

Offense stymied on road trip, can't back Kluber

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

ANAHEIM -- That last pitch thrown by the Indians on Wednesday does not properly portray the reasons behind the team's latest loss.

Tribe reliever Zach McAllister watched a fastball soar off the bat of Zack Cozart, who was soon mobbed by his Angels teammates in the immediate wake of Cleveland's 3-2, 13-inning loss in walk-off fashion. It was the Indians' lineup, however, that was the real culprit in the defeat, as was the case for the bulk of the season-opening road trip.

"We can definitely improve," Indians shortstop Francisco Lindor said. "It's just a matter of us continuing to work, continuing to take good at-bats the right way, continuing to do your pregame stuff the right way. It will be there. The results will be there. The guys aren't hitting, but our pitching staff is doing a great job. They are doing a great job."

That was true for ace Corey Kluber, who took a hard-luck loss despite spinning a complete game on Opening Day and then walked away with a no-decision for his work on Wednesday. The right-hander held the Angels to two runs over seven innings, in which he struck out six, walked two and only flinched once.

It was also true for Cleveland's bullpen, which had two pitchers (closer Cody Allen and righty Nick Goody) log multi-inning outings, while getting key outs from relief ace Andrew Miller and lefty Tyler Olson as well. McAllister -- in an attempt to save starter Carlos Carrasco from being pressed into emergency duty -- took the mound for the third game in a row.

"Being a competitor, you want the ball," McAllister said. "You want to be out there."

Thanks to another tough day in the batter's box for the majority of Cleveland's hitters, the few mistakes made on the mound were magnified.

Kluber was on the hook for a game-tying home run by Japanese phenom Shohei Ohtani, who electrified the crowd with his two-run shot in the fifth (his second shot in as many games). McAllister took the loss for his ill-fated fastball to Cozart, who sent it over the wall in left to end a battle of bullpens.

"Fastball is my best pitch," McAllister said. "Yeah, he saw a decent amount that at-bat, but I thought the one right before that he just barely got it. I thought if I could do something like that again, hopefully he'd swing and miss. He definitely didn't miss it."

McAllister was not even supposed to pitch Wednesday, but the lack of support from the Indians' lineup made it necessary. Against lefty Tyler Skaggs, Cleveland struck for just one run in the first and another in the fifth. After Jason Kipnis' two-out RBI single ended Skaggs' part in the game, the Tribe went 2-for-27 the rest of the day.

During the 2-4 swing through Seattle and Anaheim, the Indians' offense posted a .161/.264/.338 slash line to go along with 21 runs total. Twelve of those runs came within the Tribe's two wins on the trip.

"That's part of it," Kluber said of the low run support. "There are going to be times throughout the year when they're gonna pick me up when I don't do my job that great. That's part of it. If you start to get frustrated with that sort of thing, then you're worried about things that are out of your control."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Simmons sets up Ohtani: Desperate for baserunners, the Angels' Andrelton Simmons beat out a bunt down the third-base line with one out in the fifth inning. It was the Angels' first hit of the game off Kluber, who held Los Angeles to an 0-for-13 showing up to that point. Two batters later, Ohtani blasted his home run.

"He was terrific," Indians manager Terry Francona said of Kluber. "He had a bunt hit and a home run and a double. Other than that, he was flawless. We just weren't able to put much on the board."

Zimmer halts rally: After Ohtani's shot, Angels catcher Martin Maldonado drilled a pitch from Kluber off the wall in center. Indians center fielder Bradley Zimmer snared the ball with his bare hand off the carom and fired a pinpoint throw to Lindor at second base. The shortstop applied the tag on Maldonado, whose would-be double turned into a rally-killing out.

"That was a great play," Francona said. "His awareness to not just make the play, but come up and know that he's got a throw -- he's good. He's good out there."

QUOTABLE

"I'm looking forward to playing in front of the home crowd. I'm looking forward to being in my locker room and the familiar dugout and all that stuff. I'm not looking forward to the weather, but I'm looking forward to everything else." --Lindor, on returning to Cleveland

"As a club right now, we don't have anybody hot. We certainly had chances. We'd get some runners on base. We just couldn't get a big hit. It certainly made it hard on this trip, or today, but they're good hitters. The hope is they all get hot at the same time. That'll be terrific." --Francona

SOUND SMART WITH YOUR FRIENDS

Allen worked two shutout innings, covering the ninth and 10th against the Angels. It marked the ninth time in his career that he logged two scoreless frames and the first occurrence since July 9, 2016, against the Yankees.

MITEL REPLAY OF THE DAY

The Angels tried to get Lindor's stolen base with two outs in the fifth inning overturned, but the play stood. Kipnis then followed with an RBI single, and Skaggs was removed from the game with Cleveland holding a 2-0 lead.

WHAT'S NEXT

The Indians will open their 2018 home schedule on Friday, when Carrasco takes the mound in front of a sellout crowd at Progressive Field for a 4:10 p.m. ET clash with the rival Royals. Carrasco won 18 games in '17 and finished fourth in AL Cy Young voting.

Tribe to activate Brantley for home opener

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

ANAHEIM -- The only thing that might keep Michael Brantley out of the Indians' lineup for Friday's home opener is the wintry conditions currently sweeping through Cleveland. If nature decides to play along, though, the All-Star left fielder is poised to make his return against the Royals.

Prior to Wednesday's game at Angel Stadium, Indians manager Terry Francona said the team is currently planning on activating Brantley from the 10-day disabled list for Friday's game against Kansas City. Brantley is already in Cleveland and prepping for a return to the field for the Tribe.

"He flew to Cleveland last night, and I talked to him yesterday," Francona said Wednesday. "The plan -- I don't think it's any big secret -- the plan is to activate him. I think just, using good judgment, we'll double-check with him. But, I think everybody's on the same page."

Brantley took part in a pair of extended Spring Training games on Monday and Tuesday, marking the final step in his rehab program at the team's complex in Goodyear, Ariz. Rather than send the left fielder out on a Minor League rehab assignment -- where inclement weather might risk a disruption of his schedule -- the Indians preferred to have Brantley join the Major League team and be around its training and medical staff.

Last season, Brantley was limited to 90 games due to a right ankle injury, which necessitated surgery in October. During the spring, he was unrestricted with his hitting activity, but did not make his Cactus League debut until March 21 due to a gradual build-up in a running program. Brantley appeared in three official spring games (10 at-bats), but accumulated more at-bats and innings in Minor League games as well.

When Brantley is activated, Francona said he will look to build in some scheduled off-days for the veteran in the early portion of his return.

"Yes, we will. Definitely," Francona said. "[Head athletic trainer James Quinlan] sent out kind of a, not a schedule, but just some ideas. Common sense, I think, kind of rules the day there."

Brantley hit .299 with nine home runs, 20 doubles, 52 RBIs and an .801 OPS last year, but the bulk of that production came in the first half of the season, when he was named an American League All-Star by his peers. Brantley -- limited to 11 games in 2016 due to right shoulder and biceps woes -- first hurt the ankle on May 7 last year against the Royals. Brantley aggravated the injury on Aug. 8 in a game against the Rockies and was sidelined until Sept. 29.

While Brantley finished his rehab schedule, the Indians headed north this season with Tyler Naquin serving as the primary left fielder. Outfielders Rajai Davis, Brandon Guyer, Bradley Zimmer and Lonnie Chisenhall also earned spots on the Opening Day roster.

Francona laughed when asked if Brantley will need to take batting practice in the snow to prepare for the upcoming 10-game homestand in Cleveland.

"He might have to," Francona quipped. "We're about to go through it here at home. We've all seen it. It doesn't look real inviting."

Starting spots for Indians' Top 30 prospects

The Major League schedule started last week. Now it's the Minor Leaguers' turn.

The 2018 Minor League season kicks off on Thursday, meaning top prospects will be taking the field. Some have already done so. There are eight from MLB Pipeline's Top 100 Prospects list on big league rosters currently, starting of course with two-way phenom Shohei Ohtani, who has already picked up his first Major League win and home run in the season's Opening Week.

The other Top 100 prospects who are in the big leagues are Marlins center fielder Lewis Brinson (No. 27), Phillies super-utility man Scott Kingery (No. 35) and shortstop J.P. Crawford (No. 37), Rockies infielder Ryan McMahon (No. 41), Yankees third baseman Miguel Andujar (No. 65), Reds right-hander Tyler Mahle (No. 84), and Brewers right-hander Brandon Woodruff (No. 96). That list doesn't include Reds outfielder Jesse Winker, who was No. 82 when the season started, but has graduated off of the list.

