

Bauer pleased with slider, fans 8 Rangers

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

GOODYEAR, Ariz. -- Trevor Bauer spent his entire offseason developing a new slider, and he has continued to hone the pitch this spring. In his latest start, the Indians right-hander got to see how it worked in conjunction with the other offerings in his arsenal.

"I felt good," Bauer said after Monday's 4-2 win over the Rangers at Goodyear Ballpark. "It's the first time all spring I've thrown my full complement of pitches, so I was really encouraged by the slider and the curveball playing together, and how effective those were when paired together."

Over five innings, Bauer allowed two runs on five hits, including a home run to Luis Marte in the fifth. The right-hander ended with eight strikeouts against one walk, giving him 18 strikeouts and four walks in 13 1/3 innings in his four Cactus League outings.

To this point, Bauer has been pleased by the early returns of his slider, which was designed to be similar to the breaking ball featured by Indians ace Corey Kluber.

"By the time I get to the season, I will have 60 innings under my belt with it," Bauer said. "So, that's like a full college season for some people, or high school season or whatever. So, yeah, I have plenty of time, plenty of experience throwing it. A lot of those innings -- probably 40 to 50 of them -- are going to be throwing nothing but sliders as my breaking pitch. So, I have a generally idea of how I want to use it and it's been good."

Injury updates

- Left fielder Michael Brantley (right ankle surgery in October) felt fine on Monday after introducing baserunning to his running rehab program on Sunday. Brantley was slated to go through outfield drills during Monday's workout. Said manager Terry Francona: "He's really doing well. He's excited."

- Right-hander Danny Salazar (right shoulder inflammation) continues to work through a long-toss program with the goal of getting on a mound soon. Said Francona: "He is actually, I think, getting a little bit to the point where he's turning a pretty good corner."

Camp battles

The Indians went with a batting order full of regulars for Monday's game against the Rangers. Veteran Rajai Davis was the lone player in the lineup who is competing for a roster spot this spring. The fleet-footed outfielder hit ninth and got the nod in left field, going 1-for-2 in the batter's box. Davis, who is in camp as a non-roster invitee, has hit .280 in 10 Cactus League games so far.

Worth noting

- Outfielder Abraham Almonte, who has played in 136 games for the Indians over the past two seasons, was among the players optioned to Triple-A Columbus on Monday. Almonte -- a switch-hitter who can play all three outfield spots -- avoided arbitration with a one-year contract worth \$825,000 over the winter and was in competition for an Opening Day job this spring.

"We told him that he came in a little heavy," Francona said. "He's lost weight while he's been here, but he was competing. We just told him, we said, 'At this point in time, you're not a candidate to make the team, so we're going to send you over to the other side.' He's going to work on all three outfield positions. We kind of told him, when he first got here he did such a good job with center field, and then he's not been as reliable in the outfield. So, we kind of told him that."

- Besides Almonte, the Indians also optioned catching prospect Francisco Mejia, right-hander Julian Merryweather, lefty Shawn Morimando and righty Adam Plutko to Triple-A. Cleveland reassigned first baseman Bobby Bradley, righty Louis Head, righty Josh Martin and lefty Adam Wilk to Minor League camp.

More: Mejia to get outfield experience in Minors | Bradley impresses in spring stint

- Right-hander Josh Tomlin is tentatively scheduled to pitch in a Minor League game on Wednesday. Lefty Andrew Miller, and a handful of other big league pitchers, may also participate in Minor League action at the team's complex on Wednesday.

Up next

Following a team off-day on Tuesday, Kluber is scheduled to take the mound for his fourth Cactus League start in a 4:05 p.m. ET game against the Angels on Wednesday at Goodyear Ballpark. Kluber has 15 strikeouts against two walks and a 3.12 ERA in 8 2/3 innings so far this spring. Carlos Torres, Matt Belisle, Tyler Olson and Zach McAllister are also penciled in to pitch for the Tribe on Wednesday. Tune in live on MLB.TV.

Mejia sent to Triple-A, will get OF experience

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

GOODYEAR, Ariz. -- Francisco Mejia tried his hand at third base during the Arizona Fall League after last season ended. Now, the Indians plan on having the highly touted catching prospect get some experience in the outfield during Minor League camp and early in the season with Triple-A Columbus.

Indians manager Terry Francona wanted to make something clear, though.

"He's a catcher," Francona said.

