to the big leagues in 2011, the cruising stopped and the struggle began.

Chisenhall was forced to adjust, re-adjust and re-adjust again. The natural swing is long gone. It has been dissected and re-grooved. He knows every part of it now - having almost 2,000 big-league at-bats helps - but he still fights it.

Third base is a memory. If Chisenhall is in the opening day lineup on March 29 against Seattle at Safeco Field, he'll probably be in right field.

He has shown the ability to adapt and that has allowed him to approach his 11th season with the same organization. In a year when so many talented players are still looking for work in early March, that is not a small thing.

"The Indians have had a lot of faith in me," said Chisenhall last month in spring training. "I would like to think they see something in me. For lack of a better phrase, I do my best in the time period given. If I'm struggling and I know there needs to be adjustments made, I've made big adjustments, I've made small adjustments, ones that are noticeable and ones that are unnoticeable.

"It's actually been a fun learning experience going through the whole thing. Going from what I thought was a purely natural hitter to recreate and understand why things happen and how to do it."

Chisenhall spent his first full season in the big leagues in 2014. He hit .280 (134-for-478) with 13 homers and 59 RBI. He seemed to have arrived, but fewer than three months into the 2015 season, he was optioned to Class AAA Columbus after hitting .209 and playing an uneven third base. Chisenhall was 26 and there was a feeling he might have played his last game in Cleveland.

But at the end of July, the Indians started unloading veterans and recalled Chisenhall, but he was no longer a third baseman. He was a right fielder.

"I've always been a baseball player," said Chisenhall. "I'm willing to do whatever it takes to help the team win games. That's been my message to them. They've received it well.

"You put enough work in, and you have the right mindset, you can do pretty much anything you want to do. Whatever they ask me to do this year, whenever I'm called upon, whatever it is, I'll do my best."

Said manager Terry Francona, "It's interesting as guys mature. Lonnie played third, but from all accounts he didn't really enjoy it. He goes to right and just loved it.

"I'm convinced if we had a need he could play first, third ... he could probably go to shortstop. At some point, that might save us a roster move because of his ability to do that and to do it willingly. Whereas three or four years ago he didn't enjoy it as much. I just think that's maturity and confidence."

But still baseball is baseball and it deals with angst much more than glory. Last year Chisenhall, 29, was having his best offensive season. He was leading the team with 51 RBI in only 187 at-bats when he strained his right calf on the final day before the All-Star break. He played just 18 games in the second half and went 0-for-5 in the ALDS loss to the Yankees.

"It was a tough one to swallow," said Chisenhall, who finished the season hitting .288 with 12 homers and 53 RBI. "Especially, where you don't understand why something happens and keeps happening. ... I'll just try to carry it over into this year and try to understand some of the things I need to take care of with my body to stay at that level."

Francona felt Chisenhall deserved to go to the All-Star Game last season.

"He was a force," said Francona. "We missed him when he went down."

Chisenhall, like Michael Brantley, Josh Tomlin, Cody Allen, Zach McAllister and Andrew Miller, is eligible for free agency at the end of the 2018 season. Like many of teammates, he feels a sense of urgency this season after they reached Game 7 of the World Series in 2016 and won 102 games last year only to be eliminated in the first round of the postseason.

"It could be my last year here," he said. "I'd hate to not end it on a good note. We're coming in focused on winning the final game of the season. That's going to be the big talk. It's going to be our outward focus as a team. If we do things right, collectively, we'll be fine."

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Trevor Bauer, Tribe face Chicago Cubs under the lights: Cleveland Indians spring training lineup

By Joe Noga, cleveland.com_jnoga@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The lights will be on in Goodyear, Ariz. tonight with the Chicago Cubs in town to face the Cleveland Indians for an 8:05 p.m. exhibition matchup featuring Tribe starting pitcher Trevor Bauer and Cubs lefty Jose Quintana.

Bauer is making his third Cactus League start, having allowed one earned run in five previous innings of work while striking out seven. Bauer has allowed just three hits and has not walked any of the 19 batters he's faced.

Could Wednesday's starting lineup give fans an early indication as to how manager Terry Francona's early regular-season lineup might look if Michael Brantley is not ready to break camp with the club? All of Cleveland's assumed starting position players will be in spots that fans are accustomed to seeing them hit.

Melvin Upton Jr, who is batting ninth and playing left field, is really the only regular spot that is still up in the air.

Meanwhile, Nick Goody, Dan Otero, Matt Belisle, Zach McAllister, Jeff Beliveau and Ben Taylor are scheduled to follow Bauer on the mound.

Jen-Ho Tseng, Shae Simmons, Dillon Maples, Duane Underwood, Craig Brooks RHP David Garner, Alberto Baldonado, and Dario Alvarez are available to pitch for the Cubs.

