

Kluber, Tribe feted at Cleveland Sports Awards

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- The Indians did not achieve the moment they really wanted last year, but the team did make history on multiple fronts and was appropriately honored on Wednesday night.

During the 18th Greater Cleveland Sports Awards at the Renaissance Hotel, Indians ace Corey Kluber was named the 2017 Professional Athlete of the Year, and the Tribe's American League-record 22-game winning streak was recognized as the Best Moment in Cleveland Sports. Everyone in the room, including manager Terry Francona, would have preferred to be celebrating a World Series triumph.

"After the sting of losing to the Yankees," Francona told the audience, "in 28 days, I guarantee you we're coming back with a vengeance."

Francona was alluding to the fact that the Indians -- who were ousted from the postseason by New York in the AL Division Series -- will have their pitchers and catchers reporting to Arizona on Feb. 14, marking the official start of Spring Training. This week, the manager and many of the team's players are in Cleveland for Tribe Fest, which takes place on Saturday at the Huntington Convention Center downtown.

At the awards banquet, Francona was joined by Tribe catcher Roberto Perez, who accepted Kluber's award on his behalf. Kluber -- the only pitcher in Indians history to win multiple AL Cy Young Awards -- shared some words of gratitude in a brief video.

"This is a huge honor for me, personally," Kluber said. "I'd like to thank Roberto for accepting this award on my behalf tonight. Without the leadership and guidance of our catchers -- both Roberto and Yan [Gomes] -- I wouldn't be in the position to receive this award. Also, I'd like to thank the rest of my teammates who supported me throughout the entire season. 2017 was a great year for us. It was very exciting.

"But, I think we're all looking forward to bigger and better things in 2018, and we can't wait to get started in a few weeks."

Last season, Kluber went 18-4 with a Major League-low 2.25 ERA. In 203 2/3 innings, the right-hander piled up 265 strikeouts against 36 walks, and made his second straight All-Star team. Kluber then garnered 28 first-place among the 30 ballots cast by the Baseball Writers' Association of America for the AL Cy Young Award.

"Kluber is a special guy," Perez said. "As a catcher, I expect a lot of big things from Kluber. The way he prepares, he's so professional, and his work ethic. He deserves it."

This offseason, the Indians lost Carlos Santana, Bryan Shaw, Jay Bruce and Joe Smith in free agency, but the team is taking some comfort in the fact that the bulk of the pitching staff, including the entire Kluber-led rotation, remains intact. That is a main reason behind the team's confidence that it can not only contend for a third straight AL Central title, but position itself for another postseason run.

"It's a lot easier to appear smarter when you have good pitching," Francona said. "We've got to keep our guys strong and healthy, because they're the backbone of what we're trying to do. We don't take it or granted, but we appreciate it and enjoy it, and it's one of the reasons we think we can be good."

As for the Indians' historic winning streak, which eclipsed the 2002 A's previously AL record of 20 victories in a row, Francona said the magnitude of the accomplishment sunk in this offseason.

"I honestly didn't realize at the time what it meant to people," Francona said. "When I got back [home] this winter, more people were like, 'Wow, it was amazing. I stopped what I was doing when you guys got to like 15.' It was pretty cool to hear that, because when you're living it, you heard me every day, it was like, 'We're going to turn the page and move on.' And we'd do that pretty good. So, I don't know that I took the time to maybe enjoy it as much as I should have. When you look back on it, it's pretty special."

Mejia earns top ranking among C prospects

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Francisco Mejia is not only widely considered the top prospect in the Indians' organization, but he is also one of baseball's best young catchers. According to MLB Pipeline, in fact, there is no catching prospect who merits a higher ranking than the up-and-coming Tribe backstop.

On Thursday, MLB Pipeline unveiled the top 10 catching prospects in baseball and Mejia -- who got a brief taste of the big leagues last season -- led the way in the No. 1 spot. This comes after Indians pitcher Triston McKenzie was rated as the No. 9 right-handed pitching prospect in the game earlier this week.