On Monday morning, when Mejia was optioned to Triple-A as part of Cleveland's latest round of spring roster reductions, Francona reiterated that message. The manager repeated what has been his go-to phrasing for the plans involving Mejia, noting that "this is by no means an indictment on his catching." If anything, Francona said the way the Tribe is handling Mejia is a great compliment to the promising prospect.

The Indians believe that the 22-year-old Mejia -- ranked No. 1 among the Tribe's Top 30 prospects, No. 1 among baseball's catching prospects and 11th overall on the Top 100 prospects list, per MLB Pipeline -- is an extremely advanced hitter. Cleveland's decision makers feel that Mejia is so polished as a hitter, in fact, that he might be able to help the Major League club at some point this summer.

The only problem is that the Indians have a pair of Major League-caliber catchers in Roberto Perez and Yan Gomes who rank among the game's best defenders, are locked into long-term contracts and have built a strong rapport with one of baseball's top pitching staffs. At the moment, there is no room in the inn behind the plate for a rookie like Mejia, but the Indians do not want that to get in the way of a possible promotion to the big leagues.

"We just kind of told him, 'Look, we have Perez and Gomes. Do the math,'" Francona said. "And 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. 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."

In 11 Cactus League games this spring, the switch-hitting Mejia has hit .421 (8-for-19) with two home runs, seven RBIs and a 1.292 OPS. That comes after Mejia hit .365 with an .873 OPS in 15 games for Glendale in the AFL. Last season, Mejia had an 11-game cup of coffee with the Indians down the stretch, but he spent the bulk of the year with Double-A Akron, where he turned in a .297/.346/.490 slash line with 14 homers, 21 doubles, 52 RBIs in 92 games.

That body of work follows Mejia's breakout showing in 2016, when he hit .342 (.896 OPS) between Class A Lake County and Class A Advanced Lynchburg and made national headlines with a 50-game hitting streak. Mejia has participated in the SiriusXM All-Star Futures Game in each of the past two years, rising swiftly up the various prospect rankings.

"From both sides of the plate, he just has a knack," Francona said. "I don't know if a lot of people could hit like that. It's a little bit unique. But, if you break it down, when the pitcher's releasing the ball, he's in a really good place to hit. And even when he gets out front, he's got such good hands and he keeps his hands back so well, he can either foul off a pitch or he's strong enough to get under it and still hit the ball out of the ballpark."

"But like most good hitters, the more pitches he sees and the deeper he gets in the count, he gets more dangerous. So, he's got the knack, because he uses the whole field. And I mean the whole field. But, he can also hit the ball in the gap and out of the ballpark from both sides of the plate."

Francona said the team was impressed this spring by Mejia's defensive progress, which included spending a lot of time under the tutelage of Sandy Alomar Jr., along with Perez and Gomes. Defensively, Mejia boasts a strong arm, but is still "cleaning up" his transfer and working on carrying the strides made in workouts into games.

"We were really pleased with his progression," Francona said.

Mejia tried playing third base in the AFL, but that experiment is over now, according to the Indians manager. In conversations with the young catcher, Francona felt that giving him some time in the outfield might be the more appropriate route. Mejia will still catch for Triple-A Columbus, but the Indians also want catching prospect Eric Haase to get innings behind the plate. That opens the door for some outfield innings for Mejia.

"We kind of told him, we said, 'Hey, if you want to be a full-time catcher, we'll back you 100 percent,'" Francona said. "But, when we kind of laid it out for him there, he was like, 'No, I need to do this.' So, I think we explained it properly and we won't just send him on his way. We'll check and re-check and make sure he's OK, because he's one of our biggest prospects, that's for sure."

"It just seems like he's got that kind of a bat that he could probably step into a Major League lineup and help you."

Sent down, prospect Bradley leaves impression

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

GOODYEAR, Ariz. -- Indians manager Terry Francona was so excited when Bobby Bradley walked into his office early in Spring Training that he could not stop the complimentary curse words from flying. The promising first-base prospect arrived looking like a new person after shedding dozens of pounds.

"He was a real highlight for us," Francona said on Monday morning.

Bradley was included in the Indians' latest round of spring roster reductions -- along with top prospect Francisco Mejia, outfielder Abraham Almonte and six others -- but the move was not unexpected. In fact, Francona said the energy during that meeting at the outset of Spring Training was still there during Monday's conversation with Bradley, who was reassigned to Minor League camp.

Bradley blew away the Indians' staff with his offseason training, did well in soaking up information in his first big league camp and produced in the batter's box to the tune of a .391 average in his 23 Cactus League at-bats. The 21-year-old Bradley arrived to Spring Training knowing that a trip back to the Minors was coming, so the message on Monday was to just stay on his current path.

