

Wiser Chisenhall will do anything for a ring

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

GOODYEAR, Ariz. -- When Lonnie Chisenhall strolls through the Indians' clubhouse in the morning, he often is carrying a bat in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. There are pictures his young sons have drawn for him taped above his locker. It is no wonder Chisenhall's teammates jokingly call him an old man.

"I call it maturity," Chisenhall quipped.

Exactly what an old man would say.

As far as the Indians are concerned, it has been Chisenhall's maturation on the baseball field that is most important. Gone are the inclinations of a first-round Draft pick. The game humbled Chisenhall years ago. The big leagues have a way of doing that to players who climb quickly via raw talent. He is smarter now about hitting, willing to run out to any position and focused on winning a ring with the only organization he has known.

At the outset of Spring Training, that was Chisenhall's message in his one-on-one meeting with manager Terry Francona. This might very well be the outfielder's final season in an Indians uniform, and winning the World Series is the only goal. So whatever Francona asks of Chisenhall, he will oblige.

Would Chisenhall have had that same attitude when he was a rookie?

"He was a stubborn guy," Chisenhall said of his younger self with a smile. "I'm still stubborn now. But you come up in two and a half years in the Minors, and you're 22 years old, you can't tell many 22-year-olds anything. That was seven years ago. I'm excited about how I've grown and what it's evolved into, and to see the organization grow as a whole."

Chisenhall will turn 30 in October, when he hopes to be embarking on another postseason run with the Indians. He was quick to note that Cleveland nearly reached the World Series in 2007, leading to him being selected with the 29th pick in the MLB Draft in the following summer. Chisenhall was in the Majors by 2011 and was a part of the '12 team that lost 94 games.

Over the past five years, Chisenhall has endured career ups and downs, while Cleveland has developed into an annual contender. He came up as a third baseman, dealt with multiple trips back to the Minor Leagues, converted to the outfield in '15 and embraced a platoon-type role under Francona. At every turn, Chisenhall learned to accept his place as a piece of the larger puzzle.

"The things that happened throughout my career were probably the best things that could've happened," Chisenhall said. "Getting sent down in '13. Not making the team in '12. Getting sent down in '15. Struggling at times, where I didn't make my adjustments fast enough. I wasn't mature enough to understand what I was actually doing. All that made me the player I am today."

Today, Chisenhall projects to be the main right fielder for the Indians, and it is possible that the platoon label might be peeled off a little more. Last season, Chisenhall performed well against both lefties (.967 OPS in 60 plate appearances) and righties (.857 OPS in 210 plate appearances) and was in the midst of a career year before injuries got in the way.

Overall, Chisenhall posted a .288/.360/.521 slash line in 82 games, in which he launched 12 home runs in 270 plate appearances. That fell one shy of his career mark for homers (13 in 533 PAs in '14). Chisenhall had a 129 Weighted Runs Created Plus, meaning he was 29 percent above average offensively. The only thing that held Chisenhall back was health.

"That was his best year by far," Francona said. "He was just on fire. When we lost him, it hurt us."

Chisenhall is healthy again, and the old man is motivated.

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

Indians being conservative with Miller's workload

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

GOODYEAR, Ariz. -- Andrew Miller was originally slated to make his next Cactus League appearance on Friday against the Rockies, but that schedule changed on Thursday. Indians manager Terry Francona said there was no reason for concern. Miller is simply on a conservative spring program.

"They just backed him up one day," Francona said. "He's doing fine."

Miller's schedule was altered to include a mound session on Thursday, meaning his next game appearance will tentatively be on Saturday against the Padres. Cleveland has been easing both Miller and closer Cody Allen into things this spring. Miller has only two Cactus League outings to date, and Allen's appearance on Thursday against the Dodgers will mark his third.

"[Miller] and Cody are kind of on the same program," Francona said. "I don't think they need a ton of innings. They throw sides. Just because they don't pitch in a game doesn't mean they're showing up and going home. They're doing a ton of stuff to get ready for the season. Whether it's in the weight room [or elsewhere], they're just getting ready to try to log a heavy lift."