MLB Pipeline will continue to roll out its preseason top 10 lists over the next several days, culminating in the Top 100 prospects list on Jan. 27.

"He did an extraordinary job at continuing his development," Chris Antonetti, the Indians' president of baseball operations, said of Mejia at the end of last season. "Offensively, and specifically defensively, the way he led the staff, some of the nuances of catching. He's in a much better spot now than he was a couple years ago as a defender."

Mejia, 22, was promoted to the Majors from Double-A Akron in the final month last season, but he only appeared in 11 games for the Indians. Tribe manager Terry Francona quipped that Mejia was always standing near the bat rack or close to the skipper with a bat in his hand, staying ready. That was noticed by Cleveland's big league staff, which will be looking closely at Mejia this spring, too.

When Mejia was called up to the big leagues, though, the Indians were in the midst of their American League-record 22-game winning streak, and they had a good thing going with veteran catchers Roberto Perez and Yan Gomes. Under the circumstances, there were not many innings available for Mejia to be worked into Major League games.

"There just wasn't the opportunity to catch him as much as I would have liked," Francona said. "You could tell, it's a young kid who's used to playing every day. He's making the jump from Double-A to the Major Leagues, and he's playing so sporadically. You could even see in his at-bats, he was getting a little out of control. That's not the type of hitter he is. He's a really advanced hitter. He was put into some situations that were extremely challenging."

Mejia enjoyed a standout showing with Akron before being called up to The Show. In 92 games in the Minors, the catcher turned in a .297/.346/.490 slash line with 14 home runs, 21 doubles, 52 RBIs, 52 runs scored and seven stolen bases. Mejia also threw out 30 percent of would-be basestealers.

The .835 OPS that Mejia posted in 2017 followed a breakout showing in '16, when he had an .896 OPS between Class A Lake County and Class A Advanced Lynchburg and made national headlines with a 50-game hitting streak. That performance, which vaulted Mejia up the prospect rankings, came after he had a .670 OPS in '15 for Lake County.

"It's been about the focus and focusing on the game," Mejia said earlier this month at MLB's Rookie Career Development Program. "When I finished the season in 2015, I went to the Dominican [Republic] for a short time and came back to do a program that the [Indians] set up for me. I stayed with the team more than in the Dominican. The focus and the help of the coaches and new manager helped me a lot. I talked about a lot of things with the pitching coach.

"Also, I practiced a lot in the Dominican, seeing a lot of games there, too. I learned a lot in the winter league. I didn't play, but I was on the bench. That helped me a lot to see that, in this game, it's not just you. There are a lot of people behind you waiting to take your job."

Following the regular season, Mejia went to the Arizona Fall League, where he hit .365 in 15 games and tried his hand at third base. The idea was to introduce some versatility into Mejia's game, given that he is close to being ready for the Majors and Cleveland has two veteran catchers locked in at the moment.

"One thing we know," Antonetti said recently, "is [Mejia] is a really good catcher right now and he made a lot of great progress defensively. Over the course of the last six months, he took a step toward increasing his versatility, so that's a big positive. Francisco deserves a lot of credit."

McKenzie No. 9 on list of Top 10 RHP prospects

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- The Indians currently boast one of the best rotations in baseball, and built the staff through multiple avenues. Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco, Trevor Bauer and Mike Clevinger were acquired via trade. Josh Tomlin was a late-round Draft pick who defied the odds through development. Danny Salazar came aboard as an international signing.

Triston McKenzie might very well represent the future -- an arm that can help sustain the success and reputation of Cleveland's pitching staff. According to MLB Pipeline, which is unveiling its Top 10 lists at each position over the next two weeks, McKenzie ranks ninth among all of baseball's right-handed pitching prospects for this coming season and finished last season second overall within the organization. McKenzie does what he can not to worry about rankings.

"I don't actually focus on it," McKenzie told reporters at the Indians' fall development program in September. "I focus on the game. I focus on me going out there and helping my team."