"There are some send-downs that, quite honestly, get tough," Francona said. "The guys, this is the way they make their living. But, for Bobby, I think it was anything but that. We just reinforced the things we talked about. And I reminded him that, 'You're [21] years old. You haven't even been to Triple-A yet. Enjoy seeing how good you can be.'"

Earlier this spring, Bradley smiled when told of Francona's excitement level over the young first baseman.

"It's an amazing feeling just to know that the hard work and dedication is being noticed," Bradley said. "Words can't describe how good that feels."

Bradley -- ranked as the Indians' No. 3 prospect and the 6th-best first-base prospect in baseball, per MLB Pipeline -- has belted 87 home runs in his 411 Minor League games with Cleveland. The left-handed hitter was selected by Cleveland in the third round of the 2014 MLB Draft and power has always been his calling card. Last year, Bradley had 23 homers, 51 extra-base hits and a .465 slugging percentage in 131 games with Double-A Akron.

Over the offseason, Bradley wanted to get into better shape to help improve other facets of his game and to maintain his energy over the course of a full season. He restructured his diet, attended the Indians' strength camps in Arizona -- after playing in the Arizona Fall League with Glendale -- and found another fitness routine that helped him drop nearly 30 pounds when it was all said and done.

"Me and my fiancée at the time just sat down and she started doing Orangetheory [fitness]," Bradley said. "She dragged me to a class kicking and screaming. I didn't want to go. I ended up liking it. It was super-high-intensity interval training. We did that four times a week."

Bradley said he has been focusing on strength training since shedding the weight, because he does not want to lose any of his signature power. Francona said the changes Bradley made were noticeable on the field this spring, adding to the organization's excitement about the first baseman.

"I thought it was outstanding," Francona said. "It's nice when a kid works as hard as he does and, I know it's limited at-bats, but he really swung the bat really well. It's kind of nice when guys see results, or see what it can do to their game. I think his energy's better. His defense is better. His bat speed. It looks like it's just easier for him to do things physically."

Cleveland Indians' Michael Brantley improving: "He's handling everything they're throwing at him"

By Paul Hoynes

CLEVELAND, Ohio - There are 18 days between now and opening day and Michael Brantley is getting closer to playing baseball again.

He might not make it, and the Indians have said time and time again that March 29 - opening day at Safeco Field - is a fake deadline. But the fact that he's recovering from October surgery on his right ankle is not fake news.

He went through a "baserunning segment" Sunday, according to manager Terry Francona. It's unclear what that segment included - home to first, first to second, second to third, third to home - but when an injured player starts running the bases, that's usually a sign he's getting close to playing in games.

"Michael will do a baserunning segment and then take some balls off the bat," Francona told reporters Sunday in Goodyear, Ariz. "He's really progressing. They're throwing a lot at him and he's handling it all."

Brantley has already been swinging the bat and throwing since before the start of camp. So that part of his game will not hold him back.

"He's in great shape," said Francona.

A healthy Brantley has usually hit third for Francona since he became manager in 2013. But in Brantley's absence over the last two seasons - he played 11 games in 2016 and 90 in 2017 - Jose Ramirez has made himself at home there. He hit .370 (81-for-219) with 14 homers and 34 RBI last season in the No.3 spot.

When asked Sunday where Brantley would hit when he returns, Francona said, "Josie has done such a good job there. Michael is really understanding of that. He just wants to hit somewhere. We would cross that bridge when we get to it. I would, obviously, do some thinking ahead of time on it."

Francona does not stress over lineups. Out of 162 games last year, he used 131 different alignments.

"I just think you spend too much time concerning yourself with those things," he said. "By then something else may change. I don't spend a lot of time worrying about down the road just because things change so fast."

Brantley's return would bring some clarity to a crowded outfield. The Indians opened camp with seven outfielders on the 40-man roster - Brantley, Greg Allen, Abraham Almonte, Lonnie Chisenhall, Brandon Guyer, Tyler Naquin and Bradley Zimmer. Rob Refsnyder, listed as an infielder on the 40-man, is also getting a long look in the outfield.

Outfielders Brandon Barnes, Rajai Davis and Melvin Upton are in camp on minor league deals.

Guyer, like Brantley, is questionable for opening day. He's recovering from left wrist surgery in October and has not played a game this spring.

Zimmer is expected to start in center field with Chisenhall playing right. If Brantley is healthy, he'll start in left field. Zimmer, Chisenhall and Brantley are left-handed hitters, which means the outfield needs balance.