Miller has averaged 65 innings and 65 appearances over the past four seasons, turning in a 1.72 ERA with 14.5 strikeouts per nine innings over that span. Last year, the lefty had two stints on the disabled list with a right knee issue, but he still fashioned a 1.44 ERA with 95 strikeouts against 21 walks in 62 2/3 frames. Allen has averaged 72 games and 69 innings with a 2.59 ERA over the past five seasons combined.

Injury updates

- Right-hander Julian Merryweather is scheduled to undergo Tommy John ligament-replacement surgery on his right elbow Friday. Dr. Keith Meister, who performed the same procedure on Indians righty Cody Anderson last March, will perform Merryweather's operation in Dallas.

Merryweather, 26, is ranked 16th on the Indians' Top 30 Prospects list, per MLB Pipeline.

"It's disappointing," Francona said. "But, in today's medical baseball [world], the odds of guys that work hard coming back are really good. It's not a lock, and we tell guys that, but I think some guys view it like, 'Well, I'm getting it out of the way and I can go about my career.' And I don't think work ethic has been a problem with him."

- Francona noted that both left fielder Michael Brantley and right-hander Danny Salazar were sent home on Thursday due to illness. Brantley (right ankle) came out of Wednesday's simulated game fine, and Salazar (right shoulder) is getting close to being cleared to resume throwing off a mound.

Camp battles

Both Giovanni Urshela and Erik Gonzalez were on the bench for Thursday night's game against the Dodgers. They are competing for a utility job on Cleveland's roster and both are out of Minor League options. Francona said defense is the biggest priority for that role.

"In my opinion," Francona said, "it's being able to catch the ball wherever you put them. Certainly, if you're going to give a guy a day off, but you have to pinch-hit for the guy you're putting in there, that's not perfect. I'm not too sure how many teams have a guy like that. So that's something to think about."

"But my first thought would be, when they go in, because they're going to move around, if they can't catch the ball, that makes it really difficult. With both those guys, that's not an issue. We're going to have a tough decision -- there's no doubt. There's a lot of split camps and, depending on the day, I probably go back and forth, too."

Urshela (a third baseman by trade) and Gonzalez (who came up as a shortstop) can play all four infield positions. Offensively, Gonzalez (.687 OPS in 81 big leagues games) has performed better in the Majors than Urshela (.587 OPS in 148 games).

Worth noting

- Second baseman Jason Kipnis headed into Thursday with the most home runs (six) this spring for both the Cactus and Grapefruit leagues. According to Baseball-Reference.com, Kipnis' Opponent Quality so far this spring has been 8.5 on a 1-10 scale (one being rookie-level pitching and 10 being MLB-level pitching).

"It's fun to watch," Francona said. "Nobody's going to care come June how many home runs he hit in Spring Training, but it's fun to see guys [have success]. I do think it shows he's healthy and he's obviously got some strength, because the ball is jumping off his bat."

- Francona noted that Brandon Barnes is "right smack in the middle" of the outfield competition this spring. Three main candidates appear to be Rajai Davis, Melvin Upton Jr. and Barnes, who are all in camp on Minor League contracts with non-roster invites. Barnes hits from the right side and can play all three outfield spots.

- Thursday marked the third consecutive game with shortstop Francisco Lindor in Cleveland's lineup. Francona said that was at Lindor's request.

Up next

Indians ace Corey Kluber is scheduled to take the mound on Friday, when Cleveland heads to Salt River Fields in Scottsdale, Ariz., for a 3:10 p.m. ET Cactus League clash with the Rockies. Nick Goody, Matt Belisle, Alexi Ogando, Ben Taylor and Neil Ramirez are also slated to pitch for the Tribe. Righty Jon Gray will start for Colorado. The matchup will be available live on indians.com via an exclusive audio webcast.

Terry Francona still mixing and matching to try and fill Cleveland Indians' Shawless bullpen

By Paul Hoynes

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Manager Terry Francona doesn't know if he's going to carry seven or eight relievers when the Indians open the season on March 29 in Seattle.

If Michael Brantley is the opening day left fielder, maybe it's an eight-man bullpen. If Brantley opens the year on the disabled list, maybe it's seven because the Indians will have to carry an extra outfielder.

