

Does Mejia have a shot at Opening Day roster?

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

Prior to the Indians' game against the Rockies on Friday, MLB.com reporter Jordan Bastian answered fans questions live on MLB's Facebook page at Salt River Fields, as part of the latest Edward Jones Beat Reporter's Inbox. Here are some more questions on Tribe fans' minds with Opening Day less than three weeks away.

Barring something unexpected, it appears doubtful that Francisco Mejia will begin the season on the Indians' Opening Day roster.

Per MLB Pipeline, Mejia is not only Cleveland's top prospect, but the top catching prospect in baseball. At the moment, though, the Indians are happy with their Major League catching tandem of Roberto Perez and Yan Gomes. They are both capable starters who have proven to be among the game's top defenders and have built a strong rapport with one of the baseball's best pitching staffs.

The 22-year-old Mejia got a taste of the big leagues last season and is definitely knocking on the door again. One thing the Indians are considering -- given Mejia's advanced approach to hitting -- is trying to explore ways to expedite his path to The Show. That is why Mejia played some third base in the Arizona Fall League and why, as manager Terry Francona has hinted, the catcher might play some outfield early in the season.

If something were to happen to one of Perez or Gomes, that is when the real debate will begin about Mejia's readiness for handling the responsibilities of a big league catcher on a contending club. Francona has noted that Cleveland added a veteran catcher like Ryan Hanigan in case the organization is not ready to hand the keys to Mejia, if there were a setback with the Major League catchers.

@ventoa24

Random Q - who do you think is better defensively/behind the plate, Yan or Perez?

That is a tough call, but I'd give the edge to Perez at the moment. Earlier this spring, I dove into that very debate on my blog. According to Baseball Prospectus' version of WAR, which includes defense, Perez (1.81) was slightly ahead of Gomes (1.63) last season. Per BP, Perez had 12.5 framing runs, compared to 0.7 for Gomes. Perez (1.8) also ranked higher than Gomes (0.4) in blocking runs and posted 14.4 fielding runs above average (versus 3.2 for Gomes). Gomes, on the other hand, had 2.2 throwing runs, compared to 0.5 for Perez.

@Domi_Rella

Are there leaders in the clubhouse for the last couple of outfield spots (assuming both Brantley and Guyer aren't ready for the opener)? Rajai, Upton, Naquin, etc.

As things currently stand, Lonnie Chisenhall projects to get the bulk of the playing time in right and Bradley Zimmer is set to earn most of the innings in center. If both Michael Brantley (right ankle) and Brandon Guyer (left wrist) are unavailable for Opening Day, that could open the door for both Rajai Davis and Melvin Upton Jr. to crack the roster as right-handed outfield complements. Francona has noted that Brandon Barnes (in camp as a non-roster invitee, along with Davis and Upton) is also in the mix. Tyler Naquin also has an outside shot at winning the job in left, if Brantley's comeback lingers into the regular season.

@BrianLavrich

Do you see Tomlin and Merritt on the opening day roster? Or is one of them traded? #IndiansInbox

Right now, it's hard to envision both Josh Tomlin and Ryan Merritt on the Opening Day roster unless Merritt is given a job in the bullpen. Matt Belisle, Carlos Torres and Evan Marshall appear to be the main three contenders for the lone vacancy in the relief corps, though. If Merritt (out of Minor League options) does not work his way into the Opening Day plans, Cleveland might try to work out a trade rather than just exposing the lefty to waivers.

@thefirkster

Who makes the 25 man opening day roster? Yandy? Rajai? Upton? Urshela? Gonzalez? Merritt?

Since I touched on Davis, Upton and Merritt in the above answers, I'll focus on Yandy Diaz, Giovanni Urshela and Erik Gonzalez here. Diaz is currently facing an uphill battle, because the Indians are planning on opening the year with Jose Ramirez at third base. The Indians will be weighing whether Diaz is best served getting regular at-bats at Triple-A Columbus instead of filling a part-time bench role in the bigs. One of Urshela and Gonzalez -- both out of options -- will win a utility job on the bench, but that race remains too close to call. The priority for that job is defense and it could come down to who Francona trusts more as a late-inning defender at multiple positions.

Zach Christy

@Zachinpublic

Why didn't tribe go after moustakas?

I think this one comes down to fit more than anything. Say the Indians would have traded Kipnis over the winter, that would've cleared payroll and allowed Ramirez to move to second base. In that scenario, maybe Mike Moustakas would have been a fit. But, with Kipnis very much in the plans for 2018 now, Brantley working his way back to play left and Ramirez entrenched at third, there just isn't room in the inn.