Of the other 91 on the Top 100, 72 will begin the year with full-season clubs. There are 17 who are hurt or suspended (more below), while three are hanging back in extended spring training and will make their 2018 debut later on this summer. A complete list of projected starting spots for the entire Top 100 is at the bottom of this story.

Teams to watch

Gwinnett Stripers (Triple-A), Braves: Gwinnett has three Top 100 prospects on the Opening Day roster, led (for now) by No. 2 overall prospect Ronald Acuna, the dynamic outfielder most expect to see promoted at some point in the near future. The Stripers also have a pair of Top 100 arms in the rotation: right-hander Mike Soroka (No. 31) and lefty Kolby Allard (No. 58).

Clearwater Threshers (A Advanced), Phillies: In the Florida State League, Clearwater also has a quartet of Top 100 guys, starting with right-hander Sixto Sanchez, No. 26 on the Top 100. Fellow right-hander Adonis Medina gives the Threshers an exciting 1-2 punch in the rotation, while 2016 No. 1 overall pick Mickey Moniak (No. 88) will roam the outfield with 2017 first-rounder Adam Haseley (No. 95).

Winston-Salem (A Advanced), White Sox: Chicago's Carolina League affiliate should have four Top 100 guys once Luis Robert (No. 28) comes back from a left thumb injury. He'll join Blake Rutherford (No. 99) in the outfield, playing behind right-handers Dylan Cease (No. 61) and Dane Dunning (No. 92).

Teams on MiLB.TV

Watching the Top 100 in action is easy, thanks to MiLB.TV. There will be more than 5,500 Minor League games streamed via the service in 2018. Home games for all 30 Triple-A teams will be available, as well as contests involving all 30 Double-A clubs and select games from other classifications (not to mention a host of All-Star Games).

It all starts with the first game of a Pacific Coast League doubleheader between Oklahoma City (No. 33 Alex Verdugo of the Dodgers) and Iowa at 4:08 p.m. ET, while Charlotte (No. 10 Michael Kopech of the White Sox) visits Durham (No. 22 Willy Adames, No. 64 Jake Bauers, No. 82 Christian Arroyo) at 6:05 p.m. ET in the two earliest Triple-A contests. But those are just two of the 35 total games available for your viewing pleasure on Thursday.

New faces

Outside of Ohtani, the newest face in baseball, there are five other Top 100 prospects set to play for a new organization or make their professional debuts in 2018. Tigers top prospect Franklin Perez (No. 39) came over in the Justin Verlander trade, but he didn't pitch after the deal. His Tigers debut with Double-A Erie will be delayed because of injury (more on that below). Marlins outfielder Monte Harrison (No. 72) is the only other traded prospect starting anew. He was acquired via the Christian Yelich trade and will head to Double-A Jacksonville.

Shortstop Kevin Maitan (No. 87) is a new face for the second year in a row. He made his pro debut last year with the Braves, but was one of a dozen prospects in that system declared a free agent by Major League Baseball in the wake of international signing violations by the organization. Signed by the Angels, he'll make his new debut at some point later this summer after spending time in extended spring training. Also on the international front, Cuban outfielder Julio Pablo Martinez (No. 70) just signed with the Rangers in March and will make his debut later on as well.

Finally, on the domestic front, Tigers 2017 first-round pick Alex Faedo didn't pitch after signing last summer following a long season at the University of Florida. He'll make his official debut in the system with Lakeland in the Class A Advanced Florida State League.

On the shelf

There are 17 prospects on the Top 100 list who would normally be on full-season clubs, but aren't ready to answer the bell. All but one, Forrest Whitley of the Astros, are hurt or are working their way back from injury. Whitley, the No. 9 overall prospect, will serve a 50-game suspension for violating the Minor League Drug Prevention and Treatment Program. Here's the injury report on the remaining 14:

Eloy Jimenez, OF, White Sox (No. 4): Strained pectoral muscle
Alex Reyes, RHP, Cardinals (No. 17): Rehabbing from Tommy John surgery
Brent Honeywell, RHP, Rays (No. 18): TJ surgery
Triston McKenzie, RHP, Indians (No. 24): Forearm soreness
Luis Robert, OF, White Sox (No. 28): Left thumb
A.J. Puk, LHP, A's (No. 32): Impending TJ surgery
Franklin Perez, RHP, Tigers (No. 39): Lat strain
Anthony Alford, OF, Blue Jays (No. 47): Right hamstring
Luiz Gohara, LHP, Braves (No. 49): Left ankle
Alec Hansen, RHP, White Sox (No. 54): Forearm soreness
Matt Manning, RHP, Tigers (No. 55): Oblique
Kyle Lewis, OF, Mariners (No. 71): Right knee
Michael Chavis, 3B, Red Sox (No. 80): Oblique
Jay Groome, LHP, Red Sox (No. 85): Flexor strain
Anderson Espinoza, RHP, Padres (No. 89): Rehabbing from TJ surgery
Ryan Mountcastle, 3B, Orioles (No. 98): Right hand fracture

"I never leave the heartbeat of the pitcher."

by Jordan Bastian

In the early days of Spring Training, Terry Francona listened as pitching coach Carl Willis spoke to his new crop of pitchers. This was the first new voice for many of the men inside Cleveland's clubhouse.

Over the past five years, Mickey Callaway did the leading and he quickly earned a stellar reputation as the Indians' pitching staff piled up the strikeouts and victories. Francona often called Callaway a "rising star" and the Mets' agreed, hiring him as their manager over the winter.

Willis is not new at this, though. He has led multiple Cy Young winners in his career and already has previous stints with the Indians on his resume. This was a familiar voice returning to a familiar environment, and he inherits a much more veteran group that Callaway did so many years ago.

So, as Francona listened, while he was not surprised, the passion behind each word Willis spoke blew the manager away.

"I think he thought I was giving him [a hard time]," Francona said, "because I told him, 'Man, I got chills.' I think he thought I was getting on him, but I wasn't. I was serious."

Willis now has an entire spring and six regular-season games under his belt in this second tour with the Tribe. He's had time to develop early rapport with his pitchers and to get a feel for working not only with Francona, but alongside bullpen coach Scott Atchiscon and Major League coach Brian Sweeney.

In the hours leading up to Tuesday's game at Angel Stadium, Willis leaned on the bat rack in the visitors' dugout and held court with a handful of Cleveland reporters. He discussed the progress made with his pitchers and the transition back to the pitching coach job with the Indians.

As far as Francona is concerned, it's been a perfect fit so far.

"I think our pitchers really respect him," Francona said. "I think his personality is the perfect personality after Mickey, because he's so easygoing. Because, that's not an easy guy to follow and I think he's done a terrific job. The one thing I just love is he lives and dies with those pitchers and they know it."

In lieu of Covering the Bases today, here are the highlights of the Q&A with Willis...

Q: What has it been like getting to know Trevor Bauer and working with him so far?

Willis: "I can tell you it has been great. He has been very open. We talked from the beginning—I know he has different ideas. They aren't things that he just pulled out of the clouds. He does research. He finds things that he feels can apply to him to make him better. Some of those things, I'm learning. I told him: 'I want to learn. I want to talk to you about them, because I want to be able to understand.' But, at the same time, I said, 'I'm going to have ideas, things that I think could help you. Take them for what they're worth. I'm not pulling things out of the clouds, either. If I say something, it's something I thought about.'

"Quite frankly, I told him, 'If you want to tell me to go [expletive] in my hat, then that's fine, just don't make a production out of it in front of everybody.' To this point, our relationship has been great. It's been very open. I feel like there's a lot of trust that is developing. He's been a joy to work with at this point. I was never really around him much other than in 2015 a bit, when I was going to Columbus. In talking to the rest of the staff and talking to Tito, I think it's a credit to Trevor. I think he's opened up a lot more and is willing not only to communicate a little more about his ideas, but be willing to listen as well. That's totally a credit to him."

Q: In your talks with Bauer, has he stressed to you that, when you share your ideas, he wants to know the 'why' behind it?

Willis: "He didn't stress that to me really, but it's kind of what I was trying to tell him in regards to, if I say something, I've thought it out. I'm not just hoping that this is right or that this will help. Honestly, the interesting thing is, while his delivery looks a little different than everyone else's, I think a lot of the things he talks about—when he talks about his shoulder and hip connection and what he's trying to feel—they're really the same things that everyone's trying to feel. He just uses a different terminology and there's maybe a little different science behind it that he backs it up with, whereas we're more baseball. He has other things he can get behind. Hey, that works for me. Really, it doesn't matter to me. It's what works for him. He's the one we're counting on to go out and perform."