The switch-hitting Almonte has spent parts of the last three seasons with the Tribe, but he has not looked particularly sharp this spring. Allen, a switch-hitter, made the postseason roster last year, but is expected to start this season at Class AAA. Naquin, a left-handed hitter, started in center field in 2016 and has had a decent spring, but he has an option left.

Upton, Davis, Barnes and Refsnyder are right-handed hitters.

Here's how many starts each outfielder has made and at what position: Allen (two in center), Almonte (three in left), Barnes (three in left, three in right), Chisenhall (nine in right), Davis (six in left, two in center); Naquin (two in left, three in center, two in right), Refsnyder (two in left, four in right), Upton (three in left, four in center, one in right) and Zimmer (eight in center).

Offensively, Allen is hitting .375 (9-for-24) with five RBI, Almonte .174 (4-for-23), one RBI, Barnes .080 (2-for-25), one homer, three RBI, Chisenhall .231 (6-for-26), three RBI, Davis .261 (6-for-23); Naquin .240 (6-for-25), one homer, two RBI, Refsnyder .214 (6-for-28), two homers, six RBI, Upton .214 (6-for-28), one homer, two RBI and Zimmer .214 (6-for-28).

"We're trying to make some decisions," said Francona, referring to outfield competition. "At some point we're going to have to thin down this group because then you start not getting good looks at guys. We'll get to it."

That process started Monday morning when the Indians optioned Almonte to Class AAA Columbus.

Rajai Davis gets start in LF as Tribe faces Texas Rangers: Cleveland Indians spring training lineup

By Joe Noga, cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- With an off day scheduled for Tuesday, Cleveland Indians manager Terry Francona has posted what looks to be a regular lineup with starters in their usual positions for Monday's Cactus League game against the Texas Rangers.

Cleveland's expected starting infield of Francisco Lindor at shortstop, Jason Kipnis at second base and Jose Ramirez at third base is followed by Edwin Encarnacion at designated hitter and joined by Yonder Alonzo at first base.

Rajai Davis, battling Melvin Upton Jr for the third starting outfield spot, gets the nod in left field. Davis is hitting .261 in 23 spring training at-bats with a double and a stolen base.

Trevor Bauer gets his fourth spring training start on the mound. Bauer is 0-1 with an 8.64 earned run average in 8 1/3 innings. He's allowed 2 home runs and struck out 10. In his last outing, Bauer allowed seven earned runs on eight hits in 3 1/3 innings against the Cubs.

Stephen Fife, Nick Goody, Jeff Beliveau, Neil Ramirez, Ben Taylor and Alexi Ogando are scheduled to pitch behind Bauer.

Cleveland Indians send nine to minors; Abe Almonte, Francisco Mejia optioned to Triple-A

By Paul Hoynes

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The numbers are starting to dwindle and the lockers are getting cleaned out in the big-league dressing room in Goodyear, Ariz.

The Indians sent nine players to the minors on Monday morning, reducing the spring-training roster to 50 players. By the time the regular season opens on March 29 at Safeco Field in Seattle that number will be cut in half.

Outfielder Abraham Almonte, catcher Francisco Mejia, right-handers Julian Merryweather and Adam Plutko and left-hander Shawn Morimando were optioned to Class AAA Columbus.

First baseman Bobby Bradley, left-hander Adam Wilk and right-handers Louis Head and Josh Martin were re-assigned to minor league camp.

The biggest surprise among the demotions was Almonte, who has spent parts of the last three seasons in the big leagues with the Indians. This spring Almonte found himself in a tight competition with several other outfielders and it did not go well for him.

Almonte is in his final option year. In January he signed a one-year worth \$825,000 instead of going to arbitration.

This spring Almonte appeared in 14 games, hitting .174 (4-for-23) with one homer and three RBI.

Mejia, meanwhile, was one of the bright spots of camp. The switch-hitting catcher batted .421 (8-for-19) with two homers and seven RBI. His path to Cleveland is blocked by catcher Yan Gomes and Roberto Perez, but if the Indians need his bat sometime during the season, they have talked about playing him at third base or in the outfield.

Plutko, recovering from right hip surgery, made two appearances. He went 0-1 and allowed four earned runs on three hits in 1 2/3 innings.

Morimando went 2-1 with a 5.46 ERA in four games. He struck out seven, walked one and allowed five earned runs in 8 1/3 innings.