That situation aside, here's another question looming over the pen: who is going to replace Bryan Shaw? You remember Shaw, the rubber-armed set-up man that some people loved to hate because he'd have a bad game now and then while making more appearances than any pitcher in the big leagues over the last five years.

Shaw is adios. He escaped the free-agent freeze by signing a three-year, \$27 million deal with the Rockies in December. When all is said and done, Shaw and relievers just like him -- sorry, not you Greg Holland -- may be the only free agents to emerge from this momentum-changing winter as the standard bearers for the old ways.

Which has little to do with the above question -- who will replace Shaw? Over the last five years he averaged 76 appearances a season while paving the way for such late-inning arms as Cody Allen, Andrew Miller, Chris Perez, John Axford and Joe Smith.

BAL@CLE: Otero provides a steady relief appearance

"Losing Shaw is a blow," Francona told reporters Wednesday in Goodyear, Ariz.

Before Shaw officially left, Francona said it would take two relievers to replace him. It may not be the last time he said it.

"I do think we have the guys who can pick up the slack," said Francona. "It might not be one guy, but we have plenty of guys who can handle more of the leverage (innings)."

Dan Otero, who made 52 appearances last season and 62 the year before, could be one of them. He doesn't walk anybody - 18 of the 510 batters he's faced (3.5 percent) since 2016 - and he keeps the ball on the ground. Settling into the seventh inning would be a change of roles for Otero, who has been a utility reliever since joining the Indians.

"I do like that (utility) role for him," said Francona early in spring training. "When he's good, he's efficient, he's quick, he pounds the zone down. My guess is regardless of where he pitches, when you look up in September or October, he's going to have 70 to 75 (innings), just like he always does."

Another candidate could be Zach McAllister.

"I think Mac has come in to camp in a really good spot," said Francona. "I think he's situated to have a nice year. He's in a good place."

McAllister, a converted starter, lives on his fastball, but Francona said his breaking ball is improving. McAllister, a free agent at the end of the season, has always wanted to return to the rotation, but the Indians love the way his fastball jumps coming out of the bullpen.

"I wouldn't say he couldn't start," said Francona. "His breaking ball is improving. On our team he's best suited for the bullpen. There are probably 25 teams he could start for."

With the exception of closer Cody Allen and left-hander Andrew Miller, who will handle the late and later innings, Francona hasn't assigned exact roles for his relievers.

"We don't have an inning in mind," he said. "They all have different styles. They match up with different hitters. They know how we do it. We want to put them in the game where they can match up the best and be successful."

Francona, pitching coach Carl Willis and bullpen coach Scott Atchison have a good feel for the six returning relievers - Allen, Miller, McAllister, Otero, Tyler Olson and Nick Goody. There are also 13 relievers in camp on non-roster contracts, who could fill the one or two remaining spots in the pen.

On Wednesday, Francona named Evan Marshall, Matt Belisle and Carlos Torres as possibilities for those openings. Other big-league veterans in camp include Alexi Ogando, Neil Ramirez and Jeff Beliveau. Indians minor leaguer Cameron Hill has looked good as well.

Belisle and Torres have pitched well over the last couple of years. Belisle, 37, went 2-2 with a 4.03 ERA in 62 appearances last season for the Twins. He finished the season as their closer, saving nine games. He led the big leagues with 80 appearances for the Rockies in 2012.

Torres, 35, has made 139 appearances and pitched 154 2/3 innings for the Brewers over the last two years. He went 3-3 with a 2.73 ERA in 72 appearances in 2016.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 03.09.2018

Francisco Lindor homers, Josh Tomlin steady on the mound as Cleveland Indians defeat L.A. Dodgers, 4-1

By Joe Noga

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Francisco Lindor homered and Josh Tomlin struck out four batters in 3 1/3 innings as the Cleveland Indians defeated the visiting Los Angeles Dodgers, 4-1, on Thursday at Goodyear Ballpark.

The Indians improved their Cactus League record to 8-6-1, while the Dodgers slipped to 7-7-1.

Lindor's solo home run to left in the sixth inning tied the score at 1-1. It was the All-Star shortstop's second home run of the spring, and it came batting from the right side against ambidextrous Dodgers reliever Pat Venditte.