Q: Did your first Spring Training back here go as smoothly as you hoped it would?

Willis: "I will say it was much more comfortable for me to come here having relationships with the front office, a bit with Tito. I had never worked with the staff, but I knew them. Sarbaugh, I worked with in the Minor Leagues. Having a little bit of knowledge about the pitchers, having been around them briefly, there was a bit of comfort right away. Now, we're still getting to know each other and, honestly, it's become a lot easier as we got down toward the end of Spring Training, when I'm not overwhelmed with trying to make sure 28 guys all get in the game and get their appropriate opportunity. It's really picked up here in the last couple weeks. They've been great. They've been open. I've probably asked them more questions than they have asked me. But again, it's about them. I want them to be comfortable and I want to know what makes them tick. I'm very happy with how it's going right now and I'll say again, it's a credit to them and their openness to me."

Q: What do you think about the way the starting pitchers all watch each other's bullpen sessions?

Willis: "They care about each other. They're accountable for each other. I've always felt this—obviously, I am accountable for the pitching staff—however, anything that Corey Kluber would say to Trevor Bauer or Trevor Bauer would say to Corey Kluber during a bullpen is probably

going to go beyond anything I could say, because those two guys are out there competing against the opposition and going through the same feelings and everything else. I love it, because we're all here to help each other and they can help each other and sometimes they help each other more than a coach can, just because, while we're in it with them every pitch, the other guys, they're experiencing it as well every day. So, I love it. I think it's great."

Q: When you look at the Boston staff you had and Cleveland, too, both of those teams were among the heaviest curveball usage last year. A lot of that depends on the personnel you have...

Willis: "Absolutely."

Q: Along those lines, though, how much do you buy into the theory that a pitcher should throw his best pitch most often?

Willis: "I think it's what works. You look at someone like Kluber and you talk about the best pitch being the breaking ball. You also can talk about how well he commands his fastball. He commands his cutter. So, it's not only that best pitch. Maybe it's heavy as far as usage goes, but it's being able to execute those other pitches to keep that pitch effective and have the hitter not just sit on it. It's funny, I talked to Mickey [Callaway] two years ago. We were talking in Boston about the Cleveland staff and the high usage of breaking balls and it became, 'Well, that's their philosophy. They're teaching these guys these sliders.' And I'm talking to Mickey about it and he laughed and he goes, 'No, that's what they throw.'

"Sure, they did develop [pitches] as they came through the Minor League system. You can have 12 philosophies, because you're basically working off each individual's strength. But, I do believe, and I think with today's game offensively, hitters trying to hit homers, lift the ball—there's something to be said. I think we saw it in Seattle. You have to be nasty from Pitch 1. You can't just throw a fastball and think you're going to get ahead. They'll do damage."

Q: The way Mike Clevinger pitched on Monday, did that feel like a glimpse of his potential?

Willis: "I am so impressed with his stuff. I saw him in 2014—I was a special assistant—and his stuff has picked up. I think now it's a matter of him having a purpose for each pitch, a command of each pitch. He has so much energy and so much electricity to his stuff that sometimes watching him in Spring Training, it felt like, 'He's just getting it and he just wants to throw it forward as hard as he can, but without any purpose.' We just talked about keeping the energy in his body, but trying to slow his mind down a little bit and have a purpose with each pitch. Throw it aggressively, but maybe try to narrow down the area you're trying to throw it to, as opposed to just in the strike zone. I thought he did a really good job of that [Monday]."

Q: Clevinger went right after Mike Trout with three fastballs in his first plate appearance...

Willis: "Oh, yeah. And another thing, I loved the changeup to Albert Pujols. Look, it takes a lot of courage sometimes to throw that pitch to that guy, knowing that if you miss up over the plate with it, he's probably going to do damage. He had no reservations of making that pitch and he executed it perfectly."

Q: Are you and Tito on the same wavelength yet?

Willis: "Yeah. For me personally, it was very interesting [Monday] night. I like to sit during the game. I sat in Seattle. And he likes to stand, so we're always at arm's length, so to speak. But, here is the only place I always stand right there, so we stood there all night and we had some really interesting conversations about baseball, about life, about watching the game, while we were watching the game. And I loved that, because look, once the game starts, we never leave the field. We never leave the heartbeat. I never leave the heartbeat of the pitcher and watching the pitcher and trying to analyze the game and look forward. But, at the same time, sometimes that can overtake you. He's just so relaxed. He doesn't miss a thing, but yet, he can break the tension at times, and I think that's important. And I think it's really important that players see that as well, because you want your players to play loose. And if they see us tight, it's going to transcend over to them. So, it's been really good."

Q: Are you getting a feel for how things will work in splitting the load with Atchison and Sweeney?

Willis: "It's been really good. I think it's been really good, again, for me, in the fact that Atch has been here for a few years. He pitched with some of these guys, so he already has a certain amount of relationships. That's been really good. I came in and, obviously, I have my own ideas about things, but with the success of the pitching staff here, you don't want to come in and change a lot. So, it was really good for me to spend time with Atch just to see how some things were done in terms of timing of advance meetings and things of that nature, to try to keep the same schedule, if you will, day in, day out, as to what had been done in the past and worked."

"And then Brian, I mean, he's going to be a star. He's passionate about his job. He's passionate about pitching. He's doing advance work before. He's trying to stay a series ahead, so that once I start my work, he's already done the work. I can do it and then I can grab his notes, compare. So far, we've pretty much been on the same wavelength and seeing the same things, which I think, it's not rocket science, but you learn what you're looking for and, if you're doing it right, you're going to see the same thing. So, it just gives you a little more, I guess, confidence in what you've seen if somebody else sees the same thing. So, it's been really good. I feel like we're very, very well—hey, we're four games in—but I feel like we're very, very well prepared. But, [you start to get a feel for] how it's going to work together."

Indians pitchers left to wonder how Shohei Ohtani does it and how long he can keep it going

By Zack Meisel 6h ago 5

ANAHEIM, Calif. — As Yan Gomes sat on the edge of the bat rack in the visitor's dugout at Angel Stadium, he pointed to a camera perched atop a wall beyond center field.

"Is that for Ohtani?" he asked.

At the moment, the baseball world orbits around Planet Shohei, the rookie sensation from Japan, the 23-year-old who played a significant role in delivering the Indians a pair of losses in Orange County.

The Athletics issued a reported 240 credentials for Ohtani's first major-league start in Oakland last Sunday. The two press boxes in Anaheim were packed to capacity for the Angels' home-opening series, and Terry Francona fielded questions each day about Ohtani's every movement.

Gomes wore No. 51 in little league in Brazil. He marveled at Ichiro's hitting prowess and his seamless transition to MLB. He understands the aura surrounding Ohtani, who treated Angels fans to consecutive days of game-altering power at the plate.

Through six games, Ohtani hasn't wilted beneath the hype, the spotlight and the throng of reporters monitoring his every breath.

Consider his schedule since the start of the regular season:

Thursday: Designated hitter

Friday: Off

Saturday: Off

Sunday: Starting pitcher

Monday: Off

Tuesday: Designated hitter

Wednesday: Designated hitter

That doesn't include his side sessions, film-watching, kissing babies or the other daily nuances that come with transitioning to a new country, a new league, a new team and a new way of life. On the diamond, he has come as advertised (small sample size alert). Ohtani tossed six strong innings against Oakland on Sunday. Two days later, he belted a three-run homer in a three-hit performance. On Wednesday afternoon, he tagged reigning Cy Young Award winner Corey Kluber for a two-run shot.

"I think it takes something pretty special to be able to do that," Zach McAllister said. "Doing one [job] is hard enough. You get pitchers who can definitely hit, but to be able to DH in the big leagues and be successful and also be a good pitcher — as an athlete, you like to think you'd be able to do it. You'd like to think you can do anything. But I think it'd be pretty tough."

Josh Tomlin played shortstop at Texas Tech. He's the resident hitting expert on the Indians' staff, with seven hits in 19 career big-league at-bats. He also served up Ohtani's first major-league long ball.

"I guess if you're talented enough, it becomes second nature to you," Tomlin said. "It'd definitely be something fun to try, but I'm not as talented and, obviously, a lot of other guys aren't, either. I'd imagine he has a pretty packed schedule this year."

The question that remains unanswered is whether that will eventually catch up to him. No player has a more demanding to-do list. The other 749 active players in the league channel all of their energy to one, central task.

"I would think the most difficult part," said Indians pitching coach Carl Willis, "is the day when he's in the lineup and it's his bullpen day, how he's able to manage that time to put the mound work in and then shift over to standing in the batter's box."