McKenzie played in the Futures Game this past summer, and is a safe bet to be included in MLB Pipeline's Top 100 prospect list, which will be revealed on Jan. 27. Last season, the lanky right-hander baffled plenty of bats with a fastball-curveball mix and a developing changeup. McKenzie piled up strikeouts, pitched with precision and lasted deep into games.

McKenzie spent the entire 2017 season with Class A Advanced Lynchburg in the Carolina League. In 25 starts, McKenzie went 12-6 with a 3.46 ERA, amassing 186 strikeouts against 45 walks in 143 innings. The righty averaged 11.7 strikeouts per nine innings.

McKenzie, who was selected in the first round (42nd overall) of the 2015 Draft, has a 2.68 ERA with 11.6 strikeouts per nine innings and a 4.4:1 strikeout-to-walk ratio in parts of three professional seasons in Cleveland's system.

Since being drafted, McKenzie has worked hard with the Indians on cleaning up his mechanics, especially with his lower half. The idea was to help alleviate some issues with the right-hander's across-the-body throwing motion. Once McKenzie grew accustomed to some of those alterations, he began to expand his pitch repertoire.

"In the beginning, there was a little bit of adjusting," McKenzie said. "But, I feel like every day I go out there and pitch, I learn something. Whether it be from my experiences facing the team, whether it be from me talking to my teammates who have been there before, talking to my coaches who have experience, talking to guys [from the Major League team], guys that are high prospects in our organization, I feel like I learn something every day."

McKenzie will likely advance to Double-A Akron this year, bringing him one step closer to the Majors.

"I'm not even looking that far [ahead] right now," McKenzie said. "All I'm focused on is coming into Spring Training ready to go."

Tribe unveils Spring Training broadcast slate

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- One month from now, the Indians' pitchers and catchers will hold their first official spring workout at the team's complex in Goodyear, Ariz. Spring Training games will be right around the corner, giving fans their first look at a team aiming for a third straight American League Central title.

That quest will begin on Feb. 23, when the Indians take on the Reds in their first Cactus League clash of 2018. That game will be televised on SportsTime Ohio, along with nine others during the spring, as part of the Spring Training broadcast slate that was announced by the Indians on Tuesday.

This spring, STO will carry 10 games: Feb. 23 (Reds), Feb. 25 (Reds), Feb. 26 (Brewers), March 6 (Reds), March 10 (Padres), March 11 (Brewers), March 17-18 (Cubs), March 21 (Royals) and March 27 (D-backs). The March 17-18 games against Chicago -- a pairing of 2016 World Series opponents -- will take place in Las Vegas, while the March 27 tilt against Arizona will be at Chase Field in Phoenix.

On the radio, WTAM 1100 AM will carry 10 games: Feb 23-24, March 3-4, March 6, March 10-11, March 17-18 and March 24. The March 17-18 games aired by WTAM will be the split-squad tilts in Arizona against the Cubs and Mariners, respectively. ALT 99.1 FM will air games on Feb. 25, March 23 and March 25, while WMMS 100.7 FM will broadcast two games (March 8 and March 15).

Indians.com will also have gamecasts and radio broadcasts throughout Spring Training.

The Tribe's pitchers and catchers are scheduled to report to Arizona on Feb. 14, with the first workout scheduled for Feb. 16. Position players will report on Feb. 18, with the first full-squad workout following on Feb. 20. Following Spring Training, which will conclude with two exhibition games at Chase Field (March 26-27), the Indians will open the regular season on March 29 in Seattle. Cleveland's home opener is slated for 4:10 p.m. ET on April 6 against the Royals.

Inbox: Strategy behind Brantley over Bruce?

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

What was the thought process on keeping injury prone Brantley for 1 year \$12mil and not getting Bruce for 3 year \$13 mil year average? #IndiansInbox

The first thing to consider here is the timeline of the transactions. The Indians had to make a decision on Michael Brantley's team option on Nov. 3, and chose to keep him in the fold for \$12 million. When the Indians made that call, they knew Jay Bruce was intent on testing the free-agent waters and hoping for a big payday.