Lindor, who broke his bat on a foul ball during the at-bat, got some new lumber from Tribe special instructor Carlos Baerga in the Cleveland dugout before promptly crushing a ball to the bullpen beyond the left field fence.

Lindor saluted Baerga as he trotted past the Indians dugout and ended up having to stop and go back to tag first base.

Francisco Mejia's RBI groundout in the bottom of the seventh inning plated Greg Allen with the go-ahead run against Dodgers pitcher Scott Alexander.

Rajai Davis, starting in left field and batting in the No. 2 spot, collected three hits including a double. First baseman Nellie Rodriguez added a pair of insurance runs in the bottom of the eighth with a two-run single off ex-Indians pitcher C.C. Lee.

Tomlin rebounded from Saturday's rough outing with 3 1/3 solid innings. The righty struck out four batters and allowed three hits, including a solo home run to Cody Bellinger in the second inning.

Preston Claiborne, Cody Allen, Carlos Torres, Tyler Olson and Evan Marshall scattered four L.A. hits over the remaining 5 2/3 innings.

Next: Corey Kluber gets the start for Cleveland as the Indians travel to Salt River Fields at Talking Stick to take on Colorado. John Gray will be on the mound for the Rockies. Andrew Miller, Nick Goody, Matt Belisle, Alexi Ogando, Ben Taylor and Neil Ramirez are scheduled to pitch for the Tribe. The game will be webcast on Indians.com.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 03.09.2018

Cleveland Indians Scribbles: What about Bradley Zimmer? -- Terry Pluto (video)

By Terry Pluto, The Plain Dealer terrypluto2003@yahoo.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Scribbles in my Cleveland Indians notebook:

1. There has been a lot of news from Goodyear about Jason Kipnis, Michael Brantley and so many others. But hardly a word about Bradley Zimmer, a very important player for the Indians in 2018. They need a solid season from Zimmer. In terms of defense, Zimmer delivered that last season.

2. But what about the bat? Before the All-Star break, he batted .285 (.789 OPS) with five HR 25 RBI. That was in 151 at bats. After the All-Star break, Zimmer batted .196 (.593 OPS) with three HR and 14 RBI. That was in 148 at bats.

3. In other words, Zimmer had two dramatically different seasons at the plate. Zimmer is 25, so he should be ready for a good season. He is batting .190 (4-of-21) this spring. The Indians other options for center field are Rajai Davis and Melvin Upton. Both veterans are non-roster players and right-handed hitters. Both are hitting below .200 so far.

4. Zimmer ranked No. 5 in defense among American League center fielders. By far, he is the best at that position of anyone likely to make the team. Rookie Greg Allen also is good defensively, but he's ticketed for Class AAA Columbus. Allen has yet to play at the Class AAA level, so that makes sense.

5. Zimmer was 18-of-19 in stolen bases in 2017 with the Tribe. So speed, athleticism and defense are all major positives for him. It's just a matter of his hitting.

6. Watching the tape of a recent Terry Francona press conference from Goodyear, he mentioned this order for the top of the lineup: Francisco Lindor, Jason Kipnis, Michael Brantley, Edwin Encarnacion, Jose Ramirez.

7. Obviously, that's all written in pencil. But it sounds like Francona likes the idea of Lindor leading off. Brantley (if healthy) has been a very good No. 3 hitter and will probably remain there. Encarnacion is the cleanup hitter. Ramirez does a good job of protecting Encarnacion, who draws a lot of walks. Ramirez batted .318 (.957 OPS) with 29 HR and 83 RBI last season.

8. Francona has been impressed with Zach McAllister as one of the guys to take over the Bryan Shaw role in the bullpen. Francona mentioned McAllister "could probably start for 25 different teams." McAllister began his career as a starter, but was never able to develop a reliable pitch beyond his fastball. McAllister was 2-2 with a 2.61 ERA last season.

9. Francona wants Carlos Carrasco to pitch 200 innings once again. He did that for the first time in his career last season. It led to an 18-6 record and 3.29 ERA -- the best of his career. "There's a lot of value in a 200-inning starter," said Francona.

10. One of the reasons Mike Clevinger has been named to the rotation is because Francona believes Clevinger can be a 200-inning pitcher. Only eight American League pitchers threw at least 200 innings last season. The Indians had two: Kluber (203) and Carrasco (200).

