

Miller puts out fire in 8th as Indians hold off KC

Ace reliever K's 3 straight after first 2 batters reach in 1-run game

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Andrew Miller was not toying with the Royals. It only looked that way in light of the end result.

On Friday, Miller came out of the bullpen in the eighth inning for the Indians and -- after flinching momentarily -- put on an overpowering display that helped Cleveland hold on for a 3-2 victory in its home opener. The big lefty struck out three consecutive batters to escape his own jam, electrifying the Progressive Field crowd on a cold day.

"It's like he's his own reliever," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "Once he has to start attacking, it's like he gets better. That's a good feeling."

Following six solid innings from Carlos Carrasco, Cleveland's bullpen was tasked with preserving the one-run advantage. Nick Goody held up his end of the bargain with a scoreless seventh, setting the stage for Miller's entrance, which -- due to the windy conditions -- did not include the ballpark's towers of fire that might have warmed the fans in the bleacher seats.

Both teams' pitchers struggled at the outset of their outings. Carrasco allowed two runs in the first inning before cruising through the next five frames unscathed. Royals lefty Danny Duffy walked three and allowed three runs in the first, but then settled down as well.

Michael Brantley, who came off the disabled list prior to the game, delivered a two-run single in the first to push the Indians ahead, 3-2. From there, Duffy limited Cleveland's lineup to a 1-for-20 showing.

When Miller entered, the Indians' relief ace also struggled out of the chute.

Jon Jay drew a walk on five pitches and then Whit Merrifield drove a 2-2 offering from Miller into left field for a single. With Kansas City threatening, Miller then found another gear.

"He's one of the best relievers in the game, I'll say it," Brantley said. "He doesn't want to brag about himself, but I will. We have pure confidence every time he comes in. He's a competitor. He loves going out there and competing, and I'm glad he's on our team."

First, Miller struck out Mike Moustakas with an 0-2 slider that tailed away from the left-handed hitter and ducked under his bat. Next came Lucas Duda, who also fell behind, 0-2, before swinging through an elevated fastball. Miller then fell into a full count against Cheslor Cuthbert, but fired a slider low and away, getting close enough to the edge to prompt a called third strike.

"When I got Moustakas back in the box," Miller said, "I got a lefty and kind of was able to change my sights. I think I made a nice adjustment. Again, it's not how I'd want to do it. I'd rather go out and have a clean inning, but at the end of the day, a zero is a zero."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Brantley's first swing: When Brantley stepped into the batter's box in the first inning, Duffy had thrown 15 balls within his first 20 pitches. Normally, a batter might watch a few pitches under those circumstances, but Brantley -- who came in hitting .320 in 25 career at-bats against the lefty -- opted instead to be aggressive. Brantley went after a first-pitch two-seamer and sent it into shallow right for his two-run single.

"Usually, it's take some pitches and make sure he gets in the zone," Brantley said of the typical approach in that situation. "But for myself, personally, I had a lot of at-bats against Duffy in the past and I was just trying to get a fastball early and trying to put a good swing on it. I had some nervous jitters in my first AB of the year. I was excited."

"He made a great pitch, I was just able to get enough of it to get it over [the second baseman]. I'll take it all day."

Carrasco's escape: The Royals snapped out of an 0-for-13 skid against Carrasco with consecutive singles from Drew Butera and Jay to open the sixth. The Tribe starter later issued a one-out intentional walk to Moustakas to load the bases, giving Kansas City a chance to swing the momentum. Carrasco then halted the rally. First, he froze Duda with a low four-seam fastball for a called third strike. Cuthbert followed with a flyout to left to leave the bases loaded.

"That was really important," Carrasco said. "I just tried to not walk [Cuthbert] right there, because it would have tied the game. We ended up, 3-2. I threw a fastball and got a fly ball to Michael Brantley, so I'm glad we did that."

QUOTABLE

"I think we're starting to come to expect it. It'd be nice if we just have him every day for the rest of the way. That's the big goal, because we know he can hit. We know he can play. He's a big part of this lineup. You put him in there and he's a daily guy that you just count on to get big hits." -- Miller, on Brantley coming through in his 2018 debut

"He's an easy guy to bet on. I could give you pages and pages of why. He's the heart and soul of our team. He does everything the way you're supposed to. If people saw the way he works to get healthy, it would be hard to bet against him." -- Francona, on Brantley

SOUND SMART WITH YOUR FRIENDS

The Indians have won two straight home openers for the first time since winning three in a row from 1997-99. Cleveland is now 61-57 all time in its 118 home openers in franchise history.

FRANCONA ARGUES FOR BALK

There was some confusion in the first inning with runners on first and second when Edwin Encarnacion called for time in the batter's box without it being granted by home-plate umpire Roberto Ortiz. While Encarnacion raised an arm, Duffy started and stopped his delivery. Francona became heated as he argued for a balk call to no avail. According to MLB rule 6.02(b): If after the pitcher starts his windup or comes to a "set position" with a runner on, he does not go through with his pitch because the batter has stepped out of the box, it shall not be called a balk.

WHAT'S NEXT

Indians: Right-hander Trevor Bauer is scheduled to take the mound on Saturday, when the Indians host the Royals in a 4:10 p.m. ET American League Central clash at Progressive Field. Bauer went 10-4 with a 3.93 ERA in 17 home starts last season.

Brantley activated, delivers 2-run 1B right away

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Michael Brantley tossed and turned on Thursday night. The Indians outfielder knew he was going to be activated from the disabled list and immediately slotted into Cleveland's lineup, but the anticipation of the home opener at Progressive Field disrupted his shut-eye.

"I couldn't sleep -- absolutely," Brantley said. "I'm nervous right now speaking to you guys. I've got that nervous energy. It's fun. It's exciting. Playing in front of your home fans is something that you look for. You work all offseason to get to this moment. And to be able to do it and hear the crowd roar when they hear your name, it's special."

Brantley made the home fans cheer even louder in the first inning, when he turned the first pitch of his first at-bat of the year into a two-run single against Royals lefty Danny Duffy. That soft line drive into right field wound up being the decisive blow in Cleveland's 3-2 victory over Kansas City.

Was it worth the sleepless night?

"Absolutely," said Brantley, who flashed a satisfied smile. "We got a win."

Prior to Friday's home opener against the Royals, the Indians made the expected transaction: Brantley was activated from the 10-day DL and outfielder Tyler Naquin was optioned to Triple-A Columbus. Manager Terry Francona gave Brantley the start in left and hit him fifth in Cleveland's batting order.

In the opening frame, Duffy was laboring and unable to locate the strike zone in the cold climate. Eleven of his first 14 pitches went for balls and his third walk of the inning -- a one-out free pass to Edwin Encarnacion -- brought Brantley to the plate with the bases loaded. Normally, a batter might exercise patience with a pitcher suffering through control troubles. Brantley decided to offer at the first pitch, and that decision paid off.

"He didn't scald it," Francona said. "But, he stays on the ball with a runner on third and less than two outs so well that he gets rewarded for hits like that, because he doesn't roll over and hit that ball to second on a double-play ball. He's one of the best I've ever seen at that."

Brantley, who is coming back from October surgery on his right ankle, will have his playing time monitored closely over the next week or so. Francona said it's still "worth having him" even if the plan calls for Brantley to play two out of three games at the start. The left fielder said he intends to meet with Francona and the training staff daily to give feedback and map out a schedule.

"We're going to use common sense," Francona said. "He means so much to what we're doing and, when he's playing, it's a position you don't mess with. You wind him up, let him go and that means you can maybe mix and match in other positions or do some other things because that position is solidified. It's really nice to have him back."

Brantley has been limited to 101 games over the past two seasons due to various health issues. In 2016, right shoulder and biceps woes -- which originated late in the '15 campaign -- limited him to 11 games. Last year, Brantley returned from those injury issues in time for Opening Day, but the right ankle troubles arrived in May and included setbacks in June and again in August.

As opposed to two springs ago, when Brantley's arm injury hindered his ability to hit, he was unrestricted with his hitting activity throughout Spring Training this year. It was the running aspects of his game that were gradually added into his rehab schedule, keeping Brantley out of Cactus League games until late March. Earlier this week, though, Brantley played a pair of nine-inning games in extended spring training in consecutive days and came away fine.

"I was bouncing back and recovering great every day. That was my key," Brantley said. "I feel great right now as we speak, and that is all that matters. One day at a time. I understand that I've been banged up for the last couple years, but at the same time, I'm as focused as ever."

Before the run of injury problems, Brantley was a Silver Slugger Award winner and finished third in American League MVP Award balloting in 2014. Last season, he hit .299 with nine homers, 20 doubles, 52 RBIs and an .801 OPS in 90 games, but his start to the season was impressive enough to earn a spot on the AL All-Star team in voting by his peers.

The Indians hope Brantley is finally beyond the injuries.

"It's great to see him in the clubhouse," Indians shortstop Francisco Lindor said. "It's awesome whenever you see Brantley back in the game. He's somebody who's going to help us a lot. He's proven that he's going to help us. He's a guy that we need. I'm happy for him. Hopefully, he can come back and be how he was."

'Cleveland ain't joking': World Series or bust

By Anthony Castrovince MLB.com @castrovince

CLEVELAND -- The winds were biting and blustery, prompting face masks and neck wraps and Francisco Lindor's unequivocal conclusion that "Cleveland ain't joking." Yes, the Indians returned to Northeast Ohio's typically trying early April weather for a home opener Friday that put the O-H in "OHpening" Day, with the 41-degree first-pitch temp causing Edwin Encarnacion to warm his bat on a dugout heater.

Then again, this is the place where snowfall once forced the Tribe to play its home opener in Milwaukee, so ...

"Actually," closer Cody Allen said, "this isn't so bad today."

The Indians know worse is bound to come in an opening month that has them here at home 17 times -- a would-be baked-in advantage if there weren't reasonable suspicion that they'll spend some unfortunate percentage of that time either bundled up or waiting out rain.

But while Mother Nature's opener-invading winds inspired adjustments to attire, the winds of change that are bound to blow through here post-2018 are what inspire urgency out of this crew. Prior to the 3-2 win over the Royals, they hung up another division flag in Progressive Field's third deck Friday, and the good ol' days that are the Terry Francona era -- a five-season stretch in which the Tribe has won more games than any American League club and maintained relatively remarkable roster stability in what is still an eminently winnable AL Central -- continue on in earnest.

Yet because this is Cleveland, home of some of the world's more frazzled fans, the question of how long this run of contention can continue comes up from time to time. Team president Chris Antonetti did a pregame radio interview Friday in which he was asked nearly as many questions about 2021 (i.e. the Tribe's final year of contractual control of Lindor) as he was about 2018.

(Though at least he wasn't asked to speculate on LeBron James' 2018-19 whereabouts.)

The more pressing matter, of course, is that Allen and fellow bullpen behemoth Andrew Miller are pending free agents, as are long-term core contributors Michael Brantley (who made an instant impact with a two-run single hours after his activation off the DL on Friday), Josh Tomlin and Lonnie Chisenhall. Because Lindor and Jose Ramirez and the fantastic front end of the rotation (Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco and Trevor Bauer, with Mike Clevinger creeping into that conversation) aren't going anywhere for a while, the Indians might look every bit as good at the start of 2019 as they do today. But as the division dynamics differentiate, the bullpen rebuild begins and the cost constraints tighten, they are certain to look quite a bit different.

So there's a lot on the line in '18, a year some in the clubhouse are terming a "last hurrah" for this particular cast of characters. The early performance has been uneven, and Encarnacion's literal heating of his bat hasn't applied to the lineup en masse in a more metaphorical sense. But if water finds its level here the Indians will have an opportunity to atone for last year's AL Division Series disappointment that was a blown 2-0 lead in the Bronx ... in what was supposed to be a redemption tour after the 10th inning of 2016's World Series Game 7 ended some other club's curse.

It's a long road from here to October, and at this juncture of the journey the Tribe's greatest challenge is piecing together its bridge in the bullpen, where departed free agent Bryan Shaw's rubber arm and reasonably reliable results were already missed on the 2-4 season-opening road trip in Seattle and Anaheim.

"That guy was a frickin' staple," Allen said of Shaw.

Before they can tackle the possibility of replacing Allen and Miller, the Indians are figuring out the best means to get the ball to them with a lead. On Friday, when Carrasco left after six innings with a 3-2 edge, that job fell to Nick Goody. His 2.80 ERA and 1.08 WHIP last year fell into the realm of extra equity, but his scoreless seventh on this day might prove to be a meaningful moment as the setup situation slowly solidifies.

"Normally, in a month or six weeks, a bullpen has taken shape," Allen said. "You can kind of tell, 'OK, this is the spot where this guy comes in.' Guys kind of step into roles and start to become a little more defined."

The mix and match (and, sure, trial and error) this 'pen presents will require some resourcefulness from Francona. But that's nothing new in these parts. In baseball and in real life, to be a Clevelanders is to be enterprising. In the first inning of the home opener, for instance, Royals first baseman Lucas Duda lost his bat on a violent swing and watched it land on the protective netting just to the side of Progressive Field's club-level stands. Some fan took this opportunity to turn the ballpark into his personal Big Choice machine, bearing a pair of crutches that he used to scoop up and secure the souvenir.

Roster creativity of a similar sort will be necessary for a Tribe team with transition on tap. But for now, there's clarity to the cause here, with an empty and expectant space to the right of the 2017 AL Central championship banner. When this group talks about filling that spot with a more boastful 2018 banner, well, they ain't joking, either.

6 hours ago

Covering the Bases: Game 7

by Jordan Bastian

Notes and quotes from Friday's 3–2 win over the Royals...

FIRST: As a large group of reporters swarmed around Andrew Miller on Friday night, jockeying for position and hoisting cameras and cell phones and mics and notepads, Josh Tomlin watched with amusement from his neighboring locker.

"Are we in the playoffs?" Tomlin quipped.

Nope. Welcome to the wonderful world of a home opener, when fans flock to the ballpark in sellout style, jets soar overhead amidst the national anthem ('Murica) and a swarm of one-and-done media pack the press box and raid the dining room dessert table.

The first game in front of the local crowd does have that postseason feel, and it certainly felt like October weather for Cleveland's lid lifter. After fielding some ground balls a few hours before the game, Francisco Lindor walked into an interview room, knit hat on, rubbing his hands together for warmth.

"Cleveland ain't joking," Lindor said.

One reporter asked Michael Brantley—making his season debut—how players deal with cold temperatures. Brantley could not help but smirk at the question. He then reached deep into his wealth of veteran experience and produced this little bit of sage insight.

"Extra layers of clothes," Brantley replied.

Genius!

All kidding aside, the hype surrounding the home opener is as real for the players as it is for the fans. Brantley admitted that he was tossing and turning all night on Thursday in anticipation of hearing his name announced the the roar of the crowd that would follow.

Indians manager Terry Francona has described openers as including one part excitement and one part terror. Tito took things one step further when asked about the home opener before Friday's game.

"I'm guessing if I did drugs it would be somewhat like that," joked the manager. "It's kinda like... it feels good. It's exciting and, you know, it's nerve-racking. It's a pretty cool feeling."

Also: Don't do drugs.

Lindor said he has even grown to like the "Cleveland Rocks" song that blasts at the ballpark.

"It makes me feel like I'm home," he said.