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Cleveland Indians most impressive spring training performances since 2009

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Spring training games ultimately don't mean much in terms of wins, losses, or individual statistics, but a player who puts up big numbers in exhibition games can sometimes leave a lasting impression for coaches, or carry over success into the regular season.

Cleveland Indians second baseman Jason Kipnis hit six home runs in his first six spring games this year, and is among the MLB leaders in RBI. But how good an indicator is exhibition performance for the regular season? Can a hot spring be the spark for a breakout season? Or do some players take advantage of the fact that they're facing teams half comprised of minor leaguers in order to pad their numbers?

Here is a look at some of the most impressive Cleveland Indians spring training performances since the team returned to Cactus League play in Goodyear, Arizona beginning in the 2009 season. Also included in most cases is how the player fared during the regular season that year so you can see whether or not spring success translated into regular season good fortune.

Roberto Hernandez, 2009

Known at the time as Fausto Carmona, the big righty looked like he was going to get back to his 2007 form with a strong spring that saw him go 4-1 with a 2.76 ERA in six starts. Hernandez struck out 13 batters and walked eight in 27 Cactus League innings. But he struggled through the 2009 regular season, with a 5-12 mark and a 6.32 ERA in 125 1/3 innings.

Honorable mention: Jhonny Peralta

In his final full season with Cleveland, Peralta led the club with 26 spring training hits including three HR and 13 RBI.

Shin-Soo Choo, 2010

Choo's 22 hits and 16 RBI were both team highs in Cactus League play. He also posted a robust 1.143 on-base-plus-slugging percentage in 19 games. Choo went on to hit .300 during the regular season with a career-high 22 HR and 90 RBI. He finished 14th in American League MVP voting that season.

Tony Sipp, 2011

Sipp was lights out in spring training, posting a 0.93 ERA in 9 2/3 innings over 10 appearances while striking out nine. The strong spring carried over into the regular season for Sipp, who went 6-3 with a 3.03 ERA in 69 regular season appearances, striking out 57 batters in 62 1/3 innings.

Notable: A young Corey Kluber appeared in one game during 2011 Cactus League play for the Tribe. Kluber allowed four earned runs on four hits in 1/3 of an inning, departing with an ERA of 108 for the spring. Of course, the one out he recorded came via strikeout.

Jeanmar Gomez, 2012

Gomez earned the No. 5 spot in the Tribe's rotation out of spring training after going 1-1 with a 1.37 ERA in six appearances (three starts). Gomez struck out 14 and walked eight batters in 19 2/3 Cactus League innings. But the spring success did not translate to the regular season, where he went 5-8 in 20 appearances (17 starts) with a 5.96 ERA and a career-high 34 walks in 90 2/3 innings.

Honorable mention: Travis Hafner

Prunk hit .314 with three HR and 10 RBI in his final spring training with the Tribe.

Honorable mention 2: Shelley Duncan

In his second season with the Indians, Duncan clubbed six spring training home runs out of a total nine Cactus League hits. He also led the club with 19 RBI.

Scott Kazmir, 2013

Stop us if you've heard this before: Kazmir signed a minor league contract with an invitation to big league camp. He pitched well enough to earn the No. 5 spot in Cleveland's rotation after going 1-0 with a 3.46 ERA and 13 strikeouts in 13 1/3 innings, and that success followed him in the regular season where he went 10-9 with a 4.04 ERA and 162 strikeouts in 158 innings. He parlayed that into a \$7 million free agent deal with Oakland the following year.

Honorable mention: Lonnie Chisenhall

In 24 spring training games, Chisenhall collected 24 hits including four HR and 12 RBI. Chisenhall slashed .400/.456/.667 with a gaudy Cactus League on-base-plus-slugging percentage of 1.123. In 94 regular season games that year, the young third baseman hit just .225 with 11 HR and 34 RBI while striking out 56 times.

Honorable mention 2: Bryan Shaw

In his first spring training with Cleveland after coming over in a trade from Arizona, Shaw gave Terry Francona a taste of what was to come during exhibition play when he posted a 0.82 ERA in 11 innings across 10 appearances. Shaw allowed just one earned run and struck out 15 batters. During the regular season, he would go on to make 70 appearances posting a 3.24 ERA with 73 strikeouts. He was credited with 60 holds.

Michael Brantley, 2014

The precursor to Brantley's first All-Star campaign was a stellar spring that saw him put up 25 hits in 50 Cactus League at-bats while driving in 14. Brantley's 1.292 spring OPS was also a team high.

Honorable mention: Justin Masterson

Masterson was coming off an All-Star season and put up impressive numbers: 4-0 with a 1.09 ERA and 25 strikeouts in 24 2/3 innings across six starts. But the hot spring did not translate into regular season success as Masterson went 4-6 with a 5.51 ERA in 19 starts for the Indians before being traded to St Louis in July for minor leaguer James Ramsey.