11. Francona on Clevinger: "He has three major-league pitches. He has a great work ethic. He is a big, strong kid who can hold up over the course of the year."

12. Francona said what I have been thinking about Jason Kipnis hitting six homers this spring: "If nothing else, it shows he's healthy."

Making Danny Salazar one of the best relievers in baseball

By Michael Hattery 4h ago 1

If Danny Salazar is made of glass, it is Tiffany stained glass, exquisite, exhilarating and elusive. In the past five seasons, Salazar has exceeded 140 innings just once — 185 in 2015. Salazar's greatest enemy has been arm health, seemingly constantly weighed down by elbow pain or tightness.

Indeed, Salazar is already behind due to elbow soreness that has plagued him since early January, and president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti voiced concern over whether Salazar would leave camp when spring training ends.

"What we're focused on right now is just making sure that Danny's ready to contribute for the bulk of the season the way we all know he's capable of, and if that's Opening Day, great. If it's later than that, that's fine," he said.

Yet, as baseball changes and relievers begin to throw a greater and greater share of innings pitched, the multi-inning relief ace brings with it increasing value, and for Salazar, a potential opportunity.

The Indians face a short-term and long-term conundrum. First, their pitching staff, while coming off the sixth-best season of all time, sits just seven deep in the rotation at most to start the season, including Salazar. Not to mention Josh Tomlin is injury prone, Ryan Merritt is more soft-tossing mop-up or lefty specialist than big-league starter, and Mike Clevinger consistently struggles to find the strike zone.

Still, the Indians, who rode “bullpenning” and good fortune to Game 7 of the 2016 World Series, enter their last season with Andrew Miller and Cody Allen under contract. Grooming a high-leverage replacement who can cover multiple innings has merit. Further, the Indians have 76 innings of medium- to high leverage to replace due to Bryan Shaw’s exodus.

Which brings us to Salazar.

As we’ve seen with the Yankees with Chad Green, and the Astros with Chris Devenski, teams have begun to use pitchers with potentially strong arsenals for the rotation in multi-inning, high-leverage relief ace roles. Further, with a multi-inning relief ace you can structure outings as quasi-piggyback affairs with a pitcher like Merritt or Tomlin only allowed to ever pitch three to four innings unless a large lead is accrued during that time.

For the Indians, Salazar can be Devenski, maybe even a better version of Devenski, one of the best weapons in baseball, especially in the playoffs. All it will take for Salazar to be Devenski is a usage tweak and an arm strengthening program built around a bullpen transition.

Below is a comparison of Salazar, the five-year veteran, and Devenski, the two-year veteran:

Pitcher	K%	Fastball Usage	Change Usage	Slider Usage
Chris Devenski	28.2%	43%	33%	16.0%
Danny Salazar	27.8%	54%	19%	8.4%

In his role as a starting pitcher over the past two years, Salazar has thrown just about 50 more innings than Devenski, thus some reduction in cumulative value can be expected. However, Devenski has a big-league FIP of 2.83 and Salazar, 3.56. Devenski mixes up his pitches more.

For each pitcher, four-seam fastball was their worst offering, Devenski allowing a wRC+ against of 111, and Salazar 119. The problem for Salazar was that he threw the pitch far more frequently, and threw his best offerings — split-change and slider — far too infrequently. Yet the underlying components that make Devenski an elite multi-inning reliever and a huge value to the Astros exist for Salazar.

Since Salazar’s debut in 2013, of pitchers who have thrown a minimum of 500 innings, Salazar’s changeup has been the fifth most valuable changeup in baseball. The slider is more complicated. It has been a project for the past few years with increasing success, finally posting a really good season in 2017, albeit with limited usage.

Salazar’s slider, when reviewed in a more granular analysis, appears to demonstrate the pieces of a plus offering. Below are Salazar’s slider specs compared with Max Scherzer, owner and operator of the best slider in baseball in 2017.

Pitcher	Velocity	xMOV	zMOV	2017 spin rate
Danny Salazar	86.0 MPH	1.5	2.0	2,326
Max Scherzer	85.8 MPH	1.3	1.6	2,405

Salazar’s slider, while not a mirror image of Scherzer’s elite slider, is incredibly similar in nearly every important area. The shape, velocity and spin rate support the value of Salazar’s slider in 2017 and create a strong basis for the expectation that the slider can be a plus pitch moving forward.