The more that song plays, the more wins it means the Indians have piled up. Despite all of the pomp and circumstance—and foofery—that surrounds a home opener, the buzz around the ballpark this year is justified.

There is a bit of growing angst among a fan base that has seen this Cleveland club tease with things like division titles and a 22-game winning streak, but fall short of the ultimate goal. There are high expectations, and that's the way it should be. Just ask Tito.

"This is my sixth year now. Time goes fast," Francona said. "When I came here, I remember the first press conference, I said, 'If you're an Indians fan, I want you to be proud to be an Indians fan.' I think they certainly can do that. We have high expectations and I think the fans do, too.

"As the players and myself go, there's a process to get there. For the fans, it's show up and enjoy yourself and hope your team wins. But, I hope they do have high expectations. We do, too. And they should.

"If I was a fan, watching this team, this is an easy team to like. They're good guys. They try hard. They give an honest effort. It's an easy team to latch on to."

SECOND: It wasn't just cold on Friday. It was also quite windy. At one point, a gust swept through the stadium and catcher Yan Gomes lost his balance.

"It was strong," Gomes said with a laugh. "I set up narrow, so I was getting set up and then it was like, 'Whoa, OK.' I think even [Alcides] Escobar stepped out of the box for a second."

Under the circumstances, a theme for the game was the pitchers needing time to get warmed up and get a feel for the environment.

Lefty Danny Duffy really struggled out the gates, throwing 15 balls in his first 20 pitches before surrendering a two-run single to Brantley in the first inning. The first five batters he faced reached via hit or walk, leading to three runs. But, from there, Duffy held Cleveland to a 1-for-20 showing.

It was the same for Carlos Carrasco. Three of the first four batters he faced in the first inning came through with hits. From there? The Royals went 0-for-13 through the fifth inning. Four of the seven pitchers in the game allowed the leadoff batter to reach. Six had a runner within the first two batters faced.

And yet, no runs scored after the first inning.

"I don't know if you really knew what to expect," Francona said of the weather. "I was so glad we answered back right away just because you don't want to get down in a game with conditions like this. I thought both teams actually really played through some horrendous conditions.

"There were some balls hit really well to left field that didn't go anywhere and the game wasn't sloppily played, again by both teams. I thought the players did a heck of a job."

THIRD: The pitch of the day arguably came via Carrasco.

In the sixth inning, Drew Butera led off with a single and Jon Jay followed with a hit of his own. Then, following a sacrifice bunt to move both runners up, Carrasco intentionally walked Mike Moustakas. So, it was bases loaded with one out, and Cleveland holding a 3–2 lead in the sixth.

Carrasco then got into a full count against Lucas Duda and fired this fastball:

Duda stared at it for strike three. Carrasco then induced a flyout off the bat of Cheslor Cuthbert to end the threat.

And, unbeknownst to anyone watching that escape act, Carrasco was actually battling through a minor health issue at the time.

"He did a really good job of settling in," Francona said. "And then the last inning, he had a cramp in his calf. We didn't know. When he came out of the game, we were going to take him out anyway, but he goes, 'I've had this cramp.' He's pitching through an intentional walk, bad conditions, good hitters, and did a terrific job."

HOME: Through three appearances this season, Andrew Miller has faced 17 batters and has allowed eight baserunners. Alas, he has given up exactly no runs in his 3.1 innings pitches.

I think fellow Tribe reliever Zach McAllister put it best on the recent road trip: "He finds another button to push like a video game when he gets guys in scoring position or on base."

It happened again in the eighth on Friday night.

First, Miller allowed a walk to Jay and then gave up a single to Whit Merrifield. No harm done. He got the next two batters—Moustakas and Duda—into 0–2 counts before putting them away for strikeouts. He then froze Cuthbert with a 3–2 slider to end the inning.

"It's like he's his own reliever," Francona said.

"I'd rather not be," Miller added later. "I'd like to come out and fire strikes. I haven't done that the last couple times. It's nice to be able to make a pitch and get out of it. We have a great defense. You can trust them when you need to get back in the zone, you can start firing over the middle of the plate.

"Yeah, that's not how I want to do it or write it up, but the job is still 'Put up a zero.' I've been fortunate the last few times out to be able to do that."

EXTRAS: Brantley came off the disabled list and did a thing in his first at-bat of the season. Read all about it here. ... Anthony Castrovince wrote a thing. Read it here. ... ICYM this story on Trevor Bauer and the wide-ranging Q&A from Thursday's off-day.

In closing...

Kudos to the creative fan in the second deck down the first-base line. Duda lost his grip during a first-inning swing and his bat landed on the protective netting behind the visitors' dugout—juuust out of the reach of fans. One attendee used a pair of crutches to retrieve the bat, hoisting

it into the air as the stadium roared with approval. For the rest of the game, said fan hoisted the bat again in taunting fashion whenever Duda came to the plate.

April 6: Tito's pregame minutiae

by Jordan Bastian

On Michael Brantley's schedule:

TF: "I think the best word is a common-sense schedule. [Head athletic trainer James Quinlan] a while back had written something up, kind of given us some pointers. But, we're going to use common sense. I don't think you're going to see him four or five in a row. I think two out of three to start probably for the first week. His availability on days off the bench, we'll see how it goes."

On what Brantley means to the Indians:

TF: "You know what, if it is two out of three, it's worth having him. He means so much to what we're doing and, when he's playing, it's a position you don't mess with. You wind him up, let him go and that means you can maybe mix and match in other positions or do some other things, because that position is solidified. It's really nice to have him back, even if nobody has a crystal ball and you don't know who is going to get hits. But, his being and what he means to everybody will really be helpful."

On telling Brantley he'd be in the lineup:

TF: "You know what? Actually, I kind of knew since Tuesday afternoon. It might be a melodramatic. But, he means a lot to us and it is a good feeling. [Chris Antonetti, Indians president of baseball operations] talked to [Tyler] Naquin yesterday, so he knew what was going on. And we didn't want to drag Naquin here on Opening Day and have that, so he kind of knew that. Like I said, even if he's playing two out of three for the first whatever, having him back is really important. He's such a good teammate, such a good competitor that it will be a lift for everybody, including me."

On Brantley saying he couldn't sleep Thursday night due to being excited:

TF: "Really? It doesn't matter how old you are, Opening Days are just, it's... I wish I could explain it better. I'm guessing if I did drugs it would be somewhat like that. It's kinda like, it feels good. It's exciting and you know it's nerve-racking, it's a pretty cool feeling."

On Francona's fondest Opening Day memory:

TF: "Oh, boy. Maybe '87 with the Reds. You know, Cincinnati back in the day was the official first game always. And I know with television now it's a little different, but they would let people out of school, they would have a parade. And we played the Expos, my former team, and I hit a home run. So, that was probably [my favorite, personally]. There weren't a ton of Opening Day highlights. As a manager, with the Phillies, Schilling threw eight innings, Botalico got the save and Rolan made a nice play and we won 3-2 and went on to lose every game the rest of the trip."

On still trying to have relievers settle into roles:

TF: "I'm not too sure we really need to, I don't know if 'settle' is the right word. We wanted the guys to have consistency in their appearances and their innings and we certainly got that and then some with the extra innings. But, I think it's probably going to be how we feel like where we are with the lineup, where we are with guys' rest, things like that. With a seven-man bullpen, you don't want to overdo guys, especially the first two weeks of the year. Ideally, I'd like to see the guys have an even workload across the board."

On Carlos Carrasco starting another home opener:

TF: "It is kind of random, because it's where you fall. But, it's nice to hand him the ball. He's earned so much of what he has. We've talked about it so many times, how he went to the bullpen and re-earned getting back into the starting rotation. It's fun to watch guys develop into being really good. We get a big kick out of that."

On the first week being complicated logistically for getting guys work, seeing which guys are hot and cold, etc:

TF: "A couple days ago, we needed [Andrew] Miller and Cody [Allen] to pitch. They needed to pitch. But, you get to the eighth inning and it's like, if you use Cody, then if they take the lead—now, they didn't, but say they would've taken a 3-2 lead—then Cody doesn't pitch. Or, if you bring him in in the eighth and then we take the lead—it can get a little challenging, especially early in the year. You want your guys to pitch, because it doesn't do them any good to go five or six days without pitching, but you're also trying to win the game. So it can get a little challenging."

On his advice to fans coming to the opener:

TF: "Stay warm."

On the fans' high level of expectations:

TF: "This is my sixth year now. Time goes fast. When I came here, I remember the first press conference, I said, 'If you're an Indians fan, I want you to be proud to be an Indians fan.' I think they certainly can do that. We have high expectations and I think the fans do, too. As the players and myself go, there's a process to get there. For the fans, it's show up and enjoy yourself and hope your team wins. But, I hope they do have high expectations. We do, too. And they should. If I was a fan, watching this team, this is an easy team to like. They're good guys. They try hard. They give an honest effort. It's an easy team to latch on to."

Mr. Comeback: Brantley leads Indians to 3-2 win over Royals

The Associated Press TOM WITHERS (AP Sports Writer)

CLEVELAND (AP) -- Michael Brantley has perfected the comeback season. Now he has to master completing one.

Brantley singled home two runs on the first pitch of his first at-bat this season, and Carlos Carrasco worked out of a bases-loaded jam in the sixth inning, leading the Cleveland Indians to a 3-2 win in their chilly home opener over the Kansas City Royals on Friday.

Brantley missed Cleveland's first six games while on the disabled list recovering from offseason ankle surgery. But just hours after being activated, the two-time All-Star who has overcome injuries the past two seasons, delivered in the first inning against Danny Duffy (0-2), who managed to hang around until the sixth.

It was an ideal start for the 30-year-old, who means as much to the Indians as any player on their roster.

"He's an easy guy to bet on," manager Terry Francona said. "I could give you pages and pages of why. He's the heart and soul of our team. He does everything the way you're supposed to. If people saw the way he works to get healthy, it would be hard to bet against him or to ever want to bet against him."

Following devastating, disappointing finishes the past two postseasons, the Indians are hoping this is the year they end a 70-year World Series title drought, baseball's longest. Brantley is a major part of those plans, but he needs to stay healthy after being limited to 101 games the past two seasons.

Brantley has learned one major lesson from his injuries.

"Be patient," said Brantley, who hit a walk-off single to win last year's home opener. "Understand that I'm listening to my body and understand exactly what's going on and how I feel every day and make sure I'm being honest with myself and with this team. I'm feeling good right now. I'll wake up tomorrow and we get to do it again."

"That's all I'm looking forward to, one day at a time, playing as many games as I can."

Carrasco (2-0) gave up two runs in the first inning, but settled in. The right-hander retired 13 straight before running into trouble in the sixth, when the Royals loaded the bases with one put. Carrasco then struck out Lucas Duda looking and retired Cheslor Cuthbert on a liner.

Nick Goody worked the seventh, Andrew Miller put two on then struck out the side in the eighth, and Cody Allen pitched the ninth for his second save.

Francona joked about Miller's ability to escape self-inflicted jams.

"Like he's his own reliever," Francona said. "Once he has to start attacking, it's like he gets better. That's a good feeling. Not too often you look up and it's first and second, and you're just not too sure they're going to score. A lot of times, that's not a good recipe, but with him you're like, 'I think we're going to be OK.'"

The Indians, who didn't hit while blowing a 2-0 lead to New York in the AL Division Series last October, came in batting a league-low .161. They only got four hits, but that was enough thanks to Carrasco and their top-flight bullpen.

The Royals dropped to 3-16 in Cleveland since May 8, 2016.

Down 2-0 in the first, the Indians benefited from Duffy's early wildness to score three times.

The left-hander, possibly bothered by the bitter, blustery weather conditions, walked Francisco Lindor and Jason Kipnis before Jose Ramirez dribbled an RBI single through the middle. After Duffy's third walk, Brantley dropped his single into right.

"The first inning really hurt us, and I've got to be better than that, man," Duffy said. "Two games in a row, my team has given me a lead and I've let it go. That's a bummer."

WELCOME BACK

Rajai Davis received a huge ovation from Cleveland's fans during pregame introductions. Davis, who hit a game-tying homer in the eighth inning of Game 7 in the 2016 World Series, re-signed with the club this winter.

Davis doubled in three at-bats.

CHILLING OUT

The Royals have played a league-low five games, thanks to two weather postponements. But manager Ned Yost isn't fretting about their erratic workload. "You can't do anything to change it, so it's as difficult as you want to make it," he said. "You just try to go with the flow the best you can."

Saturday's forecast calls for temperatures in the low 30s.

SORRY SOLER

Kansas City right fielder Jorge Soler went hitless in three at-bats, making him 0 for 34 dating back to last season. He did draw a walk off Allen in the ninth.

UP NEXT

Kansas City RHP Ian Kennedy (0-0, 1.50 ERA) takes on Cleveland RHP Trevor Bauer (0-0, 3.60 ERA) in the second game of the series Saturday. Kennedy is winless in his last five starts against the Indians. Bauer pitched five innings in his first start.

What the heck is Gabe Kapler doing now? ... and other odd things we've seen so far

David Schoenfield

The first week of a baseball season is full of new names, old names on new teams, and sometimes no-namers on old teams (that would be the Marlins). It's also full of new weird stuff that happens, new strategic developments and, this year, Gabe Kapler. Let's review some of the fun.

The eagle then ate a hot dog

The Mariners have already had some bad injury luck -- like Nelson Cruz landing on the DL after slipping on the dugout steps after hitting a home run -- so for a brief moment every Mariners fan knew this stunt would end up with James Paxton in a hospital with a missing ear and his eye clawed out:

An eagle landing on a baseball player during an elaborate pregame ceremony would be the most American thing ever except Paxton is Canadian. Asked why he didn't run, Paxton deadpanned, "I figured I'm not going to outrun an eagle."

Astros employ four outfielders on Joey Gallo

The most-talked-about innovation was the four-outfield shift the Astros used, with third baseman Alex Bregman moving out to left field (Gallo beat it once with an opposite-field home run). This isn't a new thing. Joe Maddon used it last year against Joey Votto and it has been used in the past against David Ortiz, Jim Rice, Harmon Killebrew and Willie McCovey, among others.

It became a hot topic of discussion on sabermetric sites. The question: Should Gallo just bunt? Russell Carleton of Baseball Prospectus crunched the numbers, although it's not an easy thing to study, in part because nobody knows if Gallo can actually bunt. Anyway, with a 47 percent success rate -- and thus a .470/.470/.470 batting line, Carleton estimates the Rangers would score 5.20 runs per game with Gallo bunting compared to 4.80 if he hit away.

As for Gallo himself, he pointed out that bunting against a pitcher like Justin Verlander isn't so easy. "I'm sure I'll try to lay one down here and there, but it's not like I've been a master bunter all my life," Gallo said. "Everyone sees the left side of the infield and says, 'Just bunt it. Just bunt it.' It's not that simple."

Unwritten rules, by the Minnesota Twins

Speaking of the shift, the Twins were upset when Orioles catcher Chance Sisco bunted for a single against it in the ninth inning of a game the Twins led 7-0. Twins pitcher Jose Berrios was two outs from a one-hit shutout when Sisco pulled his dastardly act.

"I don't care if he's bunting. I just know it's not good for baseball in that situation. That's it," Berrios said.