Willis noted, however, that this is Ohtani's norm. He has trained this way for years, so he hasn't lost the timing or the feel for hitting. When American League pitchers, for example, take batting practice prior to an interleague series, they might as well be swinging a twig at a RedBull-charged bumblebee. Tomlin wonders if Ohtani will be productive enough at the plate to warrant jeopardizing his energy level for his trips to the mound. To this point, the answer is a resounding yes.

"He's probably pretty good with his schedule to where he doesn't tire himself out a lot to the point where he's not 100 percent when he's on the mound," Tomlin said.

Either way, it's something the sport hasn't seen in decades. And in his first week as a big-leaguer, Ohtani has turned some heads, leaving many to wonder both what could be and what could've been.

"It's definitely something I always wanted to do," Tomlin said, "but when you get drafted, teams usually make a decision on what you're capable of doing and you go from there."

Photo: Shohei Ohtani homers off Corey

The Thursday Conversation: Bradley Zimmer on making life hell for opposing pitchers, catchers and hitters

Zack Meisel 3h ago 5

ANAHEIM, Calif. — As Edwin Encarnacion dashed around the diamond Monday night, Bradley Zimmer stood in the dugout, with one thought on his mind.

I wish I could race him.

Zimmer has legs the length of the redwoods that stand tall in the Sequoia National Park, a few hours north of Angel Stadium. Those limbs help him cover miles of real estate in the outfield and allow him to bug the pitcher when he reaches base.

“Watching Zim go first to third or first to home is one of the funnest [things],” Terry Francona said.

Zimmer has the speed element of his game down pat. On Monday, he stole second, advanced to third on a passed ball and scurried home on an errant throw by the Angels' catcher. It's the other areas in which the second-year player needs a little seasoning. He tallied only three hits in 21 at-bats on the Tribe's road trip. He started on Wednesday against a left-handed pitcher, an arrangement Francona plans to rely upon more this year.

During his rookie season, Zimmer made an array of acrobatic catches in center. He stole 18 bases and was nabbed just once. There was that 0-for-36 funk to begin August.

“It was kind of surprising,” Francona said, “because he's so fast, but he didn't get any of those infield hits.”

Zimmer is more comfortable now, with one big-league season under his belt. He knows the ballparks. He knows the routines. He knows his teammates. He chatted with The Athletic about all of that and more for this week's installment of the Thursday Conversation.

You can hit a home run, you can make other offensive contributions, but do you take extra pride in being able to manufacture a run on your own?

Yeah, I think that's been a big asset of mine for as long as I've been playing. Any way we can score runs is big. Being a faster guy, I'm going to take a little more risk on the bases to put us in position to where Eddie and those guys can drive me in. Like [on Monday], anything can happen. I applied pressure. They threw the ball away. And the next thing you know, we're on top. I think it's been part of my game to continue to do that.

How much pleasure do you take in knowing that the pitcher is worried about you?

Oh, it's the best. When you know that you're in his head and he's worried about you more than making a pitch, it's huge. That allows the hitter to relax and be ready for a mistake, because he's not going to be as sharp. I think it benefits everyone.

Take me through the play when you advanced to third on a passed ball and then scored. At what point do you see the throw is off the mark and you're able to head home?

I didn't even see that it was off. [Third-base coach Mike Sarbaugh] just said, 'Go. Go. Go.' I turned around and saw the ball roll into left field and I was gone. Situations like that, you have to be on your toes at all times. One misstep could be the difference in being safe or out.

When you see Edwin run around the bases like he did, does that make you jealous? As in, you want that same opportunity to show off your wheels?

Yeah. Seeing him do that, I think I could probably lap him doing that. (Laughs.) It's fun. It's fun getting to see him move a little bit. I think it was fun for everyone.

Have you learned things defensively that you never would have imagined at the big-league level, in terms of getting to know different ballparks, different techniques, your teammates' tendencies? How much more comfortable are you with all of that in your second year?

Whatever level you're at, the more you're there, the more comfortable you feel with your teammates, the atmosphere, everything. I feel like I'm in a good spot. Pitchers know that I have their back. Any hit out there, I'm going to give my absolute best to save an extra-base hit, a run, whatever it may be.

Do you think at some points in the minors, you might have gotten away with things since your speed allowed you to cover so much ground?

Yeah. Speed is one of those things that you can't really teach. Fortunately for me, I was blessed with some good legs. I work every day with my routine to keep myself as ready to go and as sharp as I can and get as fast as I can. It's one of those things that I was blessed with. I continue working to make sure I'm ready to go every day.

Do you pay attention to sprint speed leaderboards or any of that stuff?

Not really. I don't pay attention to a lot of that stuff, but people have reached out to me to say, 'Hey, you're No. 3' or whatever. It's cool to see that, but I want to be No. 1.

Francona has mentioned how he wants you to be in the lineup more often against lefties and be an everyday guy. How much are you looking forward to that opportunity?

That's a goal of mine, is to be an everyday player. I have to prove to him and everyone else that that's where I belong. I'm looking forward to the challenge.

Clippers say they're ready to roll under new rules

By Mark Znidar

In the months between the final out of 2017 and the start of spring training, the game the Columbus Clippers have played since they were knee-high morphed into something out of a mad scientist's laboratory.

The man in the white lab coat, Major League Baseball commissioner Rob Manfred, has decreasing the time of games at the top of his to-do list. Several of his experiments will play out in the minor leagues this season.

Clippers players must adjust to a pitch clock that has shrunk to 15 seconds from 20 with no runners on base, the insertion of a runner on second base to start each half-inning in extra innings and a limit of six visits to the mound in seven- and nine-inning games. Pitching changes do not count as a visit.

There will be a grace period between Friday's opener at Indianapolis and April 19, when umpires will give warnings for pitch-clock violations.

"This is something we're going to talk about in detail, but we're going to play the game like we always have," Clippers manager Chris Tremie said. "I don't think the pitch clock is going to be too big a factor, and neither will the visits to the mound."

But having a runner at second base to start extra innings has Tremie's attention.

Would Tremie try to bunt the runner to third, or have the batter try to hit the ball to the right side? Unless there is a pinch-runner, the last batter from the previous inning starts on second base.

"That's a good question," he said. "That's going to be a factor in deciding games. I do see some positives when it comes to shortening games and saving your bullpen. I think you are going to see a little bit of everything, but that most managers will play it as if they are in the ninth inning."

Mark down catcher Eric Haase as being in favor of shortening extra-inning games. He once played 18 innings in class-A.

"That kind of forces the issue a little bit, and I like it," he said. "We had a runner start at second in Little League, and that's a throwback for us. I'm all down for having ties in the minor leagues. It can save wear and tear on you, and we're here (to be fresh and healthy) for the big-league team."

Reliever Louis Head said he will treat having a runner on second as though he had given up a leadoff double, but should the runner score, it would be an unearned run in the official stats.

"You compete like you do all the time," he said. "Teams are probably going to use strategy such as moving the runner over with a bunt. I've been in 17- and 18-inning games, and it's a grind. In double-A, we had five straight extra-inning games and our bullpen was worn out. This can save arms. I think they are looking out for our safety."

With pitch-clock violations, a ball will be charged to a pitcher who goes past 15 seconds and a strike will be called on batters who aren't ready to hit with seven seconds left. The clock will be 20 seconds with runners on base.

"There won't be any more human rain delays, but 15 seconds is not that big a deal for me," starting pitcher Adam Plutko said. "I like to work fast anyway. I've been charged a ball once, and that was when the catcher and me weren't on the same page with a runner on second base."

RubberDucks: First baseman Bobby Bradley enters 2018 season fit with help from wife

by Beacon Journal/Ohio.com

Bobby Bradley is back in Akron with a new look.

Bradley, the Indians' top first base prospect, is set to suit up for the RubberDucks on Thursday in Altoona against the Curve. He is 6-foot-1 and weighs between 225 and 230 pounds.

No, this is not a boxing story. It is indeed a baseball article, but Bradley's size is pertinent because he weighed between 250 and 255 pounds last season.

"My wife [Nenwae] got on me about all the snacks that I would eat and different things like that," Bradley said with a smile during Ducks media day on Tuesday at Canal Park.

"She made me actually work out in the offseason before I had to do anything [with the Indians at spring training]. It was mostly her getting on me.

"... She is the one that got me into doing Orangetheory. It is a fitness company based out of Florida, and they have a couple of them up here [in Ohio]. That is where she started working out at, and then she was like, 'Well, I like this so you are going to do it.'"

Bradley enters the 2018 season as the No. 3 overall prospect in the Indians organization, according to MLB.com, Baseball America and Baseball Prospectus. The two guys listed ahead of him are catcher Francisco Mejia and right-handed pitcher Triston McKenzie.