Further, the slider fits into the arsenal much the same way as Scherzer’s because their top end fastball velocity and plus changeups allow for similar usage and sequencing. Scherzer has two more really good offerings but with limited usage rates.

Finally, Salazar’s slider has shown significant potential to induce ground balls, which, for a pitcher with a significant history of elevated home run per fly ball rates, is useful in diminishing contact value.

If Salazar can shift his slider usage north from 8 percent to, say, 18 percent, it will be a significant step in improving his production. Considering the frequency with which Salazar faces left-handed hitters, an increase in changeup usage from 19 percent to close to 30 percent would be another important gain, especially in reducing fastball usage.

However, Salazar’s fastball makes significantly more sense in the bullpen. At 28, surging the fastball above 95 has become increasingly difficult for Salazar, but in the bullpen with lower pitch limits, he can push out the fastball more, as he did in 2017.

The above chart shows two visually discernable velocity spikes, early- to mid-June, and mid-September. Salazar made four relief appearances in 2017: June 1 and June 3, then Sept. 11, and Sept. 15. These dates almost exactly align with Salazar’s velocity spikes, which have him up 1 1/2 to two ticks of velocity, sitting 96-97 rather than 94-95. For Salazar’s fastball, this velocity differential is very important in improving outcomes.

Salazar Four Seam Fastball	94-95 MPH	96-97 MPH
xwOBA	0.430	0.311

With his arm built up correctly, Salazar can elevate his fastball velocity to the point of making it a once again imposing offering.

Of course, arm health is incredibly difficult to manage and predict, with little evidence that a transition to the bullpen would aid in maintaining arm health in a particular circumstance. Yet, last season Salazar was built up and conditioned as a starter in spring training only to move in and out of the bullpen twice during the season. This sort of movement between roles appeared to be problematic for his arm health in 2017.

If the Indians structure Salazar's usage, strength and conditioning regimen around a multi-inning bullpen role, Salazar could be a powerful chess piece throughout the season, and most importantly for the Indians, in October.

Entering 2018, Salazar has finally discovered a strong third offering with the components to be one of the best sliders in baseball. Increased slider and changeup usage as well as a transition to the bullpen to heighten velocity over multiple innings could aid the Indians in creating what is difficult to acquire, a dominant multi-inning high leverage reliever.

Jason Kipnis swinging after rocky 2017

By Gary Schatz, The Associated Press

GOODYEAR, Ariz. >> Jason Kipnis was warned the day would come when his body betrayed him.

Early in his major league career, veterans warned Kipnis the bruises would take longer to heal and those late nights would be harder to shake in the early mornings.

That time has arrived.

"When you're 24, the excitement, the way your body feels, you can roll out of bed with a Red Bull and feel great," said Cleveland's steady second baseman. "Now, I need a Red Bull to get out of bed."

But following an injury-riddled 2017 season, Kipnis has found another gear under the warm Arizona sun.

An All-Star in 2013 and 2015, Kipnis homered in each of his first six exhibition games, evidence the 30-year-old may be primed to produce more this season.

"I'm not trying to hit home runs," Kipnis said. "If I had my choice, I'd save them for the regular season but you don't get to do that."

Kipnis spent all last year battling injuries, which limited him to 90 games. He arrived at camp with a sore right shoulder, and the lingering inflammation landed him on the disabled list before opening day.

He made two other extended trips to the DL with right hamstring problems, and if his medical issues weren't troubling enough, the Indians moved him from the infield to the outfield and he wound up making 11 starts in center.

But he's moved on, and so far Kipnis has been Cleveland's best camper.

"Yeah, I'm MVP, clearly," he joked. "It's important alone in the fact that it's good to feel good in spring training. It's better than where I was last year at this point. Instead of being hurt, I'm having success. These games, in the end, really don't count for anything. I know that, but you're not going to hear me complain about working on stuff and seeing success out of it early. I just feel good.

"I'm confident and it's showing."