Merryweather, who underwent Tommy John surgery on his right elbow last week, was also optioned to Columbus.

Bradley, like Mejia, was another young hitter who made a good impression. Bradley, who lost 30 pounds over the winter, hit .391 (9-for-23) with four RBI in 13 games. While Mejia posted a 1.292 OPS, Bradley settled at 1.005 for the spring.

It's unclear where Bradley will open the season, but at sometime this year he could join Mejia at Columbus.

Martin appeared in four games. He posted a 5.40 ERA, striking out two and allowing two earned runs on four hits in 3 1/3 innings. Wilk made two appearances and had a 13.50 ERA.

Head appeared in six games, posting a 9.95 ERA (seven earned runs in 6 1/3 innings). He struck out three and the opposition hit .379 against him.

Trevor Bauer strikes out eight, Jose Ramirez triples as Cleveland Indians beat Texas, 4-2

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Trevor Bauer threw five innings and Jose Ramirez sparked a three-run first inning with a triple as the Indians beat Texas, 4-2, Monday at Goodyear Ballpark in Goodyear, Ariz.

Bauer struck out a spring-high eight batters, while allowing two runs on five hits. Bauer's five innings were most he's pitched in one game this spring.

In four starts this spring, Bauer has 18 strikeouts and four walks in 13 1/3 innings.

Texas took a 1-0 lead in the first on Nomar Mazara's one-out double. Bauer walked Carlos Tocci to start the game. Tocci stole second and went to third on a throwing error by catcher Yan Gomes.

The Indians came back against right-hander Clayton Blackburn in their half of the first as Francisco Lindor and Jason Kipnis started the game with singles. Ramirez followed with a triple to right for a 2-1 lead.

Yonder Alonso's single made it 3-1 as Blackburn left with tightness in the right elbow. Jose LeClerc relieved and ended the first, but Bradley Zimmer greeted him in the second with his first homer of the spring for a 4-1 lead.

Bauer allowed a leadoff homer to Luis Marte in the fifth, but that was the last run the Rangers scored. Nick Goody, Stephen Fife, Jeff Beliveau and Neil Ramirez followed with a scoreless inning each. Ramirez pitched the ninth for the save.

The Indians finished with eight hits. Lindor and Rajai Davis stole bases. Erik Gonzalez was thrown out on an attempted steal of second in the seventh inning.

Next time the Cleveland Indians promote Francisco Mejia, he could be playing the outfield

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio - When cut down day comes in spring training, youth is usually well served.

Francisco Mejia and Bobby Bradley are 21. There's still a gleam in their eye and hope for a big pay day. So when manager Terry Francona told them Monday morning that they were being sent to the minors, there were no hurt feelings.

In fact, Francona told Mejia, the switch-hitting catcher, that he's going to play some outfield at Class AAA Columbus to grease his path to the big leagues. Bradley hasn't been assigned to a team yet, but Francona called his performance before and during his stay in camp as one of the highlights of the spring. Bradley lost 30 pounds during the winter and hit .391 (9-for-23) with four RBI in 13 spring-training games.

There were no sunshine and roses in the air when the Indians told veteran outfielder Abraham Almonte, 28, that he was being optioned to Columbus.

"He came in a little heavy," Francona told reporters Monday in Goodyear, Ariz. "He's lost weight since he's been here, but he was competing (for a job)."

"We told him you're not a candidate to make the team so we're going to send you to the other side. He's going to work on all three outfield positions. We told him when he first got here (2015) he was good in center field. He's not been so reliable in the outfield. We told him that."

Two things about Almonte:

1 The Indians signed him to a one-year \$825,000 deal in January to avoid arbitration.

2 That's about as public a rip job as you'll ever hear Francona level at a player. Not only did Almonte come to camp fat, but he wasn't ready to compete and his defensive play went backward. That's some trifecta.

Mejia hit .421 (8-for-19) with two homers and seven RBI in 11 games this spring. The Indians like his bat so much, to say nothing of him being blocked by catchers Yan Gomes and Roberto Perez, that they're going to start the outfield experiment as soon as he gets to minor league camp. That's how much they want his offense in Cleveland.

Five of Frankie Mejia's 14 HRs with @AkronRubberDuck in 2017 came from the right side.

1 of 1 came from the right side today. pic.twitter.com/swWPsIOCHC

-- Cleveland Indians (@Indians) February 26, 2018

They tried him at third base at the end of last season in the Arizona Fall League and that didn't take. Mejia didn't complain, but Francona wondered if he really wanted to play the hot corner.