@alexeyedid

How are the Indians going to make up for the hole left by Bryan Shaw? Clearly loved by Tito but I don't think the fans really appreciated him. Expect to see Bryan Shaw's innings distributed among Dan Otero, Zach McAllister, Nick Goody and Tyler Olson. I don't think Francona will have designated innings for any of those arms. Instead, the timing of their entrances will be determined by the game situation and the section of the order due up for the opposition. There will be a lot of mixing and matching early on, and maybe one of those relievers grows into a higher volume of high-leverage work.

@mattgoody2

What are you going to do on your off day in Seattle after Opening Day?

I plan on putting on a flannel shirt, listening to Pearl Jam and seeing how many coffee shops I can hit in a single day.

Diaz faces battle for Opening Day roster

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. -- The Indians plan on opening the regular season with Jose Ramirez back at third base and Jason Kipnis manning second. That alignment has created an uphill battle for third baseman Yandy Diaz to make Cleveland's Opening Day roster.

Barring something unforeseen, Indians manager Terry Francona said the debate about Diaz will center around not only the roster composition, but whether the third baseman will be better served opening in the Minors. With Triple-A Columbus, Diaz could garner regular at-bats and playing time, rather than filling a part-time bench role for the Indians.

"We'll see how it plays out," Francona said. "There's a lot of factors. There's a balance there, for sure. Sometimes you think guys are better off going to play for a while. They may be disappointed they get sent down, but getting 200 at-bats, as opposed to sitting -- especially in the first part of the season, where you're kind of struggling to find at-bats for guys, and it's cold -- sometimes they're better off going to Triple-A and playing."

Diaz, who went 1-for-3 with a single in Friday's 8-5 win against the Rockies, opened last year as the Indians' third baseman due to Kipnis beginning the season on the disabled list. In 49 games overall, Diaz turned in a .263/.352/.327 slash line, but he finished strong. Across his final 31 games in 2017, dating back to a recall from the Minors on Aug. 22, Diaz hit .304 with an .810 OPS.

"You look at his Triple-A numbers, they're massive," Francona said. "It's an interesting bat. Now, we've got to get him to the point where he's reliable."

Kluber's march to Opening Day

The Rockies fielded a lineup with a handful of regulars on Friday, giving Indians ace Corey Kluber an opportunity to treat his outing more like a regular-season start. The pitching line that the right-hander pieced together certainly looked like what Cleveland has come to expect.

"I guess maybe trying to sequence a little more normal like we would in a real game," Kluber said of his approach against Colorado at Sal River Fields. "I'm trying to get into that mode. Earlier on, we worked on a few things, but today we kind of took it more like a real game, kind of attacked the hitters like we normally would."

In 3 2/3 innings, Kluber struck out seven and ended with one run allowed on two hits with one walk issued. The lone run charged to Kluber came after his exit, via a two-run homer surrendered by Neil Ramirez. Overall, Kluber logged 57 pitches, including 39 strikes in the performance.

"When the outing's over with," Kluber said, "you take a step back and analyze, 'Did I get what I wanted out of today?' And I think, for me, part of that is feeling like I was in a good spot mechanically."

Prospect watch

The Indians are excited about Francisco Mejia's potential as a hitter. Friday, the young catcher got the start as the Tribe's designated hitter and promptly put his power on display.

Mejia, who is Cleveland's top prospect and the top catching prospect in baseball per MLB Pipeline, belted a towering three-run home run off Colorado starter Jon Gray in the third inning. Mejia ended the afternoon 3-for-4 with a single, double and three RBIs.

Injury updates

- Left fielder Michael Brantley (rehabbing from right ankle surgery in October) and right-hander Danny Salazar (right shoulder inflammation) were back with the team on Friday. Both players were sent home from the complex on Thursday due to illness.
- Left-hander Robert Zarate (elbow soreness) and right-hander Cole Sulser (fractured rib) were reassigned to Minor League camp on Friday. Righty Julian Merryweather was slated to undergo Tommy John surgery on his throwing elbow on Friday.

Worth noting

- The Indians made a handful of roster moves on Friday morning, reducing the number of players in camp to 59. Cleveland optioned shortstops Willi Castro (No. 5 on the Tribe's Top 30 prospects list, per MLB Pipeline) and Yu Chang (No. 7) to Double-A Akron, and also reassigned first baseman Nellie Rodriguez to Minor League camp.
- Relief ace Andrew Miller's next scheduled Cactus League appearance has been pushed back to Sunday against the Brewers. Francona said that Miller, who has not pitched in a game since Monday, is simply on a conservative spring program.