"I could've said something, but they have tremendous veteran leadership over there, with Chris Davis, Adam Jones and those guys. I'm sure they'll address it and move forward," Twins second baseman Brian Dozier said.

"Nobody liked that. No, no, no. That's not a good play," said Twins outfielder Eddie Rosario.

My head hurts just thinking about what the Twins might have been thinking. The obvious counterargument to their whining is why were they shifting up seven runs in the ninth inning? Because they're trying to win! Same reason Sisco bunted.

After realizing he was getting hammered, Dozier explained his thinking to the St. Paul Pioneer Press that because the Orioles hadn't held on a Twins runner, "they conceded to the fact they didn't want us to steal, so we didn't steal. We could have very easily stolen and put up more runs, so therefore in return, you don't bunt. That's what everybody is missing in this whole thing."

Except the Twins were in a shift.

Bottom line: Baseball is weird.

Edwin Encarnacion hits an inside-the-park home run

Encarnacion isn't exactly Adrian Gonzalez or Albert Pujols slow, but he's not known for his fleet feet, either, with only nine career triples. This one was a little wacky even as inside-the-park home runs go since Encarnacion wasn't even running out of the box and Justin Upton's effort after the ball hit off the wall would best be described as "poor."

Gabe Kapler's adventurous first week

So all this happened to the new Phillies skipper:

In the season opener, he removed starter Aaron Nola after 68 pitches while he was throwing a shutout and then watched as five relievers blew a 5-0 lead.

He brought in a reliever who hadn't warmed up in the bullpen.

He blew through 26 pitching changes in the first five games, although one of those was infielder Pedro Florimon.

He got burned when he brought right fielder Nick Williams in very shallow against Amed Rosario, who hit a two-run triple for the go-ahead runs. Williams was playing the hit chart but look where he was playing:

A Phillies player told FanRag Sports that, "We'll be OK. ... We just need the manager to get out of the way."

Kapler was then booed at the Phillies home opener.

Stanton gets a Bronx cheer

Kapler can take a little solace in knowing Giancarlo Stanton was also booed at his Yankee Stadium debut. On a cold, rainy day, Stanton went 0-for-5 with five strikeouts and heard the music from Yankees fans. How often does a player go 0-for-5 with five K's? It happened only three times last year (Javier Baez, Matt Davidson and Odubel Herrera), three times in 2016 and twice in 2015.

Aaron Judge plays center field

More Yankees. Back on the first day of spring training, Judge joked that he still considers himself a center fielder, reminding reporters that he played there in college. At the time, Yankees manager Aaron Boone said he couldn't envision a scenario where Judge would end up in there. Then Jacoby Ellsbury landed on the DL at the end of spring training and Aaron Hicks followed with an intercostal strain suffered on Opening Day. There Judge was on March 31, playing center field in a 5-3 loss to the Blue Jays.

Dee Gordon admires a home run

Gordon had 11 career home runs in more than 2,800 lifetime at-bats when he hit one against the Indians, and he watched it sail out as if he were Ken Griffey Jr. belting one into the third deck at the Kingdome.

Chris Davis hitting leadoff

The Orioles stole only 32 bases last season and since they didn't add Rickey Henderson or Tim Lincecum in the offseason, they still lack a conventional leadoff hitter (of course, the idea of the conventional leadoff hitter is dying a slow death anyway). Adam Jones and Tim Beckham got the most starts there in 2017, but Buck Showalter's initial plan put Davis there. That was quickly abandoned after five games when Davis went 1-for-20 with three walks. Only five years left on Davis' contract.

Weird series of the week

The Dodgers and Giants began with four games at Dodger Stadium -- and all four ended in shutouts. The Giants won the first by identical 1-0 scores, with Joe Panik providing both runs with home runs. You can guess where this is going: He's the first player to hit solo home runs in back-to-back 1-0 games at any point in a season, not just the first two games of a season.

Related note: The second of those came off Kenley Jansen, who is scaring Dodgers fans with diminished velocity and a loss and blown save in his first two outings.

Diary of a home opener: Behind the scenes of a whirlwind first day in Cleveland for the Indians

Zack Meisel Apr 7, 2018 4

Jeremy Feador's alarm first sounded at 2:02 a.m. On a typical morning, it rings at 5:21 a.m. and he hits the snooze button about six times until his 2-year-old daughter wakes him.

This is no ordinary morning.

On Friday, Feador rushed to Progressive Field for the Indians' home opener. He left the house long before his daughter opened her eyes. She saw him on TV, though, during his interview on Fox 8 in the 6 a.m. hour on the third-base side of the main concourse. When the interview ended, she ran into her parents' bedroom to look for her dad, but he was nowhere to be found.

Feador, the team historian and communications coordinator, arrived at the ballpark about 3 a.m. to greet the four TV station crews as they set up their pre-crack-of-dawn broadcasts. The Indians arranged more than 100 interviews for various TV and radio networks from before sunrise up until first pitch, with players, coaches, front office members and team owner Paul Dolan. As the day unfolded, those in the communications department constantly referenced a three-page printout of the interview list.

Michael Brantley said he struggled to sleep Thursday night. Terry Francona compared the thrill of opening day to the initial rush of doing drugs. Yonder Alonso noted that, as the team stood on the first-base line at Angel Stadium on Monday night, the players discussed how tired they were with celebrating opponents' openers and how much they craved the chance to play before their home crowd.

There's a long, slow build to the home opener each year. When the team begins its 162-game march on the West Coast and games air deep into the night locally, it only adds to the emphasis of that first spectacle of the home schedule.

Each year, the day is a whirlwind. A ballpark that remains mostly dormant for six months suddenly hosts a flurry of activity for close to 24 consecutive hours. And that's just for Game 1 of 81.

Here's a diary of the Indians' home opener.

11:10 a.m. The grounds crew emerges from a door in the left-field wall and starts to set up the field, placing the batting practice screen in front of the mound and the cage behind home plate.

The cat's out of the bag — the wind is blowing so swiftly that the sheet intended to hide the 2017 postseason banner atop the upper deck in right field isn't covering it at all. The flag is supposed to remain covered until pregame ceremonies.

11:20 a.m. A fan submits an entry for Random Jersey Sightings: A navy No. 16 Mike Sarbaugh uniform, spotted near the Gateway Plaza. Sarbaugh laughs when shown the image in the Indians' clubhouse, and he reveals that he saw a No. 88 Scott Atchison jersey at Goodyear Ballpark near the end of spring training.

11:30 a.m. The Indians' scoreboard team preps the park's giant monitor, flashing various graphics and videos. The audio system plays the sound effect from the start of a "Mario Kart" race, which also serves as the initiation for the nightly Hot Dog Derby that takes place after the fifth inning. (Mustard won the first dash of the season with a late push past Ketchup and Onion, for anyone who bugged their bookie about odds for the race.)

11:50 a.m. The clubhouse is mostly empty, which isn't uncommon on the first day of a new series. Hitters usually meet with coaches Ty Van Burkleo, Victor Rodriguez and Mark Budzinski to go over details about the opponent. Pitchers visit with Carl Willis, Scott Atchison and Brian Sweeney.

Dan Otero stands in the center of the clubhouse to check the Masters leaderboard. Rory McIlroy and Matt Kuchar are pacing the pack. Tiger Woods has yet to tee off for his second round at Augusta National. (Patrick Reed would have the final say for Friday's competition.)

José Ramírez sits at his locker, which now resides next to the clubhouse entrance, Carlos Santana's old spot. Ramírez is sporting his patented gold hair. He said in Seattle he might dye it purple when he returned to Cleveland, but he settled on his old look.

Brandon Guyer assumed Ramírez's old locker, and Matt Belisle took over Guyer's former stall. Ryan Merritt also shifted across the room, next to Mike Clevinger in the near corner of the clubhouse.

Eight cardboard boxes, filled with gear and mail, serve as a barrier, shielding Francisco Lindor from any potential interview-seekers.

Players were able to unpack and stock their lockers during a five-hour window Thursday. The team arrived in Cleveland about 2 a.m. Thursday following its 13-inning affair in Anaheim.

12:05 p.m. Brantley must decide whether he wants to host the horde of reporters at his locker or in the media interview room for a Q&A about his return to the lineup. He opts for the interview room, and he rises from his black leather chair and heads across the hall.

"There's nothing better," Brantley said. "I couldn't sleep last night. I'm nervous right now speaking to you guys. I've got that nervous energy. It's fun. It's exciting. Playing in front of your home fans is something that you look for. You work all offseason to get to this moment. And, to be able to do it and hear the crowd roar when they hear your name, it's special. You just can't forget it. These are special memories."

12:13 p.m. Jason Kipnis walks into the clubhouse holding three black bats. You can never be too prepared to take hacks in the cage.

Nick Goody autographs a replica home plate and pitching rubber that rest on a table near the front entrance of the clubhouse.

12:20 p.m. Lindor meets with the media. He says he'll be wearing a ski mask in the field to help him cope with the bitter chill. He also shares his appreciation of LeBron James.

"He'll go from being good to all of a sudden being really good," Lindor said, "to all of a sudden putting his foot on the gas and it's, 'Good luck, everybody.' "

12:25 p.m. As reporters wait for Francona to enter the interview room, a media relations staffer hammers away at a wooden wedge caught beneath the door. After a minute of pounding, the door finally shuts all the way, leaving behind a small pile of sawdust and wood chips.

12:37 p.m. Francona recalls his favorite opening-day memory, when, while with the Reds, he hit a two-run homer against the Expos (the team that drafted him) at Riverfront Stadium on April 6, 1987.

"It doesn't matter how old you are, opening days are just — I wish I could explain it better," Francona said. "I'm guessing if I did drugs it would be somewhat like that. It feels good. It's exciting and it's nerve-wracking. It's a pretty cool feeling."

12:50 p.m. The Indians take batting practice as cameramen crowd around home plate and TV crews deliver their reports from outside of the home dugout.

2:01 p.m. The gates open and a mob of fans rush to the right-field drink rails. One Indians employee dubbed it the "running of the bulls."

3:38 p.m. Indians radio voice Tom Hamilton stands behind a wooden podium near home plate to introduce both teams. Ramírez and Lindor are recognized for their Silver Slugger Awards, and Corey Kluber is honored for his second Cy Young Award.

The Indians unveil the new 2017 banner in right field and recognize Tito Francona, who passed away in February.

4:01 p.m. The Ohio State Athletic Band performs the national anthem.

4:02 p.m. The teams return to their respective dugouts.

4:03 p.m. Jets complete a flyover of the ballpark.

4:04 p.m. Olympic gold medalist Red Gerard, a Rocky River native, throws an eephus pitch (OK, it was really more of a deliberate lob) for the ceremonial first offering. Trevor Bauer squeezes the throw and shakes hands with the 17-year-old snowboarder.

4:09 p.m. The Indians take the field. Carlos Carrasco directs the army out of the dugout as his song of choice, Bryan Adams' "Summer of '69," blares from the ballpark sound system.

4:12 p.m. Carrasco fires the first pitch at Progressive Field this season, a fastball outside to Royals left fielder Jon Jay. First-pitch temperature is a brisk 41 degrees.

4:16 p.m. As he swings, Lucas Duda's bat soars through the air and lands atop the protective netting behind the plate. It rolls to a stop near the bottom corner of the club seats section that hangs over the lower level. A few fans lean over the railing in an attempt to snag the bat, but to no avail.

4:18 p.m. The Royals grab a 2-0 advantage as Jay scores on a Mike Moustakas RBI groundout and Duda delivers a run-scoring single. Carrasco evades further trouble by inducing a double play off the bat of Cheslor Cuthbert, whose name sounds like he should be a member of the British Parliament.

4:22 p.m. A man uses his crutches to try to retrieve Duda's bat. After a couple of minutes of work — and a shrewd reversal of crutch deployment — he succeeds. He raises both walking aids in the air to celebrate.

4:29 p.m. The ballpark finally fills, just in time for the Indians to score their first run. In his first plate appearance of the season, Brantley contributes a two-run single to right to cap a three-run first inning.

4:55 p.m. Rajai Davis receives a loud ovation as he steps into the batter's box for the first time since Game 7 of the 2016 World Series.

6:22 p.m. The Indians announce an attendance figure of 34,720, the 26th consecutive sellout for a home opener in Cleveland. It's the 25th season at Progressive Field, which opened in April 1994.

6:23 p.m. Ramírez still has not lost his helmet this season (Davis might take over as the new king of that domain). The closest we've been to the first entry on the Ramírez helmet counter: In the bottom of the seventh, he stole second standing up, removed his helmet and scratched his head.

6:53 p.m. Cody Allen induces a game-ending double play off the bat of Alcides Escobar to seal the 3-2 victory. Lindor executes his usual procedure of leaping high-fives with his outfielders. First with Davis, then with Geyer. When Brantley approaches, the two hug. No extraneous jumping for the guy who just returned from ankle surgery.

The grounds crew rolls the white tarp out onto the infield. There's precipitation in the forecast, as if the frigid temperatures and stiff winds weren't enough.

7:02 p.m. As the media flocks toward the home clubhouse, they reach a roadblock. A pipe burst in the bowels of Progressive Field, flooding the walkway outside of the home clubhouse. Reporters huddle in the indoor batting cages. Once given the green light, they walk through the team's weight room and into the interview room to hear from Francona and Brantley.

The Indians' postgame victory playlist includes a strange mix of songs, including Jason Derulo's "Talk Dirty," Bruno Mars' "When I Was Your Man," Khalid's "Young, Dumb & Broke" and Halsey's "Bad at Love."

8:21 p.m. Snowflakes begin to fall. Saturday's forecast seems welcoming ... for Jack Frost, maybe.

Fedor grabbed a hard-earned beer about 8 p.m. as he waited out traffic in downtown Cleveland. His task list for the rest of the weekend appears much more manageable. There might be 80 more home games, but none as demanding as this one. He walked into his living room almost 19 hours after he woke up, tossed his suit jacket and detailed his day to his wife. His daughter was long asleep, but they'll catch up Saturday morning. Fedor can wave goodbye to that 2:02 a.m. wake-up call. Until next year, at least.

By the numbers: Andrew Miller serves as his own reliever, Michael Brantley lengthens the lineup

By T.J. Zuppe 3h ago

Jon Jay walked to lead off the eighth. Whit Merrifield followed with a single.

Clinging to a one-run advantage, that's typically when a manager starts reaching for the Tums and his hotline to his bullpen. Terry Francona did not. He had a feeling that Andrew Miller was capable of putting out his own fire.

"Once he has to start attacking, it's like he gets better," Francona said. "That's a good feeling."

Miller responded with three consecutive strikeouts. The lefty got Mike Moustakas and Lucas Duda swinging. He caught Cheslor Cuthbert napping on a *clears throat* perfectly placed slider.

He neutralized the threat, all while rewarding Francona's faith in the typically dominant hurler.

After the game, Miller was asked about serving as his own reliever.

"I'd rather not be," he said. "I'd like to come out and fire strikes. I haven't done that the last couple times. It's nice to be able to make a pitch and get out of it."

Despite any late-game anxiety, the Tribe's first win at home this season is now in the books. Here are the numbers behind the Indians' 3-2 victory over the Royals in the home opener.

66.7 mph: That was the exit velocity on Michael Brantley's first swing since returning from the disabled list.