The Indians could have used him in the outfield this spring, but they felt catching was a big enough burden. Besides, there's still 10 outfielders in camp as the Indians await the progress reports of Michael Brantley and Brandon Guyer.

"During batting practice, he goes out in outfield and shags balls," said Francona. "So we're going to let him play some outfield. We wanted to reinforce that this was in no means an indictment on his catching. If anything we were really pleased with his progression."

"I told him, 'look we have Perez and Gomes. Do the math.' He's such an advanced hitter. And if he's able to play another position and there's an injury, he could find himself not only in the big leagues, but playing."

The Indians gave Mejia a choice. He could have concentrated solely on catching or he could catch and play the outfield at Columbus.

Francisco Mejia rips a first big league hit and RBI

"We told him if you want to be a full-time catcher, we'll back you 100 percent," said Mejia. "When we laid it out to him he said, 'No, I've got to do this.'"

Mejia made his big league debut in September after hitting .297 (103-for-347) with 14 homers and 52 RBI in 92 games at Class AA Akron. In 2015, he hit in 50 consecutive games at Class A Lake County and Class A Lynchburg. In the process of tying Roman Mejias (1954) for the fourth longest streak in minor league history, Mejia changed leagues, played in the Futures Game in San Diego and was almost traded to Milwaukee.

Here's how Francona described his hitting style, "He just has a knack from both sides of the plate. I don't know if a lot of people could hit like that. It's unique. But if you break it down, when the pitcher releases the ball he's in a real good place to hit. "

The Indians, besides Mejia, Bradley and Almonte, demoted Adam Plutko, Shawn Morimando, Julian Merryweather, Louis Head, Josh Martin and Adam Wilk. Mejia, Almonte, Plutko, Morimando and Merryweather were optioned to Columbus. The others were re-assigned to the minor league camp.

Trevor Bauer pleased with the slider (but his fastball and general opening questions are a different story)

By T.J. Zuppe 5h ago

GOODYEAR, Ariz. — Monday's mid-game conversation with Trevor Bauer began innocently enough. But these things usually do.

How'd you feel out there today?

Rarely do these sorts of post start interviews lead to anything truly groundbreaking or astonishing. As a result, questions about how a hurler felt are pretty typical opening remarks to grease the skids.

But it didn't take long for Bauer to take a playful jab at the reporter's inquiry.

"That is the worst opening question," Bauer jokingly retorted. "How much effort did you put into that?"

While his words might have initially avoided the question, his jovial mood (and preference to discuss Duke's chances in the NCAA Tournament) revealed much more.

Bauer was pleased to get through five innings against the Rangers, yielding two runs on five hits, striking out eight. He even joked that pitching coach Carl Willis was holding him back. But despite the growing workload, Bauer was far more enthusiastic about the pitches he employed to get through his longest outing of the spring — all of them.

"I felt good," Bauer said. "It's the first time all spring I've thrown my full complement of pitches, so I was really encouraged by the slider and the curveball playing together, and how effective those were when paired together."

As Bauer detailed earlier this spring, the slider is a new offering he developed over the winter. The desert environment can make breaking ball evaluation difficult, but the righty sees the continued reps with it as an overwhelming positive.

"By the time I get to the season, I will have 60 innings under my belt with it," he said. "So, that's like a full college season for some people, or high school season or whatever. So, yeah, I plenty of time, plenty of experience throwing it. A lot of those innings — probably 40 to 50 of them — are going to be throwing nothing but sliders as my breaking pitch. So, I have a generally idea of how I want to use it and it's been good."

Despite the early interview antics, Bauer was willing to take a few shots at himself. Sure, his curve and slider might be working in harmony, but his four-seam fastball, according to his own evaluation, currently has the characteristics of a misguided "missile."

"My fastball's the worst pitch in baseball," Bauer said. "I think if you look at the numbers on that, it'd probably back it up."

The worst pitch in baseball? Let's pump the brakes. According to FanGraphs pitch value, 16 qualified hurlers owned a worse fastball in 2017 (and pitches don't exactly exist in a vacuum, either — sequencing and deception matters). But, to his point, his fastball has typically been among his least reliable offerings throughout his career.

While every pitcher could probably gain something from featuring their best pitches more often, Bauer still subscribes to the more is more theory. And yes, that still applies to his fastball usage.

"The numbers say that for every additional pitch you throw, every additional pitch type, you become more effective," Bauer said, "as long as you throw all of them over a certain threshold of time. The threshold is like five percent or something like that. So, the more the better."