Jeff Manship, 2015

Manship didn't break camp with the big league club, but got the call in June, partly because of his outstanding effort in Goodyear. In 12 spring appearances he posted a 0.79 ERA with 14 strikeouts in 11 1/3 innings. In 32 regular season appearances with the Tribe, Manship was 1-0 with a 0.92 ERA and 33 strikeouts in 39 1/3 innings.

Honorable mention: Mark Rzepczynski

Rzepczynski was 1-0 with a 1.08 ERA in nine spring training appearances (8 1/3 innings) with seven strikeouts.

Honorable mention 2: Jerry Sands

The legend of Jerry Sands was born in Goodyear when the slugging outfielder hit .304 in 50 at-bats with a pair of home runs and seven RBI. In 50 regular season games that year, Sands hit four HR and drove in 19, but struck out 36 times.

Jose Ramirez, 2016

Ramirez sparked his breakout 2016 regular season campaign with a red-hot spring. In 24 Cactus League games, Ramirez hit .313 with four HR and 14 RBI. And that success at the plate continued when the club broke camp. Ramirez hit .312 in the regular season with 46 doubles and 76 RBI while splitting time between left field and third base. He finished 17th in American League MVP voting that season.

Honorable mention: Trevor Bauer

Things started to click for Bauer in spring training when the righty went 4-1 with a 2.14 ERA in six appearances (21 innings) with 20 strikeouts.

Yandy Diaz, 2017

The man with the bulging biceps earned a spot on the opening day roster after Jason Kipnis started the year on the disabled list. But hitting .458 in 20 spring games certainly helped his cause. Diaz slugged a gaudy .708 and had an on-base-plus-slugging percentage of 1.252.

Honorable mention: Nick Goody

Goody appeared in 10 spring games and finished Cactus League play with a 0.90 ERA and 11 strikeouts in 10 innings. It didn't take long for Goody to get the call up to the big league roster, where he solidified the mid-to-late innings for Cleveland's bullpen posting a 2.80 ERA and 72 strikeouts in 54 2/3 innings.

The Thursday Conversation: Carl Willis doesn't plan to reinvent the wheel as he replaces Mickey Callaway

Zack Meisel 4 hours ago

GOODYEAR, Ariz. — Carl Willis inherited a pitching staff anchored by a two-time Cy Young Award winner and the guy who finished fourth in the balloting last season.

There's the pitching-obsessed workhorse who never tires, the energetic youngster with the long hair and the seasoned veteran. There's also the oft-injured but tantalizingly talented guy still seeking to unlock his full potential.

That's not too shabby of a group to oversee, and Willis feels fortunate to have been offered the opportunity to replace Mickey Callaway, following three years as the Red Sox pitching coach. It's his second stint as Indians pitching coach, and he presided over some skilled staffs in his first go-around, too.

In 2005, the Indians led the American League in ERA, and the five starters combined to make 158 starts. In 2007, CC Sabathia captured the Cy Young Award, and The Artist Formerly Known as Fausto Carmona finished fourth in the voting.

Willis sat down with The Athletic in the coaches' room at the Indians' spring training complex to chat about taking over for Callaway, working with the new group and his previous tenure in Cleveland.

ZM: It's not as though there are 30 open jobs and you get to hand-pick the one you want. So to enter a situation with the pitching staff set up the way it is, is that a dream scenario?

CW: First, I was extremely blessed to be considered, and not just here, but I was able to receive some phone calls from a couple other clubs. Seldom do you have a choice, but for me — I spoke to the pitchers on the first day of spring training and told them a couple things that really excited me about this opportunity. The relationships that I had previously with the front office, knowing Tito — never having worked with him, but knowing him — while this is a new team, it's a place that I've worked before. So there's a bit of a comfort level in that and there's also a lot of mutual respect that's already established. But the No. 1 reason is how good this team is, and in my specific area, how good this pitching staff is. I saw it the last couple of years. I'm blessed to come in and be a part of that.

ZM: Carlos Carrasco debuted in 2009, your last year in Cleveland. What do you remember about him as a rookie?

CW: No. 1 was the stuff. He had it then. I remember he threw the curveball and the slider at times, and they would kind of blend together. Obviously, he was young and hadn't experienced the major-league level yet. You saw the potential there. But you also saw a very young pitcher without experience at this level. It was like, "Hey, if this guy stays healthy, it's only a matter of time. He's going to be a horse in the rotation."

ZM: So how does it feel to come back nearly a decade later and see him at that level you thought he could reach?