Brantley looped a liner into right field off Danny Duffy to score two in the bottom of the first, giving the Indians the one-run edge they'd carry for the rest of the contest. Not only was it Brantley's second game-winning hit during the home opener in as many years — he collected a walkoff single in last year's opener — it also spoke to how much deeper and dangerous the Tribe lineup looks with the left-handed hitter in it.

"He didn't scald it," Francona said, "but he stays on the ball with a runner on third and less than two outs so well that he he gets rewarded for hits like that. He doesn't roll over and hit that ball to second on a double-play ball. He's one of the best I've ever seen at that."

While there was plenty of debate surrounding his health status this winter — many were confused why the club picked up Brantley's \$12 million option — Francona made the decision sound much more simplistic.

"I could give you pages and pages of why (we believe in him)," Francona said. "He's the heart and soul of our team. He does everything the way you're supposed to. If people saw the way he works to get healthy, it would be hard to bet against him or to ever want to bet against him."

97 percent: That was the hit probability on the ball Yonder Alonso blistered to the left-center field gap in the eighth.

His drive to the wall left the bat at 105.9 mph — the best contact of the evening — but died on the warning track. Not only was the fly out a reminder that the 41-degree day made life difficult on both sides, but it also speaks to a bit of the misfortune Tribe hitters have experienced in the first seven games of the season.

In fact, balls struck in a similar manner have typically gone for a home run approximately 96 percent of the time in the Statcast era. Unfortunately, the wind had other ideas.

"I thought both teams actually really played through some horrendous conditions," Francona said. "There were some balls hit really well to left field that didn't go anywhere and the game wasn't sloppily played, again by both teams. I thought the players did a heck of a job."

5: That's how many barrels Alonso has collected this season. The deep fly to the track was his fifth of the season, tying him with Matt Davidson for most in the majors. Barrels, as defined by Statcast, are "assigned to batted-ball events whose comparable hit types have led to a minimum .500 batting average and 1.500 slugging percentage." Translation: it's the perfect combination of exit velocity and launch angle. Alonso's contact quality has been encouraging in the early season, even if he hasn't been consistently rewarded for it.

47.83 percent: That's how often Carlos Carrasco threw his four-seamer Friday. Carrasco gave up two in the first inning but managed to settle down, finishing with five scoreless innings before exiting before the seventh. Despite the early damage his final line — six innings, five hits, two runs, one walk, four strikeouts — was more than acceptable.

At one point, Royals hitters went hitless in 13 consecutive at-bats.

"I thought he did a good job of settling down," Francona said. "It wasn't easy. One time, (Yan Gomes) got knocked back with the wind. I thought he did a really good job of settling in."

Carrasco was fighting a cramp in his calf during his final inning, but the club was already expecting to remove the righty after his scoreless sixth.

"He's pitching through an intentional walk, bad conditions, good hitters and did a terrific job," Francona said.

17: Perhaps, the weather played a role in Carrasco's limited breaking ball usage, throwing the slider just 17 times Friday night, a noticeable drop from how often he utilized his best pitch down the stretch last season.

The cold conditions can make it difficult for pitchers to find a good grip. That was evident when Nick Goody, Andrew Miller and Cody Allen all initially struggled to locate their secondary stuff.

Goody worked around a hit. Allen was able to strand his leadoff walk.

"You can tell with Cody, he was having trouble with his breaking ball," Francona said. "I thought Gomer did an unbelievable job of sacrificing any part of his body to stop those balls. And Goody, to his credit, found his breaking ball. That's why he was in there for those hitters. It's hard when it's that cold."

4: The number of combined postgame sneezes that occurred between Trevor Bauer and Tyler Olson in a three-second stretch along the far wall of the Tribe clubhouse. The rapid-fire sneezing prompted a small handful of reporters to repeatedly issue a courtesy "bless you" on their behalf.

"There's a lot of blessing going on in here," Bauer playfully responded.

Blessings are nice. Hand sanitizer is nicer.

What to watch in the Indians minor-league system this season

By T.J. Zuppe 2h ago 2

The Indians organization took a noticeable hit when they dealt two high-end prospects — Clint Frazier and Justus Sheffield — to the Yankees for Andrew Miller in 2016. And something tells me they'd probably do it again.

Despite that blockbuster deal, the club still maintains some potential impact-level talents in a system that has strategically avoided falling to the bottom tier of Major League Baseball.

To their credit, they've managed to compete for a World Series over the past few years without completely depleting their farm system. Other clubs haven't been so lucky.

Utilizing a combination of Baseball America, MLB Pipeline and FanGraphs as a resource, we've compiled a list of the Tribe's top prospects to watch in 2018. With minor-league seasons just getting underway, here is how the organization stacks up entering the campaign.

Triple-A Columbus

Manager: Chris Tremie

Top-rated prospect: Francisco Mejia's bat may be ready for the major-league level, but where he'll play once he arrives is still a mystery. The club hasn't given up on his development as a catcher, but his offense is so advanced, they may be forced to find other ways to get his bat in the lineup. Not only will he split time with Eric Haase behind the plate in Columbus, he's expected to gain some time in the outfield, all with an eye toward his eventual promotion.

"He's such an advanced hitter that, if he's able to play another position and then there's an injury or something, he could find himself not only in the big leagues, but playing," Terry Francona said. "And I think he understands. We went to pretty good lengths to try to make sure that he understands that this is not an indictment on his catching. He's just such an advanced hitter. We want to take advantage of it."

One to watch: Mejia gets the national recognition, but don't sleep on Haase. The Indians raved about him this spring. The power-hitting catcher is a potential injury away from a promotion.

Other names of note: OF Greg Allen, SS Yu Chang, RHP Julian Merryweather (DL), 3B Yandy Diaz, SS Eric Stamets (DL), RHP Cam Hill (DL)

Double-A Akron

Manager: Tony Mansolino

Top-rated prospect: First baseman Bobby Bradley dropped 30 pounds this offseason, a development that got the organization extremely excited this spring. The club's No. 3 ranked prospect has all sorts of power potential — he's averaged 26 homers over the past three minor-league season — but it was his body transformation that may have accelerated his eventual arrival.

"I think his energy's better," Francona said. "His defense is better. His bat speed. It looks like it's just easier for him to do things physically. ... I reminded him (when we sent him down this spring) that, you're 22 years old. You haven't even been to Triple-A yet. Enjoy seeing how good you can be. Don't forget to be young and you start looking at the board and who's doing what and it's, 'I need to be there.' No, you're only young once. Enjoy doing things right. I think he's on a really good pace. He's grown up so much. Man, it was fun having him in. He was a real highlight for us."

One to watch: Shane Bieber profiles as an elite strike-thrower. He may soon be starting games in Cleveland.

Other names of note: SS Willi Castro, RHP Aaron Civale, 2B Tyler Krieger

High-A Lynchburg

Manager: Rouglas Odor

Top-rated prospect: Starting pitcher Triston McKenzie is the club's second-best overall prospect — FanGraphs actually ranks him above Mejia — but the righty begins the year on the disabled list with a forearm injury. The organization has said the move is precautionary, but it's something to monitor as the year opens. Last year, McKenzie struck out 186 hitters in 143 innings at High-A, posting a 3.46 ERA and 3.03 FIP. MLB.com's scouting report indicates "the potential is there for McKenzie to develop into a frontline starter."

Other names of note: OF Conner Capel, C Logan Ice, SS Luke Wakamatsu

Low-A Lake County

Manager: Luke Carlin

Top-rated prospect: Third baseman Nolan Jones has the type of plate discipline and power potential that could eventually earn him at spot in the majors. At 19 years old, the former second-round selection in the 2016 MLB Draft is probably at least a couple years away, but he's climbed into the Top 5 for the club, according to MLB.com. Coming off of last year's .317/.430/.482 slash line at Low-A, he's certainly a name to get familiar with.

One to watch: Will Benson, the No. 7 prospect in the system, according to MLB.com, smacked a massive homer at the end of spring training, proof that his raw offensive game is progressing. The 19-year-old outfielder and former first-round selection is excited to begin the year at Low-A.

"It's going to be a learning experience, for sure," Benson said, "just to kind of be around the guys and really build a brotherhood for a long period of time. Most of the guys that are probably going to be there are probably going to understand that it's the first time playing 140-something games. So, it's going to be a learning experience for everybody, and it's going to be fun to enjoy that journey together."

Other names of note: 2B Ernie Clement, RHP James Karinchak, LHP Juan Hillman

Indians 3, Royals 2: Michael Brantley delivers key two-run single in 2018 season debut

By Michael Beaven

CLEVELAND: The first inning Friday at Progressive Field turned into the scoring runs inning.

The visiting Kansas City Royals scored two runs in the top of the first and the Indians followed with three in the bottom half of the inning.

The 3-2 advantage for the Indians held up and gave them a victory in the 25th home opener at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario.

A crowd of 34,720 braved cool temperatures and a steady wind to watch offense in the first inning and efficient pitching in the final eight innings.

Michael Brantley made his 2018 season debut and delivered a single that scored Jason Kipnis and Jose Ramirez to give the Indians the 3-2 lead they never relinquished.

"He is the heart and soul of our team," Indians manager Terry Francona said of Brantley, who was activated from the 10-day disabled list Friday morning after missing 56 of the Indians' past 58 regular-season games with a right ankle injury that required surgery on Oct. 18, 2017.

"He does everything the way you are supposed to. If people saw the way he works to get healthy, it would be hard to bet against him, or to ever want to bet against him," Francona said.

Indians right-hander Carlos Carrasco worked through a tough first inning to give Francona six innings. Nick Goody, Andrew Miller and Cody Allen each pitched a scoreless inning in relief.

The Royals took a 2-0 lead in the first inning with Jon Jay and Whit Merrifield each scoring a run. Jay singled to left-center field open the inning and Merrifield followed with a double to right. A groundout by Mike Moustakas brought in Jay, and Merrifield scored on a broken-bat single to right by Lucas Duda.

The Indians responded with three runs in the bottom of the first inning as Royals left-hander Danny Duffy struggled with his control. Francisco Lindor and Kipnis walked to start the rally. Ramirez followed with an RBI single up the middle, Edwin Encarnacion walked and Brantley smacked his two-run single to right.

"He stays on the ball with a runner on third and less than two outs so well that he gets rewarded for hits like that because he doesn't roll over and hit that ball to second for a double-play ball," Francona said. "He is one of the best I have ever seen at that.

"I was so glad we answered back right away just because you don't want to get down in a game with the conditions like this. I thought both teams actually really played through some horrendous conditions. There were some balls hit really well to left field that didn't go anywhere, and the game wasn't sloppily played by both teams."

Brantley said usually the approach is to "take some pitches" after watching three teammates walk in front of you in an inning, but Friday he went a different route.

"For myself personally, I had a lot of at-bats against Duffy in the past and I was just trying to get a fastball early and just tried to put a good swing on it," he said. "Like I have said before, I have had some nervous jitters in my first AB of the year, but I was excited [today]. He made a great pitch, but I was able to just get enough of it to get it over the second baseman."

Duffy and Carrasco both regrouped from subpar first innings to give their managers some length. Carrasco retired 13 batters in a row after giving up two runs, and Duffy retired 16 out of 18 batters after allowing three runs.

The Royals loaded the bases in the sixth with one out, but Carrasco got Duda to strike out and Cheslor Cuthbert to line out to Brantley in left field.

"After that first inning, I figured out I should just go normal and attack the hitter," Carrasco said. "That is what we did. But I did start a little bit too fine trying to get some ground balls."

Brandon Guyer hit a double with one out in the sixth inning and Rajai Davis hit a double to lead off the seventh inning, but both Indians outfielders were stranded on base.

Carrasco struck out four and allowed two earned runs, five hits and one walk.

"I thought he did a good job of settling down because it wasn't easy," Francona said. "One time, Gomer [catcher Yan Gomes] got knocked back with the wind. I thought he did a really good job of settling in."

Goody struck out one in his one inning, Miller worked around two base runners and struck out three and Allen recorded one strikeout before a 6-4-3 double play ended the game.

Duffy struck out three and allowed three earned runs, three hits and three walks in his 5⅓ innings.

The victory gave the Indians their second in a row in home openers at Progressive Field.

"It wasn't fun by any means," Brantley said of playing on a crisp day. "But at the same time, you go out there and you get your job done as a professional, and do everything you can to scratch a run across here or there and stay in the lead."

Akron Beacon Journal LOADED: 04.07.2018

Indians report: Andrew Miller is 'his own reliever' after escaping trouble with ease yet again

By Ryan Lewis

CLEVELAND: It doesn't happen often, but when Andrew Miller finds himself in trouble, Indians manager Terry Francona doesn't need to look to the bullpen.

That's because he already has the guy he'd call upon to get out of the jam on the mound in the first place in the form of the menacing 6-foot-7 left-hander with a devastating slider.

Miller has already displayed a knack for escaping tight situations this season. He has twice pitched himself into a jam and then gotten out of it like a self-fixing robot learning to correct its mistakes. First, in Seattle on March 31, he allowed three hits and walked one in his 1⅓ innings of work but managed to record three strikeouts and escape unscathed in the Indians' 6-5 win.

He did it again in Friday's 3-2 home-opening win over the Kansas City Royals. Miller entered in the eighth and walked the first batter he faced, a cardinal sin for a reliever. Whit Merrifield followed with a single, putting two runners on and the tying run in scoring position with nobody out.

But like a cornered animal, Miller reached into his bag of tricks did what he had to do to survive. He struck out Mike Moustakas. He struck out Lucas Duda. And he struck out Cheslor Cuthbert looking on a slider that bent back to catch the outside corner.

"I've been watching him for a few years now. He's one of the best relievers in the game," Indians outfielder Michael Brantley said. "I'll say it. He doesn't want to brag about himself, but I will. We have pure confidence every time he comes in. He's a competitor. He loves going out there and competing, and I'm glad he's on our team."

When Miller runs into trouble, he might have a longer leash than most relievers in baseball. Even on a rough day, he's the guy the Indians want on the mound.

"[It is] like he's his own reliever," Francona said. "Once he has to start attacking, it's like he gets better. That's a good feeling. Not too often you look up and it's first and second, and you're just not too sure they're going to score. A lot of times, that's not a good recipe, but with him you're like, 'I think we're going to be OK.'"

Of course, Miller would like his outings to be a little smoother. But despite the rough beginnings, he now has seven strikeouts in 3½ innings and still hasn't allowed a run.

"I'd rather not be [my own reliever]. I'd like to come out and fire strikes," Miller said. "I haven't done that the last couple times. It's nice to be able to make a pitch and get out of it."

"We have a great defense. You can trust them when you need to get back in the zone. You can start firing over the middle of the plate. Yeah, that's not how I want to do it or write it up, but the job is still 'Put up a zero.' I've been fortunate the last few times out to be able to do that."

Akron Beacon Journal LOADED: 04.07.2018

Chief Wahoo makes last Opening Day appearance on a Tribe uniform

By Craig Webb

Just another typical Opening Day in Cleveland.

Temperatures in the 40s.

A threat of snow.

High hopes for playoff baseball in October.

And protesters trading barbs with fans of Chief Wahoo.

Friday was the controversial team mascot's final Opening Day appearance on a Tribe uniform.

The team and Major League Baseball agreed in January to retire the mascot from the field of play by the start of the 2019 season.

It is hard to spot the caricature inside the ballpark, a Block C now takes center stage along with the script Indians.