Unless, of course, he's referring to questions about how he's feeling. You can leave those back in the press box.

Other notes from camp

Bradley Zimmer launched his first homer of the spring Monday, clubbing a ball over the center-field fence in the second inning.

While we've seen his defense, speed and occasional offensive flash in the past, the moment served as a reminder that Zimmer has yet to consistently display every bit of his tool box in the majors.

"In BP today, he was hitting balls over (the center-field fence)," Francona said. "There's a lot in there. It's kind of exciting. We haven't seen all of it, yet."

Abraham Almonte was of several roster cuts Monday morning. The timing of the option initially felt a little odd, but Francona's explanation sounded like a purposeful message.

"We told him that he came in a little heavy," Francona said. "He's lost weight while he's been here, but he was competing. We just told him, we said, 'At this point in time, you're not a candidate to make the team, so we're going to send you over to the other side.' He's going to work on all three outfield positions ... When he first got here he did such a good job with center field, and then he's not been as reliable in the outfield (since then). We kind of told him that."

Jose Ramirez delivered a two-run triple in the bottom of the first, but the extra-base attack wasn't the most notable event of the afternoon. It was far more shocking to see Ramirez run more than 270 feet at full speed, slide into third base and aggressively jog home on an RBI groundout by Edwin Encarnacion — all without losing his helmet.

Mike Napoli entered Monday's game as a replacement, earning a warm reception from the home crowd during his eighth-inning at-bat.

Before Napoli entered the game, he delivered the Tribe's lineup card to the umpires prior to the matchup and even sat down by the coaches in the early stages of the exhibition battle, proving just how highly the veteran is thought of by Francona and his assistants.

Danny Salazar continues to progress through his long-toss program. While no exact date has been set for a mound return, things are slowly advancing in that direction.

"He is actually, I think, getting a little bit to the point where he's turning a pretty good corner, where he's starting to feel good about stuff," Francona said. "That's a good indication."

Michael Brantley recently added baserunning to his rehab and was expected to begin outfield drills Monday.

"He's really doing well," Francona said. "He's excited."

By increasing Francisco Mejia's versatility, the Indians demonstrate their strong belief in his offensive potential

By T.J. Zuppe Mar 13, 2018 3

GOODYEAR, Ariz. — Third base was supposed to create another potential path to the majors for Francisco Mejia in 2018. But Terry Francona couldn't tell how eager the natural catcher was to occasionally man the hot corner.

"I just wasn't sure how genuinely excited he was," Francona said.

Those thoughts have since subsided. The third-base portion of the experiment is officially over, as is Mejia's stay on the big-league side of camp. The club optioned their top prospect to Triple-A on Monday, but his production in the Cactus League had little to do with the decision.

After all, he was OPS-ing a blistering 1.292 in 19 spring at-bats.

Instead, Mejia was sent away with a new task: add some outfield work to his expanding routine.

"(After batting practice), he always goes to the outfield and shags flies," Francona said. "So, we're going to let him play some outfield."

The Indians felt asking Mejia to do that in major-league camp was asking a bit much from the 22-year-old switch-hitter. He'll now get an opportunity to expand his defensive capabilities in a much more comfortable minor-league setting. But if Mejia can use his athleticism and strong arm to become comfortable enough to occasionally play the position, it could create a greater chance to contribute in the majors this year.

"I think we explained it properly. We won't just send him on his way," Francona said. "We'll check and recheck and make sure he's OK, because he's one of our biggest prospects, that's for sure. It just seems like he's got that kind of a bat that he could probably step into a major-league lineup and help you."

For now, they have no plans of removing catcher from Mejia's resume — they're simply adding to it.

Long term, they're still committed to making him an everyday performer behind the plate. But in the short term, they also possess little desire to deny his offensive ability. At some point, his plus bat will grow beyond the limitations of Triple-A. But where does he fit into their 2018 plans? That's been one of the more difficult things to project this spring.

"Look, we have (Roberto) Perez and (Yan) Gomes. Do the math," Francona told Mejia. "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."

"We'll just see where it goes. I don't think it can hurt him. He's not going to catch every single day anyway, so I think it can be a really good thing."

One thing playing in their favor is the ongoing reduction of balls in play.

The Athletic's Travis Sawchik recently pointed out the declining number of outfield chances in the past few seasons, largely due to the increased rate of homers and strikeouts. While center field still sees a healthy number of opportunities in comparison, the importance of having a plus defender in the corners has been reduced, particularly if the offense created in that spot is better than the alternative.