Mejia is opening the season with the Triple-A Columbus Clippers after spending last year with the Ducks and the Indians. McKenzie, who spent last year with the Single-A Lynchburg Hillcats, will likely pitch for the Ducks this year after opening the season in extended spring training in Arizona with a forearm injury.

Bradley, 21, finished last year with a .251 batting average (117 hits in 467 at-bats) with 23 home runs and 89 RBI in 131 games with the Ducks. He also scored 66 runs and hit 25 doubles and three triples.

"I am focused on what I started to focus on at the end of last year, which is staying with a consistent approach, becoming a better defender and becoming a better base runner," said Bradley, who played first base in 125 games last season for the Ducks.

Bradley said he has been eating foods with more protein and doing more high intensity interval training, which is what Orangetheory Fitness is based upon. He said his workouts consist of mostly running, a little bit of rowing and a lot of weightlifting.

He described his wife, Nenwae, as "a fitness junkie." The couple were married on Feb. 14, Valentine's Day.

Ducks first-year manager Tony Mansolino is ready to see what Bradley, a third-round pick in the 2014 MLB Draft, can do this year in Akron.

"It is funny — I think all wives bust our chops," Mansolino said with a smile. "I have never had him [as a player on my team], but I have just heard a lot of good stuff so with him from the manager's seat.

"I don't even think about his offense. I could [not] care less. Hitting always takes care of itself. From my seat, my main concern is helping our guys become the best defenders they can be and the best base runners they can be.

"We want all-around players in our organization. We just don't want guys that hit home runs. The game has changed and you can't do that anymore. For me and him, and we have already talked about it. ... Who knows how long he is going to be here, but in his time here I think the goal is to become a better base runner and a better defender."

Bradley said conversations with Mike Napoli during spring training were also helpful.

"He helped me out in terms of like when he was just coming to first base — he told me all the different things that he tried to do, what worked and what didn't work," Bradley said of Napoli. "He gave me a lot of good tips on the way that he does things. Obviously, he is one of the better defenders at first base now and he just helped me out a lot with that aspect."

Bradley committed just eight errors in 1,099 total chances for a .993 fielding percentage last year, and is working toward being even better this year.

"This will be my sixth season coming up that I have played first base," Bradley said. "I played mostly catcher and third base, and a little bit in the outfield growing up."

Prospects to watch

In addition to Bradley, the Ducks have some other highly touted prospects. Shortstop Willi Castro is the Indians' No. 5 prospect according to MLB.com and the No. 7 prospect according to Baseball America. Right-handed pitcher Shane Bieber is the Indians' No. 5 prospect according to Baseball America and the No. 8 prospect according to MLB.com.

Right-handed pitcher Aaron Civale, outfielder Ka'ai Tom and infielder Tyler Krieger are also among the Indians' top 25 prospects, according to MLB.com.

2018 RubberDucks season preview: Expectations high as talented Ducks prepare to open season under new manager Tony Mansolino **by ABJ/Ohio.com correspondent**

For the second season in a row the RubberDucks will begin with a new manager. That said, optimism is high as Tony Mansolino takes over for Mark Budzinski.

And with good reason, as Mansolino comes to the Ducks after winning the Carolina League as the head man of the Class A Lynchburg Hillcats.

The season begins Thursday on the road against the reigning Eastern League champion Altoona Curve with a 6 p.m. first pitch.

"A lot of the guys are extremely comfortable with Manso," Opening Day pitcher Shane Bieber said of the new Ducks manager. "He's a great coach and great manager. That goes for the rest of the coaching staff as well. They keep it light in the clubhouse.

"That's one thing Manso definitely brings to the table. He preaches team unity and that's why we mesh so well already in the clubhouse. That's not something you see every day in the minor leagues. Usually you throw a jumble of guys together that might not know each other all that well.

"I'd say that's one of the things with this team and about this season. The fans can expect a guy that wants to win and put the best foot forward. It's a real exciting thing to be part of."

Bieber would know after starting 14 games for Mansolino last season.

That seems to be the norm in the lineup as 15 players on the 25-man roster played for Mansolino last season for the Hillcats.

"The newness of any season is exciting," Mansolino said. "It's a newness and kind of a sacred time in baseball. Once you get past Opening Day, you seem to settle in really quick and feel like you've been doing what you're doing for a long time."

While MLB.com's No. 2 prospect, Triston McKenzie, is in extended spring training, the right-handed pitcher is expected to join the team in the early part of the season.

The RubberDucks are loaded with top prospects in first baseman Bobby Bradley (No. 3), shortstop Willi Castro (No. 5), Bieber (No. 8) and right-hander Aaron Civale (No. 10).

What's more, the Ducks have the organization's leading base stealer in second baseman Sam Haggerty (49) and veterans in pitchers Bieber, Mitch Brown and Michael People, infielders Tyler Krieger, Mark Mathias and Joe Sever and outfielders Dorssys Paulino and Taylor Murphy.

"I feel like we have good starting pitching," Mansolino said. "I feel like we have a good bullpen. We have guys that can run the bases. I feel like we have a solid offense one through nine. Our defense is probably our weakest area. It's not what you want, but I feel like at the end of the year, it's going to be one of our strongest areas."

Bieber topped the minors with 173⅓ innings pitched and Civale led the Tribe system with 13 wins. Bradley returns after finishing second in the Eastern League in RBI (89) after hitting .251 with 23 home runs and 25 doubles.

It has the squad, including the veterans, ready to begin the season.

"Coming into pro ball, [Mansolino] was the first coach I've had, so I love him," said Sever, who learned under Mansolino for four seasons as a hitting instructor. "He's a good guy. I've never had the chance to play for him as a manager and I've always wanted to, so I'm excited about that.

"He's a fiery guy. He has our back. He's a change of pace from [former manager Mark Budzinski]. You'll see him out arguing a lot more calls. That's the sense I got when he was a hitting coach. I think he was like that as a player and it's carried over to how he manages."

While the minor leagues are all about development, don't expect Mansolino to give up a victory in the name of development.

"Sometimes in the minors, wins get swept under the rug," Civale said. "It's all about development. With him, it almost has that college feel to it again where winning matters. That's what everybody is here for. It's just a great atmosphere that he creates."

Joe Sever excited for added duties with Akron RubberDucks: Cleveland Indians Minors (video)

By Elton Alexander, The Plain Dealer

AKRON, Ohio -- The Akron RubberDucks take to the road Thursday night to start the Class AA baseball season at Altoona, Pa. The Ducks will spend a week on the road before returning Canal Park for the home opener next Friday.

By that time the interesting experiment for the season, getting time behind the plate for Joe Sever as the third catcher, may have had its first test. This is something Sever has taken to heart as part of his unofficial 'coach on the field' duties with the younger players on the team.

At 27, Sever is not just the oldest player on the team, his four seasons at third base with the RubberDucks qualifies him as the most experienced player on the team as well.

Team manager Tony Mansolino said he has no qualms finding time for Sever to get behind the plate and is quite comfortable with Sever's presence in the clubhouse helping young players navigate through a long baseball season.

That's not to say Sever is being transitioned from his main duties at third base. He still hit a very creditable .282 in 118 games last season with the RubberDucks, who were in Eastern League playoff contention until the final week of the season.

Still, he is now very excited to get this experiment into action and put in his time handling pitchers and calling a game from behind the plate. "I'm excited about that," Sever said. "I'm itching to get back there."

Class AAA Columbus infielder Drew Maggi suspended 50 games for positive stimulant test

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

ANAHEIM, Calif. -- Infielder Drew Maggi has been suspended for the first 50 games of the season at Class AAA Columbus for a violation of the Minor League Drug Prevention and Treatment Program.

A release by MLB said Maggi tested positive for an amphetamine.

The 6-0, 195-pound Maggi spent spring training with the Indians' big-league club and played well. He hit .342 (13-for-38) with 11 runs and four RBI.

The Indians brought Maggi to camp on a minor-league deal. He spent last season in the Dodgers' organization. He played the whole year at Class AAA Oklahoma City, hitting .271 (69-for-255) with five homers and 29 RBI.

This is Maggi's ninth year in pro ball. He's never played in the big leagues.

The Pirates drafted Maggi in the 15th round in 2010. They released him during spring training in 2015.

Maggi played college ball at Arizona State.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 04.05.2018

Despite enduring 'most difficult March' in 25 years, Indians groundskeeper optimistic about opener

By Marc Bona, cleveland.com mbona@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio - This has been the most challenging season to get Progressive Field ready for a home opener, Cleveland Indians head groundskeeper Brandon Koehnke said Friday.