Up next

Right-hander Mike Clevinger, who projects to be the Indians' No. 4 starter, is scheduled to take the mound against the Padres in a 3:10 p.m. ET Cactus League tilt in Peoria, Ariz. Zach McAllister, Dan Otero, Adam Wilk, Jeff Beliveau, Josh Martin and Cameron Hill are also penciled in to pitch for the Tribe. Eric Lauer will start for San Diego. The game will be broadcast live on MLB.TV.

Jordan Bastian has covered the Indians for MLB.com since 2011, and p

Cleveland Indians don't need Yandy Diaz to 'launch,' they just want him to keep swinging

By Paul Hoynes,

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Lots of people think Yandy Diaz should join the "launch angle" revolution.

They want him to go airborne so he can get more hang time and hit more home runs. It makes sense because no one hits the ball harder on the ground than Diaz. He led MLB in exit velocity on ground balls last season year.

The problem is there are guys with gloves strategically placed around the diamond to catch those ground balls and turn them into outs. If he lifts the ball and drives it far and deep into the air, there is no defense that can stop him.

But the chanting for Diaz to put a few degrees of lift into his swing is not coming from manager Terry Francona and the Indians.

"The best way to mess him up is to try to get him to pull the ball in the air," Francona told reporters in Goodyear, Ariz. "He won't be the hitter he is. We know that."

Diaz's body builder's physique is trapped inside the swing of a No.2 hitter. In Cuba, where he learned to play, he usually hit second. His right-handed swing is grooved to hit the hole between first and second base to advance the runner on first.

But no matter how hard Diaz hits the ball, the infield shift has largely neutralized his swing. Last season Diaz hit .263 (41-for-156) with no homers and 13 RBI. Nine of his hits went for extra bases.

When Francona looks at Diaz, he does not see that hitter. He sees the Diaz who hit .350 (108-for-309) with five homers and a .914 OPS at Class AAA Columbus last year. He sees the Diaz who hit .325 (117-for-360) with seven homers and .860 OPS in 2016 at Columbus.

"You look at his Triple-A numbers and they're massive. It's an interesting bat," said Francona. We have to get him to the point where he's reliable. That's the word we're looking for at third base from him."

CLE@TEX: Diaz rips a double to tally first career hit

At the plate the Indians just want Diaz, 26, to keep swinging.

"As Yandy gets his at-bats, the field will swing around," said Francona. "Right now he's driving the ball to right field. Give him another 500 to 600 at-bats and you're going to see (him start to pull the ball). He doesn't need to try and do that now because that will mess him up.

"Naturally, with at-bats, you'll see him start pulling the ball, especially in the air. Nomar (Garciparra) was like that, especially in the Arizona Fall League. He'd rifle balls to right center. Guys would tease him about it. I would say, 'Nomie don't change. You're going to be OK.'"

Garciparra, one of the best hitters in Red Sox history, was a six-time All-Star. He finished his career as a .313 lifetime hitter. In nine years in Boston, he hit .323 (1,281-for-3,968).

In Friday's 8-5 win over the Rockies, Diaz started at third. He lined a single to right field in his first at-bat, grounded out to second in his second and hit into a double play in his third.

There are times when Diaz lets pitches get too deep into the strike zone, which prevents him from pulling the ball. Again, Francona says patience is necessary.

"Driving the ball the other way, to me, is way better than being way out front (with your swing) and hitting the occasional home run," said Francona. "Guys who hit the ball the other way - I'm not saying they should be slump proof - but because they let the ball travel in on them and hit the ball hard there are going to be hits there.

"I just think with a natural progression, you'll see him pull the ball more without being told. It will happen organically. Good hitters figure it out as they go. They just need at-bats."

Defensively, the Indians like Diaz at third after bouncing him around the infield and outfield.

"He's got good hands," said Francona.

It's hard to see how Diaz will fit on the 25-man roster come opening day. He's played third base exclusively this spring and that position belongs to Jose Ramirez. Could he make it as a right-handed hitter off the bench?

"A lot of it depends where the fits are," said Francona. "Do we want him to develop more and go with someone else who can handle sitting on the bench? There are a lot of factors."

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 03.10.2018

Corey Kluber strikes out seven, Francisco Mejia homers as the Cleveland Indians rock the Rockies, 8-5

By Paul Hoynes,

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Corey Kluber struck out seven and Francisco Mejia had three hits and three RBI on Friday as the Indians beat Colorado, 8-5, at Salt River Fields in Scottsdale, Ariz. in a spring-training game.