There was still plenty of the grinning team mascot to be found on everything from hats, to shirts to jackets on fans filing their way inside.

The mascot dates back to the 1940s when former Indians owner Bill Veeck turned to artist Walter Goldbach of Medina to come up with a primary logo for the club's patches. Goldbach died in December.

Some fans went out of their way to show off their Chief Wahoo to protesters gathered at two entrances to the ballpark.

A small number even waved a middle finger or two to catch the attention of the protesters, who numbered about 50.

Jon Brittain caught the attention and ire of the protesters as he motored by on his wheelchair wearing a traditional Native American Indian headdress.

The Lakewood resident said he's been wearing headdresses to games since the 2007 season.

He said fans are supportive of his team spirit and often stop him and ask to take a selfie.

At a typical game, he will pose 20 or more times and at one game, some 40 people wanted a snapshot.

Brittain said he's only been confronted once by another fan offended by his headdress — this is the third one he has owned — but he dismissed that as one of "those Cubs fans."

Carrying a "We Are Not Honored" sign, Robert Roche, a member of the Apache nation living in Parma, said it is sad that he once again has to gather outside a Cleveland stadium as he had to do since 1971.

Roche said the ballclub has no intention of banishing Chief Wahoo, as the mascot will likely continue to appear on merchandise long after it disappears from players' uniforms.

And the team will continue to call itself the Indians.

"This is the city of racism," he said. "We are not mascots. We are humans. They continue to dehumanize us."

Walking not far away was a counterprotester.

Angelo DiSiena of Cleveland didn't have a ticket for the game.

He made his way to the ballpark to show his support for Chief Wahoo.

He carried a large tapestry of the chief he purchased in Mexico a few years ago.

"I don't see why they would want to get rid of him," DiSiena said. "It's not that insensitive. Everyone I see is wearing him."

Joseph Patrick Meissner has a long history of fighting over the mascot.

As an attorney, he was part of a bitter protracted legal battle in the 1970s to force the team to get rid of the mascot and team name and compensate Native Americans for money made from related merchandise.

Meissner, who carried a "People Are Not Mascots" sign, estimates that the team owes the tribal nations somewhere in the neighborhood of \$9 billion.

"And that might be conservative," he said.

For some fans, Chief Wahoo is not a political thing but more of a personal thing.

Matt Coleman started his Opening Day at a cemetery in Tiffin with his wife and kids.

They gathered to honor his dad, Leroy, a longtime season ticket-holder in Section 182 and Tribe fan, who died in December.

Matt said he wore his dad's Indians Santa hat that has a Chief Wahoo in the front to honor his father and his love of the Tribe.

"We stopped by his grave and let some balloons go," he said. "His seats are better than mine this Opening Day."

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Indians notebook: Michael Brantley has returned once again; the hope is that he sticks in the lineup

By Ryan Lewis

CLEVELAND: Just like the renewal of baseball, the spring and tax season, Michael Brantley has again returned from an offseason surgery to join the Indians lineup.

Brantley was activated off the disabled list on Friday and inserted into the No. 5 spot in the lineup for the home opener against the Kansas City Royals. The plan, said Indians manager Terry Francona, is that Brantley will play roughly two out of every three games and potentially be available as a pinch-hitter in the third. It is in essence a "common sense" schedule based on how Brantley feels each day.

"You know what, if it is two out of three, it's worth having him," Francona said. "He means so much to what we're doing and when he's playing it's a position you don't mess with. You wind him up, let him go and that means you can maybe mix and match in other positions or do some other things because that position is solidified."

This was the third consecutive spring that Brantley spent the majority of camp trying to work his way back from surgery with his Opening Day status at least in question. Unlike 2016 and 2017, though, this time it was for offseason ankle surgery and not connected to the shoulder issues that plagued him for the better part of two years.

Still, the Indians are looking to take the cautious route with the rest of the season in mind and not just the short run. Brantley said he isn't as healthy as he's ever been in his career. But he's ready to return right now.

"I wish I could say that, but I feel great right now as we speak, and that is all that matters," Brantley said. "One day at a time. I understand that I've been banged up for the last couple years, but at the same time, I'm as focused as ever. Look to come into the season and go out every day and compete, be a great teammate."

Brantley has been limited to 101 games the past two seasons, 11 in 2016 and 90 last year after he earned an All-Star selection but then had his second half derailed by the ankle issue. He remains an integral part to the Indians' lineup, even though he's spent more time in the trainer's room the past 24 months than on the field.

"I want to be out there 162 times if I could with this team," Brantley said. "At the same time, I have my teammates that are always picking me up, my wife and kids and family around me that is a great support system, and I can't thank them enough, and they kept me going. Like I said before, I love this game, I enjoy this game."

"I've been banged up a couple times through it, but at the same time, any time I get to step out there and put on a major-league uniform, it's an honor, it's a privilege, it's a lot of hard work, and I just don't let it go by the wayside."

Witness

Indians shortstop Francisco Lindor remains arguably the most recognizable player on the roster, with the only real competition being two-time Cy Young Award winner Corey Kluber when he starts every fifth game. At 24 years old, he was an MVP finalist last season, still hasn't reached his arbitration years and is one of the more marketable young players in the game.

And he's the second-biggest star in the city, and it isn't close, thanks to some kid from Akron playing basketball across the plaza. When asked about watching LeBron James play, Lindor said he doesn't even know how to really explain it.

"He'll go from being good to all of a sudden being really good, to all of a sudden putting his foot on the gas and it's, 'good luck everybody,'" Lindor said. "It's fun to watch him. He's one of the greatest athletes ever to live and he's one of the best basketball players ever. The stuff he's doing on the court is pretty special. And how he's been on the court every single game. Yeah, there's days that he's off, but he's never been hurt. Hopefully he never gets hurt. God willing. Knock on wood."

Stellar defense

The Indians turned inning-ending double plays in the first and ninth innings of Friday's 3-2 win over the Royals in the home opener and have not made an error in their first seven games.

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Indians 3, Royals 2: 14 Walk-Off Thoughts on the hope for this Michael Brantley return to be the one that sticks and Carlos Carrasco turning it on

By Ryan Lewis

Here are 14 Walk-Off Thoughts after the Indians' 3-2 home opener win against the Kansas City Royals on Friday.

1. So, perhaps this is the one that sticks. This return for Michael Brantley, maybe, possibly, could it be, might be the one in which he returns to the lineup and with a couple of off days sprinkled in, continues to be entrenched in the middle of the order as the All-Star caliber player that he's been—when healthy—since 2014.
2. Now, this is a completely different injury than the one that robbed him of the majority of 2016 and 2017. Just because he had trouble coming back from the shoulder issues that plagued him for so long doesn't mean an ankle issue would as well.
3. Brantley's 2018 club option was picked up at \$12 million for this season. The Indians are hoping their bet on his health allows them to cash in a productive year with vintage Brantley. He's not only an All-Star quality left fielder, he's been one of the leaders in the clubhouse for several seasons.
4. Looking at this club, Brantley's productivity is near the top of the list of key factors in terms of ceiling and floor. The Indians were without him in 2016. They were without him for most of the second half. They have been without him, for the most part, in each of the last two October runs.
5. Now, he's back. The plan, according to Indians manager Terry Francona, is to use "common sense" and most likely play him every two-out-three. The goal is to at least get that many games out of him.
6. Francona, on what Brantley means to the club: "So much. He's an easy guy to bet on. I could give you pages and pages of why. He's the heart and soul of our team. He does everything the way you're supposed to. If people saw the way he works to get healthy, it would be hard to bet against him or to ever want to bet against him."
7. Brantley, on learning from the first two rehab stints (though, again, that was his shoulder, whereas this is his ankle): "Be patient. Understand that I'm listening to my body and understand exactly what's going on and how I feel every day and make sure I'm being honest with myself and with this team. I said it before, I wasn't going to come back if I wasn't 100 percent because I wouldn't be helping this team. I'm feeling good right now. I'll wake up tomorrow and we get to do it again. That's all I'm looking forward to, one day at a time, playing as many games as I can."
8. So, again, this will be a daily story. The Indians will check in with Brantley. We will write basically the same stories we have written for three years now. Francona will try to ease him in somewhat slowly. And, perhaps, the Indians will finally have him available for a postseason run after missing out on the last two.

As a sider written for print, here is a story about Andrew Miller escaping trouble, as he did again Friday.

9. For a fan base trying to stay warm and enjoy the home opener, Carlos Carrasco didn't get off to the best start. Three of the first four hitters recorded hits. Two runs scored. Almost immediately, the Indians were trailing, and it probably felt a bit colder in the upper, windier deck.
10. And then Carrasco mutated into the Cy Young finalist he was last season. Over the next 5 2/3 innings, albeit on a very windy day that made it tough on hitters, Carrasco allowed only two hits and a walk and held a one-run lead while the offense, following a productive first inning of their own, stalled.
11. Carrasco hasn't had the best start out of the gate. He also hasn't yet given the Indians much to worry about. He did say he had a cramp during his final inning but pitched through it.
12. Said Francona: "I thought he did a good job of settling down. It wasn't easy. One time, Gomer got knocked back with the wind. I thought he did a really good job of settling in. And then the last inning, he had a cramp in his calf, we didn't know. But when he came out of the game, we were going to take him out anyway, but he goes, 'I've had this cramp.' He's pitching through an intentional walk, bad conditions, good hitters and did a terrific job."
13. Said Carrasco: "You know what, I think the first inning, I just tried to put the ball in play, that's what happened. I just figured out after that, just figured out, just go normal, attack the hitting, that's what we did. I think I started a little bit too fine, trying to get some ground balls, but I just figured it out and that's what we did."
14. Props to the fans who attended this one. The home opener is a lot of fun, but it was 45 degrees and windy. The next two days are expected to be brutal as well and in the low 30s. Hat's off to ya, but you should keep yours, especially if it's warm.

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Cold temperatures, high winds can't beat Cleveland Indians' bullpen and Yan Gomes

By Paul Hoynes

CLEVELAND, Ohio - During the 1961 All-Star Game, Stu Miller was blown off the mound at Candlestick Park while throwing a pitch to Detroit's Rocky Colavito. He was charged with a balk.

Progressive Field will never be mistaken for much maligned Candlestick Park, a wind tunnel that turned warm summer days into frigid nights no matter what the date. But in Friday's home opener for the Indians against the Royals, the wind was so strong that catcher Yan Gomes was almost blown over.

Gomes couldn't remember the inning, but said Alcides Escobar was at the plate.

"When I'm giving the signs, my crouch is pretty narrow," said Gomes. "So I'm giving the signs and a big cold gust of wind comes and I'm starting to tip. Escobar stepped out of the box, but I was kind of like falling over.

"Maybe that's happened before, but never when it's been that miserable."

The Indians beat the Royals, 3-2, and all the scoring was done in the first inning. The temperature at first pitch was 41 degrees, but a strong wind was blowing in from right field. The temperature eventually dropped to 37 degrees with a 24 degree wind chill factor, which made playing baseball far from an enjoyable experience.

Andrew Miller pitched the eighth inning, but had to step off the mound during his warm up pitches because the wind was blowing so hard.

"The wind was toughest for me, honestly, of all things," said Miller. "But I think it was harder on the hitters. We saw some good swings and the ball not go anywhere."

Carlos Carrasco allowed two runs in the first inning and then threw five scoreless to protect the 3-2 lead. Then it was time for the bullpen.

Carlos Carrasco on pitching out of jams in first and sixth innings vs KC

Nick Goody pitched a scoreless seventh and then came the drama.

Miller, when he wasn't being buffeted by high winds, walked John Jay and allowed a single to Whit Merrifield to start the eighth. He ended the inning with three straight strikeouts on 13 pitches against Mike Moustakas, Lucas Duda and Cheslor Cuthbert.

Manager Terry Francona is fond of saying that Miller is often his best reliever.

"Once he has to start attacking, it's like he gets better," said Francona. "That's a good feeling."

Miller says that's not the way he intends to pitch, but when it does happen, "I've got no choice. I've got to find a way to get out of it. I don't want to look at Frankie (Lindor, shortstop) every time and see who my double play partner is. I've got to come in and fire some strikes."

Facing Moustakas, a left-handed hitter, helped Miller get back into the strike zone.

"I got a lefty and kind of was able to change my sights," he said. "I think I made a nice adjustment. Again, it's not how I'd want to do it. I'd rather go out and have a clean inning, but at the end of the day, a zero is a zero."

The eighth inning marked the 36th time since 2016 that Miller has made an appearance featuring at least three strikeouts. He leads the big leagues in that category with San Diego's Brad Hand a distance second with 20 such games.

Terry Francona on the horrendous weather conditions during Tribe home opener

Allen pitched the ninth for his second save, but Gomes deserved an assist. Allen walked Jorge Soler to start the inning and then struck out Alex Gordon. But twice he bounced his knuckle curve into the dirt during Gordon's at-bats, causing Gomes to throw his body in front of it and keep Soler at first. If not for Gomes, Soler could have been on third base, 90 feet from tying the score.

"I thought Gomer did an unbelievable job of sacrificing any part of his body to block those balls," said Francona.

More importantly, Allen had the confidence to throw his breaking ball in that situation because he trusts Gomes.

"When it's that cold, you're grip isn't very good," said Allen. "But I had a mindset that I'm not going to hang one. I'm airing on the side of throwing a good one and bouncing it instead of hanging one over the middle of the plate.

"Thank goodness we have two of the best catchers in baseball."

Hot streak: The Indians have won two straight home openers at Progressive Field for the first time since they won three straight from 1997 through 1999.

Home sweet home: The Indians have won 18 of their last 21 regular season games at Progressive Field. They are 29-8 at home since last year's All-Star Game.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 04.07.2018

Cleveland Indians OF Michael Brantley won't let a big moment pass him by

By Joe Noga,

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Michael Brantley has demonstrated a flair for the dramatic at the plate lately that has his Cleveland Indians teammates anticipating big hits in big moments from the All-Star outfielder.

Making his first appearance of the season on Friday against Kansas City, Brantley delivered a two-run single to right field in the bottom of the first inning off Royals starter Danny Duffy that gave the Indians a 3-2 lead.

Carlos Carrasco and the Tribe bullpen made certain the lead stood up, holding the Royals scoreless over the final eight innings. It marks the second consecutive year Brantley has driven in the game-winning run in the team's home opener.

"We're starting to come to expect it," Indians reliever Andrew Miller said. "He's a big part of this lineup. You put him in there and he's a daily guy that you just count on to get big hits."

Carrasco said getting a healthy Brantley back means a lot to everybody in the clubhouse.

"When I saw the lineup today and saw he was in there, I was really happy," Carrasco said.

The big hits in big moments have come non-stop for Brantley since the start of last season.

* Following offseason shoulder surgery in 2017, Brantley delivered a walk-off RBI double in Cleveland's 2-1 home opener win against Chicago.

* He singled off White Sox pitcher Carson Fulmer on Sept. 30 to cap a 10-pitch at-bat after spending nearly two months on the disabled list.

* And he homered March 21 in his first spring training at-bat of 2018 after missing most of the exhibition season while rehabbing from offseason ankle surgery.

On Friday, Brantley said he relied on a long history against Duffy (25 previous at-bats) as he stepped to the plate looking for a fastball early.