Now, we have the benefit of hindsight. In what has been an extremely slow-developing market for free agents, and especially free-agent outfielders, Bruce reportedly agreed to a three-year, \$39-million contract with the Mets last week. All the second-guessers can now weigh Brantley vs. Bruce and wonder if Cleveland made the wrong choice so early in the process.

Brantley and Bruce are two different styles of hitters -- Bruce brings more power and Brantley offers more consistency and a higher contact rate -- but they potentially offer roughly the same value. Consider this: Bruce averaged 0.184 WAR per game in 2017 and Brantley averaged 0.178. Overall, Bruce had a 118 weighted Runs Created Plus (indicating he was 18 percent better than MLB's average) in 146 games, while Brantley posted a 111 wRC+ in 90 games.

Sample-size alert, but Bruce had an .808 OPS with a 108 OPS+ in 169 plate appearances after being traded to Cleveland. Brantley had an .801 OPS and a 108 OPS+ in 375 plate appearances in 2017. So, yes, Bruce hit 36 homers and had a higher slugging percentage, but they rated as relatively similar hitters. They just got there in different fashions.

It's also worth noting that the Indians avoided a long-term commitment in this decision. Bruce is a slugger whose new contract covers his age 31-33 seasons. There's risk there. Brantley's last two-plus years of injury woes make him a risk, too. But, Cleveland is only obligated to roll the dice for one more season before Brantley becomes a free agent.

Next year, the Indians might have Andrew Miller, Cody Allen, Lonnie Chisenhall, Zach McAllister and Josh Tomlin hit the free-agent market. The shorter-term decision (Brantley) may mean Cleveland is trying to keep its 2019 finances a bit more open in order to plan for the coming roster holes.

@BennyTheJet2017

Salazar slated to return to starting rotation? If he doesn't, who steps in to 5th spot? #IndiansInbox

During the Winter Meetings, Indians manager Terry Francona was asked if Danny Salazar was being viewed as a starter or reliever for this year. Without hesitation, Francona said Salazar was a starter. So, based on that, you can pencil Salazar's name into the projected Opening Day rotation. That said, if Salazar is being dangled as trade bait, it's in the Tribe's interest to continue to refer to him as a starter.

If there is no trade, the Indians will have an interesting rotation situation to follow this spring. You never know what setbacks or injuries might happen during Spring Training, so going in with Salazar, Mike Clevinger and Tomlin as options for the fourth and fifth spots gives the Indians a solid foundation. But, if all are healthy at the end of camp, how will Cleveland make the pieces fit?

Clevinger has one Minor League option left, so there's a chance he could open with Triple-A Columbus and stay there until a need arises in the big league rotation. Or, one spot could open for Salazar, Clevinger or Tomlin to start in the bullpen, where each has experience, to keep them all in the Major Leagues. The Indians also have to keep in mind that there is a lack of Major League rotation experience behind the top six arms.

As the other teams have gone out and made moves to significantly upgrade their squads, the Indians have been eerily quiet. I understand not giving Carlos Santana the type of money he got from the Phillies, but I have an issue with not matching or exceeding the offer that Bruce got from the Mets. It feels like the Indians have regressed. What are your thoughts?

--Dan B., Uniontown, Ohio

Given the landscape of the American League Central, the Indians arguably have the best path back to the postseason in 2018. They are also returning with a historically great pitching staff nearly entirely intact. I don't think the roster as it stands today is as strong as it was when the '17 season ended. That kind of goes without saying, but I don't see a team that needs to be in panic mode when it comes to spending in the free-agent market. Cleveland remains in a good position and based on recent years (acquiring Miller and Brandon Guyer in '16 and trading for Bruce and Joe Smith in '17), I think it's likely that Cleveland tries to address some of its needs midseason.