Kluber, topping out at just over 92 mph, allowed one run in 3 2/3 innings in his third start of the spring. Kluber has 15 strikeouts in 8 2/3 innings.

Yan Gomes started the Tribe's offense with a two-run homer in the first off Jon Gray. It was Gomes' second homer in as many games.

The Indians made it 6-0 in third on a RBI single by Lonnie Chisenhall and Mejia's three-run homer to right center. It was Mejia's second homer of the spring and gave him seven RBI.

Mejia, who started at DH, added a single in the fifth and a double in the seventh. Mejia's three hits led the offense, while Bradley Zimmer, Gomes, Jason Kipnis and Mike Napoli added two each. Kipnis is hitting .500 (11-for-22) with six homers and 12 RBI this spring.

The Indians finished with 15 hits. Giovanni Urshela, competing for the utility job, supplied their last run with a homer in the eighth. It was his second of the spring.

The Rockies scored their first two runs on a two-run homer by David Dahl off Neil Ramirez in the fourth. Ramirez, who relieved Kluber with two out and one on, has allowed five homers this spring.

Nick Goody struck out the side in order in the fifth, but was charged with a run in the sixth. Matt Belisle pitched a scoreless seventh and Alexi Ogando struck out three in the eighth, but allowed a run.

Ben Taylor finished the game for the Tribe, allowing a run and two doubles. The Indians are 9-6-2 in Cactus League play.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 03.10.2018

Corey Kluber gets 3rd spring training start, Francisco Mejia bats 6th vs. Rockies: Cleveland Indians lineup

By Joe Noga,

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Corey Kluber gets his third start of spring training for the Cleveland Indians on Friday as the Tribe takes on the Colorado Rockies at Salt River Fields.

Francisco Mejia, who drove in the go-ahead run on Thursday night against the Dodgers with a groundout in the seventh inning, will bat sixth as the designated hitter. Bradley Zimmer gets the start in center field batting leadoff.

Jason Kipnis, who leads MLB with six spring training home runs in just seven games played, will hit second.

Kluber, meanwhile, held Oakland to one run in two innings on Feb. 27 with three strikeouts and one walk. He picked up the win against Milwaukee on Sunday with five strikeouts in three innings.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 03.10.2018

Cleveland Indians make first roster cuts; infielders Willie Castro, Yu Chang optioned to Class AA

By Paul Hoynes,

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The Indians on Friday optioned shortstops Willi Castro and Yu Chang to Class AA Akron and re-assigned first baseman Nellie Rodriguez, right-hander Cole Sulser and left-hander Robert Zarate to minor league camp in the first roster cut of spring training.

Castro and Chang, on the 40-man roster, were in their first big-league camp. They both swung the bat well, but struggled defensively. The switch-hitting Castro hit .308 (4-for-13) with an RBI in seven games. Chang hit .417 (5-for-12) with one RBI in nine games.

"Willi got 20 to 25 plate appearances," said manager Terry Francona. "He got to be around Frankie Lindor every day. He's a pretty exciting young guy who needs to go play. Getting to spend three weeks with him was fun for us."

The Indians used Chang quite a bit a third base because they think he might outgrow shortstop. The position was new to him and he did not look comfortable.

Last season Chang hit 24 homers at Akron, while Castro hit .290 with 11 homers at Class A Lynchburg.

"Chang is very similar to Castro," said Francona. "He's an interesting kid. He's learning English rapidly. He has some skills, and power for a shortstop, who could probably play third. We're excited about both of them."

Rodriguez helped the Indians beat the Dodgers on Thursday night with a two-run single before being demoted. He hit .412 (7-for-17) with one homer and eight RBI this spring. His eight RBI ranked third on the team.

The 6-2, 250-pound Rodriguez is starting his seventh season in the Tribe's minor league system.

"He had a really good camp after the struggles of last year," said Francona. "He did a lot of work in the cage. It looks like he has an idea of what he wants to do at the plate. Now go do it."

"I think he has a framework to be more successful than before."

Rodriguez hit .170 (64-for-377) with 17 homers and 181 strikeouts last year at Class AAA Columbus.

Sulser, who pitched at Akron and Class AAA Columbus last season, came to camp with a broken rib and never pitched. He injured himself helping his parents move before camp started.

"He was really disappointed because of the broken rib," said Francona. "We reminded him that come June no one is going to remember he didn't throw three innings in spring training."

Zarate made three appearances this spring, allowing three unearned runs in three innings. The opposition hit .308 against him.

"His elbow was a little balky and he was going to miss about five days," said Francona. "By that time the innings wouldn't be there."

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 03.10.2018

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

By Terry Pluto,

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."

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 03.10.2018