CW: It's really cool and, more than anything, I'm proud of and happy for him. He's put in the work and he's had tremendous coaching and leadership to help him along the way. But sometimes it takes time to put everything together. I know there are other names that people speak of before they speak of Carlos, but I think he belongs in that conversation.

ZM: Do you have to tailor your job differently based upon the pitchers you're working with? Maybe you'd be more hands-on with a younger, inexperienced group, but I imagine you don't need to tell Corey Kluber what to do every day.

CW: Oh, absolutely. When you have a really young staff, there's more instruction going on. There's more teaching of the game going on and managing situations and having them understand the game. A more veteran staff as this one, they've already experienced these situations. They understand how to control things and what the opposition is trying to do.

More than anything, you have to respect the formula of success. They're helping me learn them right now. I'm watching them and talking with them. I watched a ton of video in the wintertime. I'm not coming in with a way to try to get them to do things differently. The way I try to do things, I learned it here to begin with. If an adjustment needs to be made, we're equipped to make them. But we're not going to change something just because there was a change at the pitching coach position. The change at the pitching coach position wasn't made because of performance. It was made because Mickey got an opportunity to go manage. So the last thing anyone wants to do is step in and try to change something that's been very successful.

ZM: What has stood out to you so far about Kluber?

CW: I was around him a little bit in 2015 when I started the year in Columbus. I think it's how professional he goes about his day, how he pays attention to the detail of his work, how he leads by example, whether it be PFP drills or how he goes about throwing his bullpen. When you sit and watch him and everyone talks about his breaking ball — the stuff doesn't need to be described. I was impressed last year watching him pitch against the Red Sox. It wasn't only the stuff, but the command of the stuff. He has somewhat of a simple delivery, a powerful delivery, but he is a strong athlete who repeats it. He really commands the baseball and his stuff very well, and that's why he's able to go out and put up the numbers that he does.

ZM: Have you ever been around anyone so obsessed with his craft as Trevor Bauer is? He packed weighted balls for his offseason vacation to Iceland.

CW: He's passionate about pitching. And he has an investigative personality. We always talk about resources. If there are resources available to help us get better, we're going to utilize them and find them and get them. He puts the time in to do some research and apply things that he thinks can help himself get better. They may not help everyone, but if they help him and it works — I wish everybody had that passion and drive to do those things. People talk about how much he throws coming in (to spring training). Hey, in his mind, he's preparing himself to be the best he can be and that's how he goes about it and that's what you want from everybody.

ZM: Mike Clevinger is adamant about throwing 200 innings and being a consistent presence in the rotation. Is that music to your ears?

CW: Oh, no doubt. He goes about his business very well, too. He still has some things to learn; each and every time he throws a pitch on the baseball field, whether it's 10 a.m. for a bullpen session or 2 p.m. at a spring training game or if it's August at Progressive Field — you see the same effort, the same arm speed. We're trying to manage that a little bit, because he is young and we want him to be strong still when we get to August, September and October. But he's driven and motivated by a desire to succeed. It's much easier to manage that than to try to motivate someone.

Carl Willis served as Indians pitching coach from 2003-09. (Doug Pensinger/Getty Images)

ZM: From your first tenure here, was the 2005 staff the one you remember most fondly? Five pitchers made 158 of the 162 starts, and the team had the best ERA in the American League.

CW: Yeah, I remember that (laughs). We only had six starters the entire year. We had CC (Sabathia) and Cliff (Lee). They were the young, up-and-comers that were establishing themselves as approaching elite status. Also, Kevin Millwood joined us that year and led the league in ERA and was a tremendous help to me, much like Kluber in how he went about his business, leading by example. Scott Elarton came over that very same year and finished the year strong. Our bullpen was strong.

Listen, I've been proud of all of my staffs, but that staff, yeah, particularly — to use six starters in a season, that's a testament to the training room and conditioning, but more so to those pitchers themselves for doing the work.

ZM: That sort of consistency probably helps you sleep well at night.

CW: It was great. Even the position players knew, day in and day out, who's pitching and what type of game they can expect. I think that was a big part of our run up until the last week of the season that year.

ZM: Aside from your brief stay with the organization in 2015, what is your history with Francona?

CW: We were in spring training together in 1987 with the Reds. Now, obviously, I was a pitcher. I didn't really spend any time (with him), other than maybe talking in the outfield on occasion. He came over in 2001 as a special assistant with us and he was in our clubhouse and I recall him talking, asking questions about scouting reports, writing reports. He was going to go out and see our minor-league system. I got to know him a little bit then and I think, just with the connection, more than anything else, the connection with John (Farrell), the friendship and working relationship they developed and having known John and having worked with John here when he was the farm director, I have felt like I knew Tito probably better than I really do, just from it being from hearing stories or being with John or being the third wheel of a conversation.