"I had some nervous jitters and I was excited," he said. "(Duffy) made a great pitch, but I was just able to get enough of it to get it over second base. I'll take it all day."

Brantley said he can't explain his success against Duffy. Last season, left-handed batters hit .183 against Duffy, but Brantley entered the game with a .320 average against the Royals lefty, including three career RBI.

"We did a great job of just making (Duffy) work today and I think our overall approach as team was very good," he said.

Manager Terry Francona praised Brantley's approach to the at-bat following the game.

"He stays on the ball with a runner on third and less than two outs so well that he gets rewarded with hits like that because he doesn't roll over and hit a double-play ball," Francona said. "He's one of the best I've ever seen at that."

Francona said it's satisfying to see a player of Brantley's character come back from a run of injuries and find success.

"He's an easy guy to bet on and I could give you pages and pages of why," Francona said. "He's the heart and soul of our team. He does everything the way you're supposed to. If people saw the way he works to get healthy, it would be hard to bet against him or to ever want to bet against him."

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 04.07.2018

Cleveland Indians open at home with sense of urgency -- Terry Pluto

By Terry Pluto,

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- "Time goes fast."

Manager Terry Francona said that before the Cleveland Indians 3-2 victory over the Kansas City Royals in Friday's home opener.

Even in a sport with no clock, time doesn't stop.

I'm not going to fall into the pit of "the Indians have to win this year, or it's time to eat dirt and die."

But when I interviewed Paul Dolan in spring training, the Tribe owner mentioned the team "had been building toward 2018 for a while."

He mentioned the Andrew Miller deal during the 2016 season.

A key part of the trade was knowing Miller was signed through the 2018 season.

After the 2016 season, the Tribe signed Edwin Encarnacion to a three-year, \$60 million deal. Part of the reason was knowing Carlos Santana could leave via free agency after the 2017 season.

Encarnacion would be protection in the middle of the order after Santana's exit.

In the last few years the Indians signed these key players to contract extensions: Jose Ramirez, Corey Kluber, Jason Kipnis, Yan Gomes, Carlos Carrasco, Josh Tomlin and Roberto Perez.

The Indians have won more games than any other American League team in the last five seasons. They have won about everything you can win -- except a World Series.

FEELING BETTER

That's what I was thinking while watching Friday's game. This team could be special.

The game-winning hit came off the bat of Michael Brantley -- a smart two-run, bases-loaded single in the bottom of the first inning.

In his first at bat of the season, Brantley reminded everyone why the Indians were willing to pick up his \$12 million option despite his major off-season ankle surgery.

Brantley is a composed, clutch hitter. For his career, he's a .325 hitter with runners in scoring position.

"The heart and soul of the team," said Francona. "He does everything the way you're supposed to do it."

As for Brantley making a comeback for the third straight year after an injury?

"He's an easy guy to bet on," said Francona.

WIND AND WINNING

After a shaky first inning where he allowed two runs, Tribe starter Carlos Carrasco pitched like Carlos Carrasco. He put up five scoreless innings.

Francona said Carrasco pitched with a leg cramp in the sixth inning, not telling anyone until he returned to the dugout. It was nice to see that opening day grit from the Tribe's righthander.

Then came the bullpen to protect a 3-2 lead over the final three innings.

Nick Goody.

Andrew Miller.

Cody Allen.

Three innings up, three innings down. Five of the nine outs were strikeouts.

A few baserunners. Some quick heartbeats. Three saved wild pitches by catcher Yan Gomes in the ninth inning, blocking pitches in the dirt.

"Gomer sacrificed about any part of his body (to block those pitches)," said Francona.

But on a sweat-sock gray afternoon with 25-mph wind gusts and 40-degree temperatures, the Indians took that lead in the bottom of the first inning and then put the game on ice.

SENSE OF URGENCY

Feeling anxious about the Tribe's World Series timeline closing was almost impossible to imagine six years ago on opening day.

From 2009-12, the Indians had averaged 92 losses.

Since Francona arrived in 2013, they've averaged 92 victories.

"I remember my first press conference," said Francona before the home opener. "I said, 'If you're an Indians fan, I want you to be proud to be an Indians fan.'"

This season should be more of the same.

"We have high expectations and I think the fans do, too," said Francona.

Certainly that was the mood Friday, especially as the sellout crowd of 34,720 departed singing CLEVELAND ROCKS ... CLEVELAND ROCKS as they left the ballpark.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 04.07.2018

Cleveland home opener was a cold day in heaven as Tribe wins: Michael K. McIntyre

By Michael K. McIntyre

CLEVELAND, Ohio - It was the kind of day where you might have been tempted to say "let's play two!"

And by that you'd mean two innings of the Indians home opener against the Kansas City Royals, played in late afternoon Friday under a cloud deck with wind in full whip.

And then get inside where it's warm and leave baseball for another day, a blue-sky day, when a hot dog doesn't double as a hand warmer and hot chocolate doesn't sound better than a cold beer.

But this is Cleveland. We know our weather. We shovel snow here in April. We laugh at 41 degrees and a 22 miles-per-hour wind. We've sat through sub-zero Browns games where we know deep inside there's no warmth coming by way of a win.

Staying warm meant coming prepared. This ain't our first rodeo.

"Long Johns, long sleeve shirt, coat, two blankets . . ." said Luann Lambert, 52, of Painesville, as she described her attire and the contents of her oversized reusable shopping bag.

Next to her in section 533 was Julie Seaman, 54, of Mentor and Holly Howle, 62, of Madison, each carrying their own huge bag filled with supplies. They could have survived being stranded in the Arctic Circle.

"I have three blankets and two winter coats . . ." said Seaman.

"And I have three layers on the bottom of me and four on top," said Howle.

There were plenty of tissues and extra pairs of gloves and enough hand warmers to keep every palm in the section sweaty.

Everybody talked about the wind. Without that, the day would have felt balmy by Cleveland standards. Still, they said, it wasn't anything like the "snow-out" of 2007, where they shivered through four-plus innings of flurries before umpires canceled the game and, eventually, the entire series.

A lot of fans seemed to be banking on alcohol to keep them warm. "When you drink alcohol," said Seaman, "it opens the capillaries and releases the heat! It makes you colder!"

Of course, it also makes you need to use the restroom and the lines proved alcohol was a popular strategy. It may not have been a terrible play. The bathrooms were warm.

Up in Section 416, Bob Klinger, 70, of Mentor and his wife Judith, 62, wore what they had worn the night before. If that makes it sound like they were underdressed, consider that the night before they attended the Lake County Captains home opener, shivering to a 9th inning, walk-off win. They agreed winning makes you warmer.

Judith wore what Bob called her "Elmer Fudd hat" with the Captains logo and "double Long Johns." Bob layered on himself a shopping spree's worth of Tribe gear, including a winter jacket. "I could have my own team shop with all of the gear I have," he said. "This is a few pieces of it."

The game was a sellout with an official attendance of 34,720. But there were plenty of empty seats from those who couldn't brave the chill.

Ushers were warning people to stay out of the tunnels. Walking through the tunnel from section 421 to the concourse, the wind pushed so hard it felt like it would carry you over the players' parking lot, over Carnegie Avenue and right on to the Innerbelt.

It was windy enough to dislodge Michele Sommerfelt's hotdog from its wrapper in the upper deck. By the time she got to her seat, she noticed the empty foil. Not like she could have caught it if she'd seen it happening. She wasn't exactly nimble wearing seven layers.

"I look like Ralphie's brother from 'A Christmas Story,'" she said, referring to Randy from the iconic film, the kid who was so bundled he couldn't get up when he fell.

Perhaps Kyle Haire, 26, of Independence had the whole thing figured out. He wore a ballcap and a t-shirt topped by a sweater buttoned only at the bottom. No scarf. No gloves. No blanket.

Of course he was standing inside the Lexus Home Plate Club, looking out an open window just to the third base side of home plate.

"I'm still kind of outside," he said. "I see people walking by all bundled up and I'm like man, I am so glad I'm here. In fact, it's getting a little warm with all these people in here."

By game's end, after Carlos Carrasco and Andrew Miller had pitched out of jams and Cody Allen slammed the door, the Tribe offered a warming 3-2 win.

Too bad we couldn't play two.

Carlos Carrasco goes six innings, Michael Brantley gets big hit as Indians beat Royals, 3-2, in home opener

By Paul Hoynes,

CLEVELAND, Ohio - There was no snow on the ground, but if there was it would have been cold enough to make snowballs. That was appropriate because Carlos Carrasco did not let the first inning snowball on him Friday at Progressive Field.

Carrasco, getting used to the April chill in the home opener, allowed two runs in the first inning on a ground ball and a broken-bat single. He held the Royals scoreless over the next five innings as the Indians came from behind to win their home opener, 3-2, at Progressive Field.

In his first start of the season on March 31, Carrasco let a couple of innings get away from him against Seattle, but still came away with a win. It was a problem that bothered him late in spring training as well.

After Jon Jay and Whit Merrifield opened the game with a single and double to put runners on second and third, Jay scored on a ground out by Mike Moustakas. Lucas Dudas followed with a broken bat single to right to make it 2-0. But shortstop Francisco Lindor turned a ground ball by Cheslor Cuthbert into an inning-ending double play.

"When something like that happens, you want to stop it right there," Carrasco said. "I didn't want it to go so far as it did in my last start. If they got two runs, I wanted to stop it right there."

Carlos Carrasco on pitching out of jams in first and sixth innings vs KC

From there Carrasco (2-0, 5.40) retired 12 straight before pitching himself into and out of a bases-loaded jam in the sixth. Carrasco, working with a 3-2 lead, intentionally walked Moustakas to load the bases with one out. Then he threw a called third strike past Dudas and retired Cuthbert on a liner to left.

"I thought Carlos did a real good job of settling in," said manager Terry Francona. "And in his last inning, he had cramp in his calf and we didn't know. We were going to go to take him out (after the sixth) anyway.

"He was pitching through an intentional walk (in the sixth inning), bad conditions, good hitters and he did a terrific job."

Some of Carrasco's success may have had something to do with muscle memory left over from last year's home opener. Carrasco allowed one run on four hits in seven innings. He was not involved in the decision as the Indians beat the White Sox, 2-1, in 10 innings.

The guy who was involved in the decision, Michael Brantley, was involved in Friday's outcome as well. Last year Brantley's walk-off double gave the Indians the win. Friday, it was his first-pitch, two-run single that provided a 3-2 lead in the first inning that the Indians never lost.

Lefty Danny Duffy, like Carrasco, had trouble finding the strike zone in the first inning. He walked Lindor and Jason Kipnis to start the game. Jose Ramirez bounced a single through the middle - just his second hit of the season - to score Lindor and make it 2-1.

Duffy (1-1, 7.45) walked Edwin Encarnacion to load the bases and Brantley sent a soft single into right field to score Kipnis and Ramirez for the lead. Duffy had limited left-handers to a .170 (37-for-212) batting average since the start of the 2016 season. Brantley came into the game hitting .320 (8-for-25) against Duffy.

Brantley was activated before the game after opening the season on the disabled list. He told reporters before the game that he was so excited about Friday's start that he didn't sleep Thursday night.

"Usually I'm going to take some pitches and make sure he gets in the zone," said Brantley. "But for myself, personally, I've had a lot of at-bats against Duffy and I was just trying to get a fastball and put a good swing on it.

"I had some nervous jitters. It was my first at-bat of the year. I was excited. He made a great pitch and I was able to get it out over second base. I'll take it all day."

Brantley on his game-winning hit against Duffy in the 1st inning

The Indians' search for a bridge builder to connect the starters to the late-inning relievers touched on another candidate Friday. Nick Goody pitched a scoreless seventh inning to bring Andrew Miller into the game.

Miller made things interesting in the eighth with a walk to Jay and a single to Merrifield to start the inning. He struck out the next three batters.

"Sometimes Andrew is his best reliever," said Francona.

Allen pitched a scoreless ninth for his second save with Lindor starting a 6-4-3 double play to end it.

What it means

Carrasco was the first Indians pitcher to start consecutive home openers since Roberto Hernandez in 2010 and 2011. Hernandez was known as Fausto Carmona during that period of his career.

The pitches

Duffy threw 99 pitches, 54 (55 percent) for strikes. Carrasco threw 92 pitches, 64 (70 percent) for strikes.

Thanks for coming

The Royals and Indians drew a sellout crowd of 34,720 fans to Progressive Field on Friday. First pitch was at 4:12 p.m. with a temperature of 41 degrees and strong winds.

Next

Trevor Bauer (0-0, 3.60) will face Kansas City's Ian Kennedy (0-0, 1.50) on Saturday at 4:10 p.m. at Progressive Field. SportsTime Ohio, WTAM/1100 and WMMS/FM 100.7 will carry the game.

Bauer made his 2018 debut against the Mariners on April 1. He allowed two runs in five innings, but was not charged with the Tribe's 5-4 loss. Bauer is 2-3 with a 3.36 ERA against the Royals in 10 starts.

Kennedy is making his second start Saturday after allowing one run in six innings in a no-decision against the White Sox. He is 2-5 with a 5.90 ERA in 10 starts against the Indians.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 04.07.2018

Michael Brantley spends sleepless night before Cleveland Indians' home opener

By Paul Hoynes,

CLEVELAND, Ohio - When Michael Brantley passed his final test in Goodyear, Ariz., playing consecutive nine-inning minor league games on Monday and Tuesday, manager Terry Francona knew he'd be in the starting lineup for Friday's home opener against the Royals.

But he wanted to meet with Brantley and the team's medical staff one more time just to make sure. They talked on Thursday's off day after the Indians returned from a six-game West Coast trip to open the season. That's when he told Brantley he'd be activated and start in left field on Friday.

How did Brantley, who has missed 223 regular-season games over the last two years because of injuries, react?

Francona on Michael Brantley: "He means so much"

"Last night, I couldn't sleep," Brantley told reporters before Friday's game. "Absolutely. I enjoy this game. I couldn't sleep last night. I'm nervous right now speaking to you guys. I've got that nervous energy. It's fun. It's exciting.

"Playing the home opener in front of you fans is something you look for. You work all offseason to get to this moment. And to be able to do it, and hear the crowd roar when they hear your name, it's special. You just can't forget it. These are special memories."

Francona was surprised when told about Brantley not being able to sleep on the eve of the home opener after he found out he'd be playing.

"Really?" said Francona. "It doesn't matter how old you are, opening days are just ... I wish I could explain it better. I'm guessing if I did drugs it be somewhat like that. It feels good. It's exciting and you know it's nerve-racking. It's a pretty cool feeling."

Brantley, who batted fifth in Friday's lineup, won't be force fed into the lineup. Francona said he'd probably play two out of every three games for a while.

"The best was to describe it is a common sense schedule," said Francona. "James (Quinlan, head athletic trainer) has given us some pointers. You're not going to see him play four or five games in a row.

"He'll probably play two out of three to start for the first week. We'll see how it goes."

Brantley, as long as he can stay on the field, gives Francona an outfielder he can rely on every day once he shows his ankle is sound. He hits lefties and righties and was a Gold Glove-caliber defender before undergoing two operations on his right shoulder and one on his ankle from 2015 through 2017.

"You wind him up, let him go and that means you can maybe mix and match in other positions or do some other things because that position is solidified," said Francona.