And we've already seen the Indians put Jason Kipnis and Carlos Santana — two players without previous MLB outfield experience — in the outfield during the postseason.

Defensive positioning can often become a give and take. Does the offensive advantage the player creates exceed what you might lose by putting a less-than-stellar defender in that spot? That depends on a few factors.

This was the 2017 league average production at the positions Mejia could possibly see time.

Catcher: 89 wRC+

Left field: 100 wRC+

Right field: 103 wRC+

(Note: 100 is league average run creation for all hitters.)

Mejia projects to have the capability of contributing above-average run creation at each of those spots. And while catcher will always present his greatest opportunity to hold an offensive advantage, the Indians certainly believe the bat is good enough to justify creating the additional versatility by risking any defensive issues.

"If you break it down, when the pitcher's releasing the ball, he's in a really good place to hit," Francona said. "And, even when he gets out front, he's got such good hands and he keeps his hands back so well, he can either foul off a pitch or he's strong enough to get under it and still hit the ball out of the ballpark. But, like most good hitters, the more pitches he sees and the deeper he gets in the count, he gets more dangerous. So, he's got the knack, because he uses the whole field. And I mean the whole field. But, he can also hit the ball in the gap and out of the ballpark from both sides of the plate."

More than anything, the continued desire to find additional avenues to the majors speaks to the organization's belief in their top prospect. The decision is more about removing a possible barrier between Mejia and his eventual promotion.

Catcher? Third base? Outfield? DH? They're certainly serious about creating a spot, perhaps sooner rather than later. If they can do that through increased flexibility — all without seriously disrupting the chemistry Perez and Gomes enjoy with their pitching staff — they're willing to give it a shot.

"We went to pretty good lengths to try to make sure that he understands that this is not an indictment on his catching," Francona said. "He's just such an advanced hitter. We want to take advantage of it."

Procedural moves have Francisco Mejia, Bobby Bradley, Abraham Almonte, others leaving Indians' major-league camp by **Beacon Journal/Ohio.com**

The Indians on Monday made nine procedural moves relative to major-league camp as the club begins to consider decisions regarding the roster as Opening Day approaches on March 29.

Top prospect Francisco Mejia, outfielder Abraham Almonte, left-handed pitcher Shawn Morimando and right-handed pitchers Adam Plutko and Julian Merryweather were all optioned to Triple-A Columbus. First baseman Bobby Bradley, right-handed pitchers Louis Head and Josh Martin and left-handed pitcher Adam Wilk were all reassigned to minor-league camp.

In the case of the switch-hitting Almonte, he was a potential candidate as a fifth outfielder behind Michael Brantley, Lonnie Chisenhall, Bradley Zimmer and Brandon Guyer. Only Guyer hits right-handed. The lefty-heavy group is a reason why one of right-handed hitters Rajai Davis or Melvin Upton Jr. could have a case to make the Opening Day roster as another option against left-handed pitchers.

Almonte has fallen out of that competition. According to what Indians manager Terry Francona told reporters in Goodyear, Ariz. on Monday, the Indians weren't entirely pleased with how Almonte arrived to camp this spring. He hit .174 in 23 at-bats.

"We told him that he came in a little heavy," Francona told reporters. "He's lost weight while he's been here, but he was competing. We told him, 'At this point, you're not a candidate to make the team.' ... He hasn't been as reliable in the outfield, and we kind of told him that."

The conversation with Bradley, the No. 3 prospect in the Indians' system according to Baseball America, was more pleasant. Bradley hit .251 with a .796 OPS, 23 home runs, 25 doubles and 89 RBI for the RubberDucks last season. He followed that up by hitting .391 with two doubles in 23 at-bats this spring. A left-handed hitter, Bradley projects as a power hitter and he still hasn't turned 22 years old.

"I reminded him that, 'You're 22 years old [on May 29], you haven't been to Triple-A yet,'" Francona said. "'Don't forget to be young. ... You're only young once. Enjoy doing things right.' I think he's in a really good place. He's grown up so much and man it was fun having him [in camp]. He was a real highlight for us."

Indians 4, Rangers 2

Jose Ramirez tripled home two runs in the first inning and Bradley Zimmer belted a solo home run in the second to lead the Indians past the Texas Rangers 4-2 in a Cactus League game on Monday.

It was Zimmer's first home run of the spring. Francisco Lindor went 1-for-3 with a stolen base, his third of the spring.

Trevor Bauer pitched five innings, allowing two runs on five hits and racking up eight strikeouts.