@Domi_Rella

Does the front office plan on signing another outfielder for depth? Why not re-sign Austin Jackson? #IndiansInbox

The Indians have maintained all offseason that they have interest in a reunion with Jackson, but that might be unlikely after the team signed Melvin Upton Jr. to a Minor League contract with a non-roster invite to Spring Training. The Indians like Upton's potential against left-handed pitching and the fact that he can play all three outfield spots. He'd earn \$1.5 million if he made the Major League roster. Essentially, it's the same type of role and deal that Jackson had with Cleveland one year ago. At the moment, adding relief depth looks like a bigger priority for the Tribe.

@slheinemann

I'm hoping to see @Cody_Anderson40 make a come back from TJ surgery this season. What is the time frame? When is he projected to begin pitching in games?

Chris Antonetti, the Indians' president of baseball operations, said during the Winter Meetings that the team will not rush Anderson back to the mound. The typical timeline for return for a starting pitcher who undergoes Tommy John surgery is 12-18 months, and Anderson will be coming up on one year on March 27. A midseason comeback is probably most realistic.

Unsung zero: Perfect year for Indians' Olson

By Andrew Simon MLB.com @AndrewSimonMLB

The most dominant 2017 season you didn't notice came from a 27-year-old rookie pitcher with a modest professional track record. The year before, he was designated for assignment more times (three) than he pitched in a big league game (one).

Yet from that unlikely place, Indians left-hander Tyler Olson emerged in unprecedented fashion.

Called up from Triple-A Columbus in the second half, Olson helped Cleveland win an American League-record 22 consecutive games on its way to a 102-60 record and an AL Central championship. He did it by being something almost nobody ever is in the failure-filled game of baseball -- perfect.

In 20 innings over 30 regular-season relief appearances, Olson did not allow an earned or unearned run (he added three scoreless appearances and two innings in the AL Division Series). Since at least 1901, no other pitcher has produced a scoreless season of more than 14 games (the Mets' Eric Gunderson in 1994) or 18 innings (the Dodgers' Karl Spooner in '54).

By making the most of his limited opportunity, Olson generated 1.2 wins above replacement (WAR), according to Baseball-Reference.com, while facing 77 batters. No other pitcher or position player in 2017 managed at least 1 WAR with fewer than 98 batters faced or plate appearances. And no pitcher since Boston's Luis Aponte in 1981 had reached the 1-WAR plateau while facing fewer batters than Olson.

Here are five things to know about Olson's out-of-nowhere arrival:

1. A circuitous path to Cleveland

Drafted by the Mariners out of Gonzaga in the seventh round in 2013, Olson spent three seasons in the Seattle organization, debuting in the Majors for 11 games in '15. But between that December and the end of this past July, the southpaw went for a wild ride, as follows:

- Designated for assignment by the Mariners (December 2015)
- Traded to the Dodgers (December 2015)
- Traded to the Yankees (January 2016)
- Designated for assignment by the Yankees (June 2016)
- Claimed by the Royals (June 2016)
- Designated for assignment by the Royals (July 2016)
- Claimed by the Indians (July 2016)
- Designated for assignment by the Indians; sent outright to Triple-A (August 2016)
- Contract selected by the Indians (July 2017)

That's five organizations -- three of them 2017 postseason qualifiers -- in the span of less than two years. Through it all, Olson made one MLB appearance with the Yankees in April 2016, then didn't see a big league mound again until last July 21. He pitched twice for the Tribe, was briefly optioned back to Columbus, then came back up for good on July 31.

2. Pick your spots

The Indians and manager Terry Francona got to 102 wins in part by putting players in a position to succeed. Olson's usage is a perfect example.

In 18 of his 30 appearances, Olson went less than one inning. Ten times, he faced exactly one batter, and his average of 2.6 batters faced per game was the fourth lowest in MLB (minimum 10 appearances).

Although he stifled right-handed batters (.504 OPS) nearly as well as lefties (.460) for the Tribe in 2017, Olson had displayed a significant platoon split throughout his pro career. Therefore, it makes sense that 54.5 percent of the southpaw's matchups came against same-side hitters. Only four lefties who faced at least 75 batters had the platoon advantage more often, led by fellow Tribe reliever Boone Logan (61.5 percent).