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Cleveland Indians fans sound off about Chief Wahoo before 2018 home opener

By Emily Bamforth,

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- As the crowd swelled in the hours before the Cleveland Indians' home opener at Progressive Field, it became clear Chief Wahoo isn't going anywhere -- at least in the stands.

It's been three months since the team announced its plan to remove the controversial mascot from its uniforms after the 2018 season. But from "Keep the Chief" shirts to Chief Wahoo jackets, a majority of the Tribe fans lined up at the gates on Friday seemed to have the logo somewhere on their attire.

"I can see everyone's opinion about it, but just breaking that tradition with the Indians for so long, that's going to hurt," said Mike Newton, who wore a Chief Wahoo shirt to the game. Fans interjected "Wahoo only" and "Go Wahoo" as cleveland.com interviewed Nelson on Prospect Avenue.

Chief Wahoo first appeared more than 75 years ago and has been the center of heated debate ever since. Protestors stand outside the gates each year, asserting the logo misrepresents Native American culture and furthers discrimination.

For lifelong Indians fans, though, Wahoo can be synonymous with the team.

"I can understand why people want to have him removed. If I was (Native American) how would I feel? I have respect for that," Youngstown resident John Fonda said. "I'll still wear my Wahoo stuff if I have it. I hope that doesn't offend too many people. But yeah, I'll miss him."

The team has been scaling back its use of the logo for years. It removed Wahoo from its spring training complex in 2009, and announced the "Block C" as its new primary logo before the 2016 season.

Fans began to speculate when Wahoo would be removed from the team's jerseys and caps, especially in the wake of a high-profile lawsuit filed in Canada during the 2016 playoffs and the national scrutiny that came when the Indians advanced to the World Series.

Progressive Field stores will still sell Wahoo merchandise after the team discontinues use of the logo on its uniforms.

Ramee Marinelli, of Warren, thinks Wahoo was removed because the Indians were trying to lure the All-Star Game, which the team will host it in 2019. It'll be the first All-Star Game held in Cleveland since 1997.

"If they're going to do that, they need to do that to a lot of other teams... the Atlanta Braves, the Washington Redskins," she said. "I just think it was all due to money."

Mark Blasinsky, of North Royalton, wore a hat with a throwback Chief Wahoo logo as he tailgated in a parking lot next to the stadium. He understand why some people find the logo offensive, but he views it as part of being a Tribe fan, he said.

"I wish they would understand the pride the community feels for what Chief Wahoo represents," Blasinsky said. "It represents the team and it's a team that went through a lot of tough times down at the old Municipal Stadium. It's all a part of what the community means to one another."

A Baldwin Wallace University poll found that just under half of respondents said Native American mascots are not disrespectful. Of the 528 polled, 71 percent said the Chief Wahoo logo represented Cleveland, and 62 percent said it made them proud of the Indians.

Deanna Langer, from Cleveland, didn't know that Chief Wahoo will no longer be on the team's uniforms after the 2018 season. She said she doesn't mind it's being phased out.

"I don't really think it's that big of a deal," she said. "I think it's kind of progressive and I think it's a good thing. I'm also younger and I feel like my generation kind of thinks that way anyways. ... I'm not attached to it. I'm more attached to the team."

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Francisco Lindor's trick to dealing with a frigid home opener? Don't think about it

By Joe Noga,

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Francisco Lindor's approach to dealing with cold temperatures on opening day at Progressive Field is simple: keep moving and do your best to keep your mind on something else.

"You've got to continue to move and get the blood flowing, and after that, it's more mental," Lindor said Friday. "Cleveland (weather) ain't joking."

It was almost one year ago when Lindor's blood was flowing as he raced around the bases to score the game-winning run on Michael Brantley's walk-off RBI double in Cleveland's chilly 2-1 home opener win against the White Sox.

With Brantley returning to the Tribe lineup today, and Carlos Carrasco on the mound just like he was last year, the table could be set for Lindor and the Indians to give fans another dramatic finish to kick off the home portion of the 2018 schedule.

Brantley's advice for taking the bite out of a frigid home opener? Dress in layers and barrel up the ball.

"Hit it on the barrel, good things happen," Brantley said. "Hit it on the end, yeah, it's going to be a little bit of a sting."

Lindor said moments like his mad dash last year are special, particularly early in the season, because in a way they validate all of effort that goes into offseason preparation.

"Once you get to opening day and to the regular season, you see all the work you've put in and you see it paying off," Lindor said. "It's always fun seeing the crowd go crazy as we win the game and celebrating and hearing that 'Cleveland Rocks' song. It's really cool and it makes me feel like I'm home."

This offseason, Lindor focused on improving his defense, particularly his footwork and paying attention to little details like paying attention during every pitch.

"At least 98 percent is 'be on it,' be on my toes, be always prepared," he said. "Wanting the ball being hit to me and focusing on getting that out."

Meanwhile, Lindor is off to a slow start at the plate by his standards. The two-time All-Star shortstop is hitting .192 with five hits and seven strikeouts in 26 at-bats through the first six games.

Last year, Lindor opened the year on fire, blasting three home runs in his first six games. He hit .292 while scoring five runs and driving in seven in 24 at-bats.

But don't expect Lindor to put any extra pressure on himself or his teammates this early in the season.

"It doesn't matter what we did last year, we've got to come back here this year and try to win it," he said. "It's what we do on a daily basis. It's what every team is trying to do. Whether it's this year, next year or years to come, every year it's the same mentality. Do your best and try to win and make it to the postseason. Once you're in the postseason, anything can happen."

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Cleveland Indians activate Michael Brantley; option Tyler Naquin to Class AAA Columbus

By Paul Hoynes

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The Indians activated Michael Brantley from the disabled list in time for Friday's home opener against the Royals. To make room for Brantley on the 25-man roster, Tyler Naquin was optioned to Class AAA Columbus.

The Tribe opened the season with a six-game West Coast trip while Brantley was going through the final stages of his rehab from October surgery on his right ankle. They went 2-4 on the trip.

Brantley played in three Cactus League game this spring, hitting .400 (4-for-10) with one homer and two RBI. He also played in several minor-league games this spring.

Manager Terry Francona said Brantley will be eased into the lineup. Look for right-handed hitters Rajai Davis or Brandon Guyer to platoon with him until he's ready to play regularly.

In the last two years, Brantley has played 101 games (90 in 2017, 11 in 2016) because of shoulder and ankle injuries.

Naquin appeared in five of the Tribe's first six games. He hit .167 (2-for-12) with one homer and two RBI.

In November the Indians exercised Brantley's club option for \$12 million. He can be a free agent at the end of this season.

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Michael Brantley activated from DL, but plans are for him to take it slowly as he continues to come back from ankle surgery

Chris Assenheimer ByChris Assenheimer | The Chronicle-TelegramPublished on April 6, 2018 | Updated 2:25 a. m.

CLEVELAND — As expected, the Indians activated left fielder Michael Brantley from the disabled list prior to the home opener Friday, adding a pivotal piece to the clubhouse and an All-Star-caliber player when he's healthy.

Outfielder Tyler Naquin was optioned to Triple-A Columbus to clear room for Brantley on the 25-man roster.

Brantley was in the lineup against the Royals, playing left and batting fifth, but is not expected to play on a regular basis at least from the start.

"I think the best word is the common-sense schedule," manager Terry Francona said. "We're going to use common sense probably for the first week. His availability off the bench on days he doesn't play, we'll see how it goes. If it is two out of three (games), it's worth having him. He means so much to what we're doing. When he's playing, it's a position you don't mess with. You wind him up, let him go and it means you can maybe mix and match at other positions and do some other things because that position is solidified. It's really nice to have him back.

"Nobody has a crystal ball, you don't know who's going to get hits, but just his being here, what he means to everybody, will really be helpful. Having him back is really important. He's such a good teammate, such a good competitor that it will be a lift for everybody, myself included."

"(I'm going to) listen to my body. Understand what it took to get here — the lumps and bumps I took along the way," said Brantley, who made the All-Star team last year before a second-half ankle injury virtually ended his season and required surgery in October. "And just understand where I'm at. Just really be smart about it. I know Tito and the training staff already have a plan kind of mapped out. We're going to sit down and go over it one day at a time and go from there."

Brantley, who has been limited to 101 games over the past two years, didn't make his debut until late in the exhibition season, but he was able to hit shortly after arriving at training camp. It was beneficial and expedited his return.

"It was very important, just because getting in the swing reps, getting in — your body — just kind of twisting and moving in that motion, and to be able to work on your swing to kind of perfect my craft," said the career .292 hitter over seven-plus seasons. "I like to come into spring training every year 100 percent ready to go, playing nine innings and hitting full. But, at the same time, this offseason and the previous offseason, I had to work towards that. Being able to hit the whole time during spring, I really liked where my swing was at. I got to develop and kind of do my system and my routine consistently throughout spring, which I think will help me out throughout the entire season."

Bullpen bit

Francona said the season-opening road trip did little to decide who would fill the seventh-inning relief role in place of departed right-hander Bryan Shaw.

"We wanted the guys to have consistency in their appearances and their innings and we certainly got that and then some with the extra innings (Wednesday)," Francona said. "I think it's probably going to be how we feel, where we are in the lineup, where we are with guys' rest, things like that. With a seven-man bullpen, you don't want to overuse guys, especially the first two weeks of the year. Ideally, you'd like to see guys have an even workload across the board."

Lofty goals

Season ticket sales are up substantially, as Indians fans greet another year with high expectations for a team that has qualified for the postseason two straight years, coming a win shy of its first World Series title since 1948 in 2016.

"When I came here, I remember the first press conference, I said, 'If you're an Indians fan, I want you to be proud to be an Indians fan.' And I think they certainly can do that," said Francona, who has guided Cleveland to three playoff trips in five seasons and the most wins in the American League over the span. "We have high expectations and I think the fans do, too. There's nothing wrong with that. As the players and myself go, there's a process to get there. For the fans, it's show up and enjoy yourself and hope your team wins. But I hope they do have high expectations. We do, too, and they should.

"If I was a fan watching this team, this is an easy team to like. They're good guys, they try hard, they give you an honest day's effort. It's an easy team to kind of latch onto."

Hailing the King

Shortstop Francisco Lindor, one of Cleveland's biggest sports stars, has enjoyed watching the city's biggest one in the Cavaliers' LeBron James.

"I see different levels of play," Lindor said of James. "He'll go from being good to all of the sudden being really good to then now all of the sudden stepping his foot on the gas and it's like, 'Good luck, everybody.' It's fun to watch. He's one of the greatest athletes to ever live and he's one of the best basketball players ever. The stuff he's doing on the court is special.

"He's the best. Watching him perform and watching how he carries his team, how he carries the city, it's amazing."

Lindor said he didn't play basketball growing up in Clermont, Fla.

"I was too short (5-foot-11)," he said. "My dad never let me play basketball. I always played baseball, baseball ... baseball was the only sport I played. It's worked out, so."

The Big EE

Edwin Encarnacion homered in his first game as an Indian last year, but it took him another 13 games to hit his second.

Cleveland's cleanup hitter is on a faster pace this season, entering Friday with three homers in six games, including two in a 5-4 loss to Seattle on Sunday.

Encarnacion, the major league-leader in homers (231) and RBIs (550) from 2012-17, joined Lonnie Chisenhall as the only Indians to reach base safely in each of the first six games of the season.

It is the first time a Cleveland duo has accomplished as much since Brantley, Jason Kipnis and Carlos Santana in 2014.

Roundin' third

The Indians entered their 118th home opener — 25th at Jacobs/Progressive Field — owning a 60-57 record.

** Cleveland posted the second-best home record (49-32) in the American League last year, going 28-8 at Progressive Field after the All-Star break.

** Carlos Carrasco is the first Cleveland pitcher to start consecutive home openers since Roberto Hernandez (Fausto Carmona) in 2010-11.

Michael Brantley, fresh off the DL, delivers in his first at-bat of the season to lead the Indians past the Royals in their home opener
Chris Assenheimer ByChris Assenheimer | The Chronicle-TelegramPublished on April 6, 2018 | Updated 2:52 a. m.

CLEVELAND — Prior to the home opener Friday, manager Terry Francona spoke of how important it was to have Michael Brantley back in the fold after the All-Star left fielder was activated from the disabled list earlier that morning.

Then Brantley went out and showed the sellout crowd of 34,720 fans at Progressive Field and the Kansas City Royals what Tito was talking about.

In his first at-bat of the season, and on the first pitch he saw in the first inning, Brantley flared a two-run single into right-center field to drive in what turned out to be the game-winning run in a 3-2 victory.

It was the second straight time Brantley played hero in the home opener. His walk-off double in the 10th inning gave the Indians a 2-1 win over the White Sox last year.

"He didn't scald it, but he stays on the ball with a runner on third and less than two outs so well that he he gets rewarded for hits like that because he doesn't roll over and hit that ball to second on a double-play ball," Francona said of Brantley, who delivered with the bases loaded and no outs to give the Indians just their third win in their last 10 home openers. "He's one of the best I've ever seen at that.

"He's tremendous for our team. He's an easy guy to bet on. I could give you pages and pages of why. He's the heart and soul of our team. He does everything the way you're supposed to."

Kansas City left-hander Danny Duffy was struggling with location, walking three of the first four batters he faced, before Brantley went with an unorthodox approach.

"Usually it's take some pitches and make sure he gets in the zone but for myself, personally, I had a lot of at-bats against Duffy in the past and I was just trying to get a fastball early and trying to put a good swing on it," Brantley said. "I had some nervous jitters in my first AB of the year. I was excited. He made a great pitch. I was just able to get enough of it to get it over second base. I'll take it all day."

Offense was at a minimum on a cold and windy afternoon in Cleveland, especially for the Indians, who after struggling at the plate for much of their season-opening road trip, managed only four hits to the Royals' seven.

Both starting pitchers, Duffy and Carlos Carrasco, worked similar outings, each struggling in the first inning before settling in to offer up quality efforts.

Carrasco bounced back from a disappointing season debut, allowing two runs in the opening inning before holding KC scoreless the rest of the way.

After the Indians took the lead, Carrasco retired 12 straight.

"I thought he did a good job of settling down," Francona said. "It wasn't easy. He's pitching through an intentional walk, bad conditions, good hitters, and he did a terrific job."

So did Cleveland relievers Nick Goody, Andrew Miller and Cody Allen, who allowed two hits and two walks, while striking out five over the final three innings.

There were some anxious moments for Miller, who put the go-ahead run on first with no outs after allowing the first two hitters he faced to reach on a walk and single.

But the left-hander showed why he is one of the game's best by striking out the next three in succession to end the threat.

"Like he's his own reliever," Francona said of Miller. "Once he has to start attacking, it's like he gets better. That's a good feeling. Not too often you look up and it's first and second, and you're just not too sure they're going to score. A lot of times, that's not a good recipe, but with him you're like, 'I think we're going to be OK.'"

"I've been watching him for a few years now. He's one of the best relievers in the game," Brantley said. "I'll say it. He doesn't want to brag about himself, but I will. We have pure confidence every time he comes in. He's a competitor. He loves going out there and competing and I'm glad he's on our team."

The same goes for the oft-injured Brantley, whom the Indians are glad to have back on the roster. They're hoping he remains for the long haul after playing without him for much of the past two seasons.