Kipnis, who was slowed by some lower back tightness recently, has been comforted in knowing that he's going to stay at second base — for now.

The Indians signed Rajai Davis, who was with the club in 2016, and Melvin Upton Jr. to add depth and competition in the outfield.

Manager Terry Francona let Kipnis know he's not fighting for an outfield job.

"I told Kip, I don't want to ask him to do something that's unfair," Francona said. "Let's do this together. Go out and be a second baseman. If there's a need, that if something comes up we'll do this together. Because of who he is and what he's accomplished and what he can accomplish, I think it's better if we do it together."

Kipnis is signed through 2019, and the Indians hold an option for 2020. Because All-Star Jose Ramirez is more of a natural middle infielder than third baseman, there has been talk of moving Kipnis.

He understands it's just part of the game.

"I'm not the first person to ever had trade rumors around his name, nor the last," he said. "I'd be lying if I didn't say you're like, 'OK, am I not wanted around here anymore?' But that's just the normal reaction every player would probably take. But once you step back and actually look at what's going on, I understood it: small-market team and the contracts get up there in the later years and the way last year played out. If I'm a fantasy GM or something like that, I could see it too, or at least hearing offers."

The past year has provided Kipnis with perspective. He's older, wiser and grateful.

"I've come to, with the last season, a new appreciation for the game of baseball," he said. "I've said it before: I enjoy the process now of hitting in the cage for hours. I enjoy the working out and stretching, all that stuff. It's not stuff I could've said in years past. I was more of the gamer who would just show up and once the lights come on, 'Let's go.'

"But now it's a need to enjoy the process a little more and it's been fun for me."

Francisco Lindor a comfortable option at top of Indians lineup by Beacon Journal/Ohio.com

You can't always let hitters have their desired spot in the lineup. That's one of the fundamental truths of being a manager.

Writing out a lineup card is a back-and-forth act of slotting hitters in the best order statistically while also balancing their comfort levels, not to mention players' rest and that day's opposing pitcher.

It involves much more than writing nine names down on paper and hoping it works out at 7 p.m., and it's probably the cause of most of the Tylenol bill from the manager's office.

But, sometimes, it works out for all parties involved.

Up until 2018, Indians manager Terry Francona effectively had a wild card when filling out the lineup thanks to Carlos Santana, who he could put basically anywhere.

A rare combination of skills and an indifference to where he hit in the lineup was one of Santana's more valuable traits. A switch-hitter with both power and an elite knack for getting on base, Santana profiled for any of the top 5-6 spots in the lineup. That afforded Francona a near endless number of potential lineup combinations.

When Santana signed with the Philadelphia Phillies in free agency, some of that lineup flexibility left with him. And because of that, the 2018 lineup configuration could be a more straight-forward issue.

Looking at just the top of the lineup, the leadoff spot will likely be up to either Francisco Lindor or Jason Kipnis. Last season, Lindor (63 starts), Kipnis (42) and Santana (37) accounted for 142 of the 162 starts there.

But it was Lindor who was at his best statistically in the leadoff spot. He hit .281 with a .904 OPS, belted 18 home runs, drove in 47 runs and stole nine bases as a leadoff hitter. Kipnis wasn't as successful, posting a .242 average and .780 OPS, though he was much better in that role in 2015, when he hit .311 with an .861 OPS in an all-star season.

The Indians haven't made any declarations about the lineup with a few weeks still remaining until Opening Day. But Lindor — an MVP candidate and a switch-hitter who excelled there a year ago — might make too much sense to ignore.

"One [factor] is that Frankie really liked it," Francona told reporters in Goodyear, Ariz. this week. "So when you have a guy that's that much of an impact player who really enjoys it, well that's — you can't just let guys hit where they want. It won't work. But when your better players are in a spot where they're comfortable, that, to me, makes sense. ... I think Frankie does profile really good in that position."

Lindor had arguably the best offensive season of his career in 2017, piling up 33 home runs, 44 doubles, 89 RBI, 15 stolen bases and an .842 OPS. He finished with 5.9 fWAR and placed fifth in America League Most Valuable Player voting.

"Switch hitter, when you turn a lineup over, you've got a guy who can drive in some runs," Francona added. "I think it makes a lot of sense."