Field conditions at Progressive Field

He should know. It marks the 25th home opener for Koehnke, who regularly deals with whatever Mother Nature throws at him.

"This has been without a doubt the most difficult March in the 25 years I've been here," he said. "We never felt like we were getting to a finish line" in getting things done.

Among the "laundry list" of challenges Koehnke and nine other staffers regularly face, it's temperature - not necessarily rain - being atop the list.

"Days over 40 degrees this year has been extremely, extremely difficult," he said. "If memory serves me, I think we've only had about three or four over 40 degrees. ... It's the nighttime temperatures when we go below freezing. There was only one day in the month of March when we stayed above freezing at night."

Those temperatures mean shortened work hours. During winter, sometimes the field is still frozen until 11 a.m. or noon the following day. With the sun going down at 4 p.m. or so, that limits work of the grounds crew.

"The really, really difficult part is the clay areas, the infield areas around home plate when they freeze and thaw, freeze and thaw, freeze and thaw," said Koehnke, a former minor-league ballplayer who often plays catch with players during pregame warm-ups. "It's like a pothole. It freezes, it pops up. That's been the real difficult challenge."

He said snow, rain and wind all factor in his preparations before Cleveland's home opener against Kansas City. First pitch is 4:10 p.m. Friday. Forecast calls for temperatures in the 40s with chance of wintry mix.

Those factors also play a role in whether a game is postponed, said Curtis Danburg, the team's communications director.

He said team officials have to consider field conditions, player safety, fan comfort, how much precipitation has fallen and ground temperature when determining whether a game should be called. The team also has to be concerned about whether a starting pitcher will have his pregame warm-up routine disrupted.

"We're looking at all those factors to determine if we play," he said, adding it's "one of the most difficult decisions" the club has to make on a regular basis.

Last year, the Indians had only one home rainout. It was part of a doubleheader that ended up being played on a common off day. They have had two snow-outs in recent memory, in 1996 and 2007.

Most of the time, Danburg said, it's the club's decision before first pitch to call a game. "But we communicate with the league and visiting clubs. Once the game starts it's (up to) umpires with Major League Baseball support."

Despite winter's challenges, Koehnke said he is "pretty comfortable with where the field is right now."

The field has been rolled multiple times to alleviate freeze-thaw conditions and "keep those humps and bumps from reappearing." Water has been added, which helps even out things. The tarp goes on every night to keep the field as warm and dry as possible. And some sod was replaced, but "nothing major."

As he sat in the Indians dugout Wednesday, bundled in a hoodie, knit hat and gloves, Koehnke remained optimistic two days prior to the home opener. He's confident in the work his staff has done. In the end, he could only shrug as he summed up what he knows too well.

"It's April in Cleveland," he said.

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Cleveland Indians banner erected downtown in time for home opener

By Julie Washington, The Plain Dealer jwashington@plaind.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Move over, LeBron James - the Cleveland Indians now have their own enormous sign in downtown Cleveland.

Two Cleveland businesses have partnered with the Indians to hang a four-story-tall banner on the Cleveland Technology Center building in downtown Cleveland. The banner shows larger-than-life images of players Jose Ramirez and Francisco Lindor next to the team motto "Rally Together."

"It's a great way to kick off our push to the World Series," said Mike Campanelli, executive vice president at SecureData 365, one of the partners in the banner project.

Fans can celebrate the new 45-yards-wide Indians banner during a pre-game tailgate party on Home Opening Day on Friday at the Cleveland Technology Center, 1625 Rockwell Ave. The outdoor party, which starts at noon, will offer music, food trucks, a heated tent and a shuttle to Progressive Field.

The party is free, but registration is required at www.securedata365.com/indians.

The idea for the banner began when SecureData 365, a tenant in the Cleveland Technology Center, learned that the Indians wanted to put up a giant sign in downtown Cleveland, similar to the iconic 10-story-tall LeBron James banner across from Quicken Loans Arena.

The Indians are a longtime client of SecureData 365, Campanelli said. His company is a data center operator headquartered in Canton; the Cleveland office is located in the Cleveland Technology Center.

H5 Data Centers, headquartered in Denver, owns the Cleveland Technology Center building and was interested in improving the look of the tech center's west-facing exterior wall. That wall was originally an interior wall, and when the building it was connected to was demolished, an ugly wall was left facing the outside.

"It was never built to be an exterior wall," Campanelli said.

SecureData 365, H5 Data Centers and the Indians partnered to commission the banner and have it hung. Campanelli declined to give the project's cost.

Since the banner went up March 16, he has heard lots of compliments. "People say it's awesome, it's unbelievable," he said. "It beautifies this part of downtown, on the edge of downtown."

Campanelli isn't sure if the Indians will hoist a new banner next year displaying new players and a new slogan.

"Hopefully, the Indians will want it to stay and will update the sign annually," he said.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 04.05.2018

Akron RubberDucks a familiar group to start season: Cleveland Indians Minors 2018 (video)

By Elton Alexander, The Plain Dealer

AKRON, Ohio -- Tony Mansolino, manager for the 2018 Akron RubberDucks, is quite familiar with the bulk of his team as he has managed in the Cleveland Indians farm system in the past, including with the Class A Lake County Captains and the Advanced A Lynchburg Hillcats. He said that is one advantage he has going into the season.

"I think what it does for me is they (players) understand the culture and how I like to run a clubhouse," Mansolino said.

Speaking at the RubberDucks recent media day, Mansolino made it clear that his team's pitching and hitting is on par with any in the Class AA ranks. His focus from the outset will be getting his team better defensively.

"Our defense right now is one area where we need some work," the manager said.

That challenge begins at the Altoona (Pa.) Curve on Thursday at 6 p.m., the first of a four-game series. The Ducks will open at home on April 13 at 6:35 p.m. against the Trenton Thunder.

One player Mansolino spoke of was prized first baseman Bobby Bradley, 21. While still young, Bradley, a third-round pick in 2014, has dropped his weight from 255 last season to 225 this season and he impressed the Indians during spring training. Considered one of the top power prospects in the Indians organization, Mansolino said he will focus on getting Bradley better around the bag and on the bases.

"I won't be looking at how he hits," Mansolino said. "We want him to get better in these other areas."

For his part Bradley, who hit .251 last season with 23 homers and 89 RBI at Akron, said he is ready for the challenge. Recently married, on Valentine's Day, he credits his wife, Nenwae, with his renewed health and conditioning focus going into the season.

Bradley said his wife is not a former athlete, but, "she is a fitness junkie. My wife getting on me, making me work out. Basically, her being ornery."

The husband and wife duo are currently into Orangetheory fitness, which according to Bradley is high intensity training.

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Cleveland Indians expected to activate Michael Brantley -- perhaps in time for Friday's home opener

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

ANAHEIM, Calif. -- Michael Brantley is back in Cleveland and manager Terry Francona says the plan is to activate the outfielder from the disabled list.

The Indians open the home season Friday against Kansas City. So the timing of all this makes sense.

Brantley opened the year on the disabled list following October surgery on his right ankle.

"Michael is in Cleveland," said Francona. "He fulfilled his obligation (in Goodyear, Ariz.). The plan, I don't think it's a big secret, is to activate him. Using good judgment, we'll double check with him, but I think everyone is on the same page."

Francona said the Indians will ease Brantley into the lineup.

"Common sense kind of rules the day there," said Francona. "That's not the worse thing. If Brandon Guyer and Rajai Davis face a righty, it's good for them, too."

Guyer and Davis, two right-handed hitters, are expected to spell Brantley in the early part of the season.

Friday's home opener marks the start of a 10-game homestand for the Indians. The conditions are not expected to be ideal with snow, rain and cold temperatures in the forecast.

The Indians will have to make a roster move when they activate Brantley.

Brantley played three Cactus League games this spring, hitting .400 (4-for-10) with one homer and two RBI. He played additional minor league games, including Monday and Tuesday in Goodyear.

Last season Brantley played 90 games and was named to the All-Star team. His ankle injury, however, sidelined him for much of the second half. Two years ago, he played 11 games because of a right shoulder injury that required two operations.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 04.05.2018

Lake County Captains open at home Thursday: Cleveland Indians Minors (video)

By Elton Alexander, The Plain Dealer

EASTLAKE, Ohio -- One of the first definitive steps to the major leagues and the Cleveland Indians starts with the Lake County Captains. Thursday night will be the debut for the 2018 Captains in Classic Park against the Fort Wayne TinCaps at 6:30 p.m.