3. Drop that hook

No team in 2017 threw curveballs more often than the Indians (17.6 percent), who were followed by fellow division winners the Red Sox, Dodgers, Astros and Cubs. Loading up on breaking balls is in style, and Olson fit right in with that trend.

With a four-seam fastball that averaged only 89 mph, Olson went to his curve more than 41 percent of the time. That ranked sixth highest among those who threw at least 200 total pitches, and opponents had no answer for the hook, going 5-for-30 (.167) against it with one double and nine strikeouts.

4. No barrel peril

Olson's 18 strikeouts in 20 innings didn't stand out for a reliever in 2017, but what the lefty did do exceptionally well in his limited body of work was induce favorable contact.

Among all pitchers who generated at least 50 batted balls, according to Statcast™, Olson ranked in the top 20 in average exit velocity allowed (83.1 mph), average exit velocity allowed on fly balls and line drives (87.4 mph) and opponent hard-hit rate (23.1 percent).

None of the 52 balls put in play against Olson were barrels -- the most dangerous type of batted ball, based on exit velocity and launch angle -- with only fellow Tribe lefty Ryan Merritt (78 balls in play) topping that feat.

5. Great expectations

Statcast™'s expected weighted on-base average (xwOBA) metric takes into account the quality of contact made, plus actual strikeouts and walks. Boosted by his opponents' weak contact, Olson allowed a .251 xwOBA that tied him for 30th in the Majors (minimum 50 batters faced), compared with the MLB average of .304 for relievers. That put Olson just behind teammate and AL Cy Young Award winner Corey Kluber (.248).

So while Olson clearly won't be counted on to replicate his 0.00 ERA in 2018, his spectacular '17 performance qualifies as more than just luck.

Cleveland Indians not lost losing Jay Bruce -- Terry's Talkin' (photos)

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

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- I would have loved for the Cleveland Indians to sign Jay Bruce. I preferred him over Carlos Santana because Bruce can play right field. Santana is basically a first baseman who can play the outfield in an emergency.

As of the weekend, Santana's three-year, \$60 million deal with the Philadelphia Phillies remains the largest contract signed by a free agent so far this winter. Next comes Bruce's three-year, \$39 million deal with the New York Mets. Bruce was originally looking for five years in the \$75 million range.

The Indians will never admit it, but the quick exit from the playoffs has had an impact on this season's payroll. Blowing the 2-0 lead against the New York Yankees in the best-of-five American League Division Series meant the season ended on a downer.

That has hurt off-season ticket sales. The Indians are ahead of a year ago, but it's not the tidal wave of enthusiasm that could have come from a deep playoff run. They had built momentum during the 22-game winning streak leading to a 102-60 final record.

The Tribe's 2018 payroll is projected to be in the \$130 million range, an all-time high for the franchise. They project it to be about 17th in the majors.

This is how the Indians view their payroll situation.

1. Some fans wondered why Michael Brantley's \$11 million option for 2018 was picked up. He made the 2017 All-Star team, but played only 24 games after the All-Star break. He is coming off major ankle surgery.

2. For the Indians, the key is Brantley's deal is one year. He also is a relentless worker and they believe he can make a comeback. If he has a huge 2018 season, they can offer him a qualifying offer for 2019. If he rejects it, the Indians receive a draft pick.

3. When the Indians signed Edwin Encarnacion last winter, they knew he'd be a big part of their free agent investment for a few years. In 2017, Encarnacion made \$14.7 million. This season, it's \$18.7 million. In 2019, it's \$22 million and he has \$5 million guaranteed in 2020 based on a \$20 million salary.

4. Encarnacion's contract just keeps rising, as do the deals for some other players. His contract is one of the reasons the Indians are staying away from long-term commitments to many players.