"It'd be nice if we just have him every day for the rest of the way," Miller said. "That's the big goal, because we know he can hit. We know he can play. He's a big part of this lineup. You put him in there and he's a daily guy that you just count on to get big hits."

"It's interesting, because Duffy was obviously having a little bit of trouble, and then (Brantley) came out and swung at the first pitch. But, he drove in two, so that's the game maker. Obviously, it's nice to have him back and I'm happy for him to get that moment."

Scott Petrak: Carlos 'Cookie' Carrasco proving he's one tasty second ace

CLEVELAND — Carlos Carrasco gave up a soft single to start the game. Then a solid double to right field.

After a broken-bat single by Lucas Duda, the Indians trailed by two runs four batters into the home opener.

Nothing to see here.

Or worry about.

Carrasco isn't the young, inconsistent, hard-to-trust flamethrower of two or three years ago. He's a top-of-the-rotation guy in perhaps the top rotation in the majors.

He proved that yet again Friday, putting aside the shaky start to begin the home schedule in style.

Indians 3, Royals 2.

Carrasco (2-0, 5.40 ERA) got Cheslor Cuthbert to ground into a double play to get out of the first. That started a string of 14 straight outs.

He stopped trying to be too fine with his pitches.

"I just figured out after that, just go normal, attack the hitter and that's what I did," Carrasco said. "Just two runs and stop 'em like that."

"I thought he did a good job of settling down," manager Terry Francona said. "Because it wasn't easy."

The hitters had it worse, but the elements made life difficult for the pitchers. Gripping the ball, getting it to break like it does in reasonable temperatures and maintaining proper mechanics in a buffeting wind were problems.

But Carrasco didn't allow another runner until the sixth. Again, he rose above the trouble.

Two singles, a sacrifice bunt and an intentional walk loaded the bases with one out. He struck out Duda looking, then got Cuthbert to fly out to Michael Brantley in left field.

"Pitching through the intentional walk, bad conditions, good hitters, and he did a terrific job," Francona said.

Carrasco fought through a cramp in his calf over the final 10 pitches to keep his team in front in a game in which every run was critical. The final delivery was a 3-2 fastball.

"I'm glad we did it," Carrasco said of the pitch selection.

He was done for the day. He went six innings, allowing two earned runs on five hits. He struck out four and the only walk was intentional as he threw 64 strikes in 92 pitches.

"'Cookie' did his job," Brantley said.

Carrasco, 31, is much more consistent and mature than even two years ago. He seems able to stay out of his head and get out of his own way. Adversity doesn't sink him.

That was obvious in the first and sixth innings Friday. And throughout last season when he went 18-6 with a 3.29 ERA and finished fourth in the Cy Young voting.

Ace Corey Kluber and his two Cy Youngs in four seasons cast long shadows. But the Indians wouldn't be the prohibitive favorite to win the AL Central without a dominant No. 2 in Carrasco.

Or without a bullpen featuring Andrew Miller and Cody Allen at the back end. Each pitched a scoreless inning to close out the victory.

It opened with Carrasco, who was looking for a strong performance after a rough first start in which he got the win against Seattle but allowed five earned runs in 5 2/3 innings.

On a day better suited for sitting in front of a fire with hot chocolate and desserts shaped like wreaths, trees, reindeer and gingerbread men, "Cookie" didn't crumble.

He sharpened his concentration, tweaked his approach and let his talent take over. Just like a second ace is supposed to do.

A happy home opener to all, and to all a good night. Carrasco made sure of that.

Jim Ingraham: When it comes to home openers, tingles matter more than singles

Jim Ingraham | The Chronicle-Telegram Published on April 7, 2018 | Updated 2:58 a. m.

Ah, yes. Opening Day. Hope springs eternal. Take me out to the ballgame, because the boys of summer are back — except for Tyler "Inside-The-Park" Naquin, who was optioned to Columbus prior to Friday's game.

It doesn't get much better than Opening Day, even if your team lost four of its first six games — all on the road.

Because this is different. This was the Indians' home opener, in which the home team comes home, and opens.

In this case, it's the team with the longest championship drought in the sport. The team that traditionally puts the pomp back in the pomp and circumstance of Opening Day by unfurling an American Flag big enough to cover the state of Rhode Island — and still have room for the dreams of Indians fans.

If you don't get a case of the tingles on Opening Day, you're either not AT Opening Day, or you're not alive. Because Opening Day is like ... well ... it's like ... Tito, what do you think?

"It doesn't matter how old you are," Indians manager Terry Francona said.

"Opening Days are just ... it's ... I wish I could explain it better. I'm guessing if I did drugs, it would be somewhat like that. It's kind of like, it feels good. It's exciting. And you know it's nerve-racking. It's a pretty cool feeling."

Exactly.

Play ball!

On Opening Day, the Indians returned to the scene of the crying. Prior to Friday, the last time the local nine graced the local greensward was that dismal October night six months ago when the 102-win Indians saw their magical season go up in smoke.

It was a tragically truncated postseason in which the Indians took a 2-0 lead in the Division Series, one win from advancing to the American League Championship Series, only to get Yankee Doodle Dandied.

But that was then, and Friday was the frigid now. It's the start of Year 6 in the reign of Pope Tito II, the manager with World Series chops, yearning to transform his chumps into champs.

"We have high expectations, and the fans do to — and they should," said His Titoship. "This is an easy team to like. Good guys. They try hard. They give an honest day's effort."

Yeah, but can they win a World Series?

Their window of opportunity is yawning wider than it's yawned since that mid-1990s star-laden powerhouse plowed its way into five consecutive postseasons, but failed to win the last game every time.

On Friday, for the home opener, another Opening Day sellout showed up at Progressive Field. They came. They saw. They shivered.

Francona called it "horrendous conditions."

The temperature was in the mid-40s, the wind chill in the mid-30s and the Indians' hitters are now in the mid-.150s. The team batting average is an icy .157, after the Indians somehow managed to pull out a 3-2 victory despite being four-hit by two Kansas City pitchers, two of whom you've never heard of.

The Indians came into the game dead last in the American League in hitting, with a .161 average. Nine innings, 30 at-bats and four hits later it had plunged to .157. That's 103 points below their team batting average of .263 last year, which was the best of any American League team outside the Houston city limits.

Friday the Indians scored three runs on two hits in the first inning, and then were held scoreless on two hits over the last seven innings, during which they hit .080 (2-for-25).

Their hitting was as horrendous as the weather. Was it horrendous BECAUSE of the weather?

Well, the weather didn't help.

"That's the way it is sometimes here in April," Francona said.

But it's not like that in California, and the Indians didn't hit out there, either. In losing two of three games to the Angels in Anaheim, where the average gametime temperature was 64 degrees, the Indians scored just 10 runs and hit .139.

Is the lack of hitting a Yankee Doodle hangover?

In their last 12 games — five vs. the Yankees in the last year's Division Series and the first seven this year — Francisco Lindor is hitting .149, Jason Kipnis .167 and Jose Ramirez .087.

Is it too early to hit the panic button? Yes. Is it too early to look around for the button? Yes again.

The Indians will eventually hit. Their lineup is filled with hitters who have a track record of hitting. Hitters hit. It's what they do. The Indians will hit again.

Until then, it's ugly. But first place won't disappear on them. The non-Josh Tomlin sector of the pitching staff looks fine, and the Indians' defense has been perfect: seven games, no errors.

So look at it this way: with a .157 team batting average, the Indians are still 3-4.

That's not horrendous.

Manager Terry Francona: 'I want you to be proud to be an Indians fan'

By Jeff Schudel, The News-Herald & The Morning Journal

Time flies when you're having fun, according to the cliché. And when the baseball team you follow has been successful, it flies by even faster.

The Indians on April 6 were getting ready for their sixth home opener under manager Terry Francona. He was asked in a pregame news conference what advice he had for fans who a couple hours later would pack Progressive Field.

"Stay warm," Francona said while grinning.

Anything else?

"This is my sixth year, now; time kind of goes fast," Francona said. "I remember the first press conference. I said 'If you're an Indians fan, I want you to be proud to be an Indians fan.' They certainly can do that.

"We have high expectations, and I think the fans do, too. There's nothing wrong with that. As the players and myself go, there's a process to get there. For the fans it's show up, enjoy yourself and hope your team wins."

The Indians made it to the World Series in 2016, won 102 games last year and have essentially the same team back for another postseason run. Their record of 454-354 is the best in the American League over the last five years.

"This is an easy team to like," Francona said. "They're good guys. They try hard. They give you an honest day's effort. It's an easy team to kind of latch onto."

The Indians carry a 2-4 record into the game with the Kansas City Royals at Progressive Field. No one in the Indians clubhouse is concerned about the slow start. Instead, they were excited for another home opener. It is only the second for shortstop Francisco Lindor, but the 24-year-old native of Puerto Rico says the home opener will never grow old.

"I'm very excited," Lindor said. "It's always fun playing at home. Playing the first home game is cool."

"We're going to continue to compete and have fun and see what happens. Me personally, I want to be the best player I can be in every aspect of the game to help my team win. I want to become a better defensive player and score as many runs as I can to help my team."

By contrast, Francona has been in 18 home openers as a manager with the Phillies, Red Sox and Twins after eight seasons as a player. Francona turns 59 later this month. Openers don't get old for him, either.

"It doesn't matter how old you are," Francona said. "Opening day is, I mean, it's just — I wish I could explain it better. I'm guessing if I did drugs it would be somewhat like that because it feels good."

"It's exciting and it's nerve-wracking. It's a pretty cool feeling."

It must be a pretty cool feeling for fans, too. The game April 6 was the 26th consecutive home opener to sell out for the Indians.

Perseverance finally pays off for Indians' Michael Brantley | Jeff Schudel

By Jeff Schudel, The News-Herald & The Morning Journal

Perhaps the most amazing part of the Indians making it to the World Series in 2016 is they got there without Michael Brantley. They won 102 games last season and were without their All-Star left fielder for 72 of them.

The first seven games of 2018 started in familiar fashion. Brantley was on the disabled list, this time rehabbing from right ankle surgery, but he was activated April 6 and started in left field against the Royals in the home opener at Progressive Field.

Francisco Lindor, Jose Ramirez, Edwin Encarnacion and Jason Kipnis are all important everyday players for the Indians, but the one most capable of delivering a clutch hit when the Tribe needs one most is 30-year-old Brantley. The Indians think so much of him, they picked up his \$12 million option for 2018 less than three weeks after his ankle surgery.

"It means a lot (to me)," Brantley said, "but it's also a testament of what I do in the locker room to be the best teammate I can and what I do on the field when I'm available."

"I try to work as hard as I can to be there for my teammates. There's nowhere else I want to be. We have some unfinished business here in this locker room, and I'd love to get it done."

Brantley is the model of consistency at the plate and in the field when healthy. He played 156 games in 2014, posted a .327 batting average, homered 20 times and drove in 97 runs. A sore back bothered him in 2015 and he still managed to play 137 games, hit .310, homered 15 times and knock in 84 runs.

Manager Terry Francona might have to juggle his outfield every third day so he doesn't tax Brantley's ankle in the beginning of the season, but that is an issue he will deal with gladly, because even then Brantley can pinch-hit.

"If it is two out of three (games), it's worth it, because he means so much to what we're doing," Francona said. "When he's playing, it's a position you don't mess with. Wind him up and let him go. It means you can mix and match at other positions. It's really nice to have him back."

"Nobody has a crystal ball. You don't know who's going to get hits, but just his being here and what he means to everybody will really be helpful."

Right on cue, Brantley ripped a line drive single to right field in the bottom of the first in his first at-bat off the DL, knocking in Jason Kipnis and Jose Ramirez to give the Indians a 3-2 lead. He struck out and grounded out in his next three at-bats, but his single proved to be the game-winning hit.

Before overcoming the ankle injury and subsequent surgery, he overcame complications from 2015 shoulder surgery that restricted him to playing 11 games in 2016. He bounced back from that to make the 2017 All-Star team. Had he not sprained his ankle Aug. 8, he might have been Comeback Player of the Year in 2017.

There were times in the last three years, he admits, when he became discouraged.

"I have my teammates that were always picking me up," Brantley said. "I have a great wife and kids and family around me as a great support system. I can't thank them enough. They kept me focused.

"I love this game. Yeah, I've been banged up a couple times, but any time I get to put on a major-league uniform, it's an honor. It's a privilege. It's a lot of hard work, but I don't let it go by the wayside. I really do appreciate it and value it."

Brantley is a study in perseverance. So are the Indians. Brantley staying healthy is a key to them ending a 70-year World Series drought in Cleveland.

Opening day memories eventually blend together, but the most important thing is the experience | Opinion

By Mark Podolski, The News-Herald

Getting older means your memories tend to get -a bit foggy.

My favorite opening-day memory growing up was watching former Indians slugger Andre Thornton hit a grand slam at a home opener at old Municipal Stadium.

The year was 1982, 1983 or 1984. I wasn't sure which season Thunder Thornton — his nickname back in the day — did the deed so I went to the record books.

It never happened. Thornton hit six grand slams in his solid career. In 14 seasons — 10 with the Indians — he hit 253 home runs with 895 RBI.

The thing is, Thornton did hit a grand slam at an Indians game I attended one of those seasons. It just wasn't at a home opener. It was likely during a game in April. It was likely cold and miserable, similar to April 6 during the Indians' home opener vs. the Royals. I was certain the Thornton grand slam happened at a home opener. Oh well.

Hey, we're talking more than 30 years ago. I've cut myself some slack.

The best thing about that time in my life as a baseball fan was the start of the season. I was approaching high school in the early 1980s, and baseball consumed my spring and summers. I loved every minute of the game — playing, watching, listening or reading about it.

Especially opening day, and even more special, the home opener.

Getting older as a baseball fan only means the memories start to blend together. My Thornton non-memory is a perfect example. The where remains constant (Progressive Field for most, old Municipal Stadium for others) but the what gets cloudy.

Some of the moments are unforgettable. A sampling:

- In 1994, President Bill Clinton threw out the first pitch for the debut of then-Jacobs Field in 1994, and Wayne Kirby's walk-off hit beat the Mariners, 4-3, in 11 innings.
- In 2007, then-Mariners manager Mike Hargrove had enough of a steady snowfall as the Indians led, 4-0, in the fifth inning. Hargrove insisted the snow was so severe, his batters couldn't see the ball. The game was eventually postponed, and so was the entire series because of snow. On April 10, the Indians played their "home opener" in Milwaukee against the Angels, and won 7-6.
- In 1998, Jim Thome hit a walk-off home run off Angels closer Troy Percival in the 10th inning to secure an 8-5 victory.

On April 6 among the announced crowd of 34,720 at Progressive Field, there might have been a few young fans whose lasting memory of an Indians 3-2 home-opener win against the Royals was Michael Brantley's two-run single in his first at-bat of the season. Or Cody Allen closing it out in the ninth. What's likely is the young fan will remember how cold it was in downtown Cleveland. But it was baseball, and it was an Indians home opener. Most young fans are happy just to be there.

Just like a pre-teen in the 1980s who marveled at Thornton's grand slam at old Municipal Stadium at an Indians home opener. ... Oh wait.

The details don't really matter. An imaginary Thornton grand slam only adds to the mystique of one of baseball's best traditions.

I was there at whatever Indians home opener it was in the '80s, and that's what's most important.

Still, that Thornton grand slam was pretty cool — whenever it happened.