Manager Luke Carlin is anxious to get his team on the field as the weather has been dicey all week, limiting actual practice time.

The Captains outfield is intriguing, led by 2016 No. 1 draft pick Will Benson, slated for right field. The outfield will also include Oscar Gonzalez in left and Austen Wade in center.

According to Carlin, Wade is the sage of the trio, based on his college experience at TCU with a team that advanced last season to the College World Series.

At 22, Wade only played 36 games last season at Mahoning Valley, hitting .255 with a homer and 10 RBI.

The intrigue comes with Benson, 19, and his imposing size (6-5, 225). The Indians No. 1 pick in 2016 got 100 games under his belt last season at Mahoning Valley. Wade, who hits and throws lefthanded, will be looking to improve on his combined .225 average with 16 homers, while cutting down on his 140 strikeouts.

If there is a player who could emerge it's Gonzalez, an undrafted free agent signed by the Indians in 2014. Still young at 20, Carlin calls him "super fast." As Gonzalez has matured over his three-year, 166-game minor league career, he's proven to be a productive hitter with a .254 average, 43 doubles, three triples and 15 homers.

Carlin would not say Gonzalez is a breakout player to watch. But, "It would be fun to see him do it."

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 04.05.2018

Angels rally past Cleveland Indians, 3-2 in 13 innings, as Shohei Ohtani strikes again

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com

ANAHEIM, Calif. - So maybe this Shohei Ohtani has a chance.

Hitting a three-run homer off Josh Tomlin, who throws below hitting speed, is one thing. Hitting a game-tying, two-run homer off the defending Cy Young winner, well, that will open some eyes.

Ohtani, after hitting his first big-league homer off Tomlin on Tuesday night, drove Corey Kluber's 91 mph fastball over the fence in center field in the fifth inning Wednesday to help spark the Angels to a 3-2 come-from-behind victory in 13 innings over the Indians.

The Angels won it in the 13th when Zack Cozart hit a walk-off homer off Zach McAllister with one out. McAllister, who allowed a two-run homer to Rene Rivera in Tuesday's 13-2 loss, was making his third straight appearance and fourth in the last five games.

He was the last man standing among Tribe relievers. The next Indians' pitcher would have been Carlos Carrasco, who will start Friday's home opener against Kansas City. Matt Belisle and Dan Otero were not available after pitching two innings each on Tuesday night.

Ohtani saw the best the Tribe had to offer. Kluber made him look like a statue in the third by striking him out on four pitches. Ohtani retaliated in the fifth, but then lefty Andrew Miller retired him on a ground ball in the eighth.

He opened the 10th with a single through the middle off closer Cody Allen. Lefty Tyler Olson retired him in the 12th.

Kluber took a no-hitter into the fifth. He faced just one batter over the limit through the first 5 1/3 innings. Justin Upton, courtesy of a first-inning walk, was the Angels only base runner to that point of the game.

Andrelton Simmons disrupted Kluber's flow when he bunted for a one-out hit in the fifth after Kole Calhoun struck out to start the inning. The bunt seemed to momentarily disrupt Kluber's timing. In the process of striking out Luis Valbuena, he wild pitched Simmons to second. Then of course came the 1-1 fastball to Ohtani that tied the game.

"I was trying to do what I did in the first at-bat against him," said Kluber. "I tried to throw a four-seamer away and it came back and ended up on the outer third instead of the corner (of the plate)."

Asked if it was a "big deal" to face a player as hyped as Ohtani, who is trying to prove he can pitch and hit at the same time in the big leagues, Kluber said, "I think Mike Trout has a lot of hype to him. Albert Pujols has a lot of hype to him. Justin Upton has a lot of hype to him. It's a good lineup."

The Indians led 2-0 through 4 1/2 innings, but it could have been more. They let left-hander Tyler Skaggs escape from a first-inning jam by scoring just one run.

Francisco Lindor opened the game with a single and stole second. After Jason Kipnis walked, Jose Ramirez advanced the runners with a fly ball to deep left. Skaggs walked Edwin Encarnacion to load the bases and Brandon Guyer singled to center to make it 1-0.

At that point it was looking good for the Tribe. Guyer, by the way, came into the game hitting .800 (4-for-5) against Skaggs. But Yonder Alonso bounced back to the mound as Skaggs started a 1-6-3 double play.

That's how the score stayed until the fifth when Lindor singled off Skaggs again, this time with two out. He stole second - the steal withstood a 2:09 replay challenge -- and scored on a single by Kipnis for a 2-0 lead.

That was it for the offense. The Tribe went scoreless over the last eight innings. After being held to one hit on Tuesday, they finished with seven hits Wednesday, but only two came after the fifth inning.

"We weren't able to put much on the board," said manager Terry Francona. "Early on I thought we swung the bat pretty good. We had a lot of firm outs. But, boy, over the last couple hours of that game it was tough sledding for us.

"As a club right now we don't have anyone who is hot."

Terry Francona on Indians' struggling offense

Kluber, in his first two starts of the season, is 0-1 with a 2.40 ERA. He's struck out 14, walked three and allowed four earned runs in 15 innings. The Indians have scored three runs while he's been on the mound.

Skaggs allowed two runs on five hits in 4 2/3 innings. He struck out five and walked two

The Indians went 2-4 on this six-game trip to start the season.

What it means

Last year Kluber was 6-0 with a 1.50 ERA in series-deciding games.

The pitches

Skaggs threw 103 pitches, 57 (55 percent for strikes). Kluber threw 96 pitches, 64 (67 percent).

Thanks for coming

The Indians and Angels drew 32,412 fans to Angel Stadium on Wednesday afternoon. First pitch was at 4:08 with a temperature of 65 degrees.

Next

The Indians are off Thursday before opening the home season on Friday against Kansas City at 4:10 p.m. Carrasco draws the starting assignment for the second straight year. The Royals will start lefty Danny Duffy.

Francisco Lindor gives thumbs up to Shohei Ohtani; says Cleveland Indians will be fine

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com

ANAHEIM, Calif. - The most popular U.S. export to Japan these days might just be the Indians. Japan has to love how they've welcomed Shohei Ohtani to the big leagues the last two days.

Japan's version of Babe Ruth went 3-for-4 with his first big-league homer Tuesday night in the Angels' 13-2 win. On Wednesday, he hit a game-tying homer against two-time Cy Young winner Corey Kluber on the way to a 3-2 victory in 13 innings.

Asked his thoughts on Ohtani, All-Star shortstop Francisco Lindor said, "Good hitter. Good swing. He was successful. I'm happy for him. It stinks that he did it against us, but I'm happy for him. I think it's cool for the game."

Terry Francona on Indians' struggling offense

The Indians are heading home after going 2-4 on a season-opening six-game West Coast trip. The home opener is Friday against Kansas City.

"I'm looking forward to playing in front of the home crowd," said Lindor. "I'm looking forward to being in my locker room and a familiar dugout and all that stuff. I'm not looking forward to the weather, but I'm looking forward to everything else."

Regarding the trip, the Indians went 1-2 in Seattle and 1-2 in Anaheim. Four games were decided by one run with the Tribe dropping three of them.

"It was all right," said Lindor. "Last year we were 3-3 going home. This year we're 2-4. And we won 101 games."

Make that 102, but who's counting.

"It's OK," said Lindor. "We definitely can improve. We can play ball a lot better. I can definitely be a better offensive hitter. But overall, I think it's early in the season. There's no panicking. As long as we stay together and continue to compete and have fun, we'll be fine."

Lindor had two of his team's seven hits. He stole two bases and scored the Indians only two runs for a 2-0 lead that did not stand.

"I want to get on base and score. Get on base and score," said Lindor. "That's what I want to do so I can help my team win."

Lindor stole his second base of the game in the fifth inning. When he was called safe, he stared into home plate, trying to lock eyes with his foil - Angel catcher Martin Maldonado. The two have been chirping at each other for the last few years.

"He didn't respond," said Lindor. "It's just playing the game. I'm a kid. I'm a kid and I enjoy the game. I'm not trying to disrespect nobody."

The Indians are hitting .161 (33-for-205) with 21 runs in their first six games. In the last two games, they've scored three runs in 22 innings.

Check out these batting averages: Bradley Zimmer .143 (3-for-21), Jose Ramirez .043 (1-for-23), Lindor .192 (5-for-26), Yan Gomes .143 (2-for-14). Yonder Alonso is the Tribe's top hitter at .227 (5-for-22) with two homers and five RBI. Edwin Encarnacion, despite his insider the park homer on Monday, is hitting only .200 (4-for-20) with three homers and three RBI.