5. Corey Kluber's deal rose from \$8 million in 2017 to \$10.7 million in 2018. It's \$13.2 million in 2019.

6. Carlos Carrasco went from \$6.5 million in 2017 to \$8 million in 2018.

7. Jason Kipnis went from \$9.2 million in 2017 to \$13.7 million (2018) and to \$14.7 million in 2019.

8. Cody Allen went from \$7.3 million in 2017 to \$10.7 million in 2018.

9. Yan Gomes, Jose Ramirez, Josh Tomlin and Roberto Perez all have raises built into their contracts.

10. The Tribe signed free agent first baseman Yonder Alonso to a two-year, \$16 million deal.

11. I know, we can play the numbers game. Santana's \$12 million is off the books. So is the \$3.6 million they paid when adding Bruce last August. But the point is their decision to sign younger players to long-term deals leads to higher salaries in the final years of their contracts.

ABOUT THE PITCHING

The Indians correctly believe pitching is what makes them a contender in the American League. That's why they worked so hard to sign their key pitchers.

I also think it's hard to make a good argument against putting a premium on pitching. Here's how it breaks down:

1. Had Carlos Carrasco not signed his four-year, \$22 million extension in 2015, he would have been a free agent right now. He had an 18-6 record and 3.29 ERA. Who knows what Carrasco would command on the free agent market. Odds are, the Indians could never afford him.

2. Instead, Carrasco is under contract for \$8 million in 2018. The Indians also have team options for him in 2019 (\$9 million) and 2020 (\$9.5 million).

3. Corey Kluber could have been heading into his free agent season with two Cy Young awards next to his name. Instead, the Indians signed Kluber to a five-year, \$38 million deal before the 2015 season. They have him signed up through 2019, with team options in 2020 and 2021.

4. When the Indians traded for Andrew Miller on July 30, 2017, they took on his \$9 million annual contract through 2018.

5. Cody Allen signed a \$10.7 million deal to avoid arbitration. So the Indians have nearly \$20 million tied up in two top relievers.

6. The bullpen market keeps rising as Bryan Shaw signed a three-year, \$27 million deal with the Colorado Rockies.

7. The Indians have Trevor Bauer under team control until after the 2020 season, as is Danny Salazar.

8. They have Mike Clevinger under team control through 2022. I'd try to sign Clevinger to an extension.

9. The Indians can lose Josh Tomlin, Miller and Allen after this season. But their key starters remain under control -- and the starting rotation is what can keep them in contention for the next few years.

BIG TRIBE POINTS

1. If the pitching staff remains one the best in baseball, the Indians will contend. There are question marks. Pitching coach Mickey Callaway is now the Mets' manager. Pitchers get hurt and slump. But any team in baseball would love to have the collection of arms who will be wearing Wahoo red, white and blue in 2018.
2. The Central Division is not strong. The Indians will be favored to win it for the third year in a row. As the Tribe showed in 2016 with its injured pitching staff, if you can make the playoffs you can reach the World Series by getting hot at the right time.
3. It's not just me saying the Indians are still a prime-time team. ESPN's Buster Olney ranks the Tribe as the best team in baseball in his early 2018 projections. That's right, No. 1 even without Bruce and Santana.
4. I'm not riding that high. But Olney's key points are "still the safest bet to get to October with Francisco Lindor, Jose Ramirez, Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco, Andrew Miller, et al."
5. When looking at the Tribe, it's easy to dwell on what they have lost -- Bruce, Santana, Shaw and Joe Smith. Their only real additions have been Melvin Upton and Yonder Alonzo. But I remain intrigued by Yandy Diaz and believe he'll hit his way into the lineup somewhere.
6. Speaking of extensions, the Indians were very wise to sign Jose Ramirez to a five-year, \$26 million option last spring with team options for 2022 and 2023.
7. I still think the Indians could make a significant trade. The waiting game for several big name free agents to pick a team has stalled the trade market. That could change in a few weeks.

Corey Kluber, Cleveland Indians 22-game winning streak take top honors at Greater Cleveland Sports Awards

By Joe Noga, cleveland.com jnoga@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- With spring training less than a month away for the Cleveland Indians, the final vestiges of the Tribe's 2017 season were laid to rest Wednesday as the club earned two top honors at the 18th Greater Cleveland Sports Awards.

Manager Terry Francona accepted the 2017 Best Moment in Cleveland Sports award on behalf of the organization for his team's record 22-game winning streak, and left little doubt about his focus during his parting remarks.

"After the sting of losing to the Yankees, in 28 days I can guarantee we're coming back with a vengeance," Francona told the crowd at the Renaissance Cleveland Hotel.

Pitcher Corey Kluber was also honored as the 2017 Professional Athlete of the Year, beating out teammate Jose Ramirez, Cavaliers star LeBron James and Browns iron man Joe Thomas. Kluber went 18-4 with a 2.25 earned run average and 265 strikeouts in earning his second career Cy Young Award.

In a video message to the audience, Kluber echoed Francona's excitement for the upcoming season.

"2017 was a great year for us," Kluber said. "But, I think we're all looking forward to bigger and better things in 2018, and we can't wait to get started in a few weeks."

Kluber's teammate and catcher, Roberto Perez, accepted the award on the pitcher's behalf. Perez, who caught three of Kluber's 18 regular season wins, praised the two-time Cy Young winner for his work ethic and preparation.

"He works hard to be the best pitcher," Perez said. "As a catcher, I expect a lot of big things from Kluber. The way he prepares. He's so professional and his work ethic is tremendous. He deserves it."

Francona reiterated many of the thoughts he previously shared about the winning streak in September, adding that he honestly did not realize at the time what it meant to people.

"When I got back to Tucson this winter, more people were like, 'Wow, it was amazing. I stopped what I was doing when you guys got to like 15,'" Francona said. "When you look back on it, it's pretty special."

Cleveland Indians announce player development staff assignments for 2018

By Joe Noga, cleveland.com jnoga@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Some familiar faces return while others will move to different roles within the Cleveland Indians' player development system for the 2018 season.

Cleveland's four full-season clubs and short-season Mahoning Valley went 325-308 overall in 2017. Class A Lynchburg posted the best record, earning a 87-52 regular season mark and a Carolina League co-championship.

The 2017 season also saw the emergence of right-handed pitching prospect Triston McKenzie along with the continued development of catcher Francisco Mejia and third baseman Nolan Jones.

Chris Tremie returns for his sixth season with Class AAA Columbus while Tony Mansolino takes over as the skipper at Class AA Akron. Mansolino led Lynchburg to a co-championship in the Carolina League and was named Manager of the Year.

Rouglas Odor takes over as manager in Lynchburg, while Luke Carlin moves from Mahoning Valley to Class A Lake County.

Jim Pankovits joins the Indians organization after seven years with Seattle and 16 with Houston. Pankovits will manage at Mahoning Valley.

Indians ownership recently approved the creation of a second Arizona League team in Cleveland's player development system. The club will begin play this summer. Larry Day, who managed at Lake County in 2017, will run this team comprised of college-aged players, while Jerry Owens moves from the bench in Columbus to helm the Arizona League high school-aged team.

Tom Wiedenbauer will run the organization's minor league spring training and guide player development programming. Anthony Medrano replaces Wiedenbauer as the assistant field coordinator. Medrano will helm the staffs in Goodyear and the Dominican Republic while leading player development activities at both locations.

Anna Bolton, who spent the last two seasons as the Major League Spanish Translator and Player Engagement Coordinator, has been promoted to the newly created position of Education and Language Coordinator. Bolton will operate mainly out of the team's complex in Goodyear, as well as the Dominican Republic.

Joel Magnum joins the Arizona Rookie League college team staff after serving as pitching coach at the University of Louisiana Monroe, along with Kai Correa, who worked as an infield coach at the University of Northern Colorado.

Cleveland has set its spring training broadcast schedule for 2018. (Chuck Crow, The Plain Dealer)

By Joe Noga, cleveland.comjnoga@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Indians fans will have the opportunity to watch 10 spring training games from Goodyear, Ariz. beginning with the team's Cactus League opener Feb. 23 against Cincinnati.

The club announced its 2018 spring training television broadcast schedule