"We understand at some point it's going to come around," said Lindor. "It might not be today. It might not be tomorrow. It might not be in two weeks. Who knows when it's going to be?"

"It's just a matter of us continuing to work. . . It will be there. The results will be there. The guys aren't hitting, but our pitching staff is doing a great job. They're holding us right there."

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 04.05.2018

Before the Cleveland Indians' home opener, here's what goes into game day

By Emily Bamforth, cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- As the Cleveland Indians' home opener approaches, Progressive Field employees are gearing up for the production that is putting on a ballgame.

Friday's game is sold out, which means more than 30,000 fans will be streaming into the ballpark to watch the Indians take on the Kansas City Royals. Cleveland.com took a look at what it takes to make them happy and keep everything moving smoothly.

From beginning to end, here's a glimpse behind the scenes.

Before the game

About 175 people work full-time on game days, spending 12 to 15 hours at the stadium. Read more about them here.

Indians announcer Bob Tayek has to do his homework before the games. He's spent more than 18 years in the position, but every game requires intense preparation.

Fans shared their tips for getting through the gates and into seats as quickly as possible. Among them: Check your pockets and have your ticket ready on your phone.

Ball boys don't just run around at game time. They get there hours beforehand to prep the dugout with clean uniforms, drinks and other necessities.

The manager of the visitors' clubhouse, with a crew of six, makes preparations for the Tribe's opponent. That includes meals, laundry and making sure everything gets back on the visiting team's truck at the end of the day.

Before fans flood team shops looking for their next favorite piece of Indians garb, it's up to two buyers to choose what goes on shelves. There's even a routine for covering baseballs in mud before each game. The umpires' room attendant coats more than 10 dozen balls.

During the game

Picking who sings the National Anthem is one of the major decisions organizers make for each game. Here's how they decide.

Switching the field from batting practice to first pitch might not take much time, but it's because a crew of 18 is hustling to make sure players - and fans -- aren't kept waiting.

Take an inside look at what the dugout is like during games.

If you have a complaint or concern during an Indians game, you head to fan services. Find out how to get birthday wishes on the scoreboard, first-game certificates and more here.

If you've been to a Tribe game, most likely you've heard the Cleveland Indians "beer guy." Les Flake has been a vendor for more than 42 years.

The Indians take steps to make game operations eco-friendly. This includes recycling hundreds of tons of materials and composting 100 tons of waste each year.

John Adams beats the drum at the ballpark to throw the opposing team off and psyche up Indians players and fans. Here's why he's spent more than 43 years doing it.

You'll see Strikers members all over the ballpark, most likely dancing, smiling or giving out free swag. The group, comprised of about 30 young adults, keeps fans engaged through the game.

Volunteers are about 90 percent of the staff at concession stands. The team reciprocates by donating money to their causes.

The scoreboard at Progressive Field is the largest in the league. It takes more than two dozen employees to orchestrate what goes onscreen.

If the Indians hit a home run, score a run or win the game, fireworks light up the field. It's two guys sitting on the field's parking garage roof who make it happen.

If you still want to learn more about the ballpark as a community, Click here for a comprehensive look at the fan experience and some of the history behind the team.

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Captains set sail in 2018 with power arms on staff

By David Glasier, The News-Herald

As a catcher during a 14-year playing career in professional baseball that included brief stints with the Indians and two other big-league teams, Luke Carlin was a battery mate with many talented pitchers.

Carlin, about to begin his first season as manager of the Lake County Captains, is mightily impressed with the power he sees in the arms of many of his pitchers.

"It seems like all of these young guys are throwing way up over 90 (mph) now. It's impressive to watch," Carlin said.

Indeed, many of the 13 pitchers on the Lake County roster possess power arms and the numbers to match.

Eli Morgan, a 21-year-old right-hander from California, will get the start on April 5 against the Fort Wayne (Ind.) TinCaps in the season opener at Classic Park.

Last year, in his professional debut at short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley, Morgan was 3-2 with a 1.03 ERA. In 13 appearances, four of them starts, Morgan notched 58 strikeouts while yielding only nine walks in 35 innings. He did not give up a home run.

Selected by the Indians in the 15th round of the 2017 draft out of Gonzaga University, the 5-foot-10, 190-pound Morgan mixes a four-seam fastball that sits in the low 90s with a hard slider and changeup that Baseball America rates as the best in the Indians' farm system.

"I throw strikes and challenge hitters," Morgan said. "Growing up, my favorite pitcher was Pedro Martinez on the (Boston) Red Sox. He was such a badass. That guy had swagger and wasn't afraid of any batter."

Morgan and 10 of the other pitchers in the Captains this season spent all or part of the 2017 campaign with Mahoning Valley. The Scrappers finished 44-29 and made the New York-Penn League playoffs.

"The pitchers we have here this season dominated last year at Mahoning Valley. Our goal is to do the same this season in the Midwest League and win a championship," Morgan said.

Carlin said the balance of his team's starting rotation shapes up as follows: left-hander Juan Hillman piggybacking with right-hander Grigori Vasquez; left-hander Kirk McCarty; right-hander Grant Hockin; left-hander Francisco Perez piggybacking with right-hander Felix Tati.

The relievers are left-hander Kyle Nelson and right-handers Tommy DeJuneas, Domingo Jimenez, James Karinchak and Jonathan Teaney. At Mahoning Valley last season, these pitchers had combined totals of 172 strikeouts in 117 innings.

Fort Wayne's starter in the opener, Nick Margevicius, is a 2014 graduate of St. Ignatius High School. The 6-5, 220-pound left-hander from North Royalton was selected by the San Diego Padres in the seventh round of the 2017 draft out of Rider University.

Indians fall to Angels in 13 innings to finish West Coast trip

By Greg Beacham, The Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. >> The Indians' offense is about as cold as the weather the Tribe will be returning home to this weekend.

Cleveland had no extra-base hits, and no hits at all in extra innings in a 3-2 loss to the Angels on April 4.

Zack Cozart hit a game-ending home run in the 13th inning for Los Angeles.

Brandon Guyer and Jason Kipnis drove in early runs, but Indians finished a season-opening West Coast road trip at 2-4.

"As a club right now, we don't have anybody hot," manager Terry Francona said. "We certainly had chances. We had runners on base. We just couldn't get a hit. ... The last couple of hours was tough sledding for us."

It was the opposite for the Angels' Shohei Ohtani.

He didn't think his long drive to center field off Corey Kluber in the fifth inning would get out of the park, so he sprinted around first base while it soared over the fence for his second homer in two days.

Ohtani made the same sprint with the same thoughts one day earlier, when his first big-league homer also surprised him by flying over the wall.

"There was a runner on second base, so I was just trying to get a base hit and keep my swing compact, and it ended up clearing the fence," Ohtani said through a translator. "I think everything is going really well right now. I'm off to a good start."

Neither team scored again after Ohtani's drive until Cozart, the Angels' new infielder, connected for his first career walk-off homer against Zach McAllister (0-1).

Kluber pitched seven innings of three-hit ball with six strikeouts, but remained winless despite two strong starts to open the season. He credited Ohtani for capitalizing on a misplaced fastball: "I was trying to force him away, and I ended up in the high third (of the strike zone)," Kluber said.

Ohtani also singled leading off the 10th to go 2 for 5, giving him six hits this season and five in his only two home games. He will make his first home pitching start April 8 against Oakland, one week after beating the Athletics on the road in his big league pitching debut.

"At the plate, he's starting to get comfortable," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said. "You can see the big power he has. Corey Kluber is a guy that does not give up a lot of home runs. He's as tough as there is. (Ohtani) made him get a ball over the plate, and Shohei got a hold of it. That's obviously a big hit in the game."

Noe Ramirez (1-1), the Angels' eighth reliever, came on with two outs in the 13th and struck out Erik Gonzalez with two Indians on base. Los Angeles' bullpen pitched 8 1/3 innings of scoreless, two-hit ball.

Tyler Skaggs retired 12 of 13 Indians after a rough first inning, but couldn't get out of the fifth.

The Angels didn't get a hit off Kluber until a one-out single in the fifth by Andrelton Simmons, who has a hit in each of Los Angeles' first seven games for the second consecutive season.

One out later, Ohtani connected.

Indians>> Cleveland intends to activate All-Star LF Michael Brantley before Friday's home opener against Kansas City, Francona confirmed. Brantley participated in extended spring training games this week before heading to Ohio ahead of the team. He had right ankle surgery in October and didn't play much in spring training.

Indians >> Weather permitting, Carlos Carrasco (1-0, 7.94 ERA) will return from a rough season opener when the Indians host the Royals in their home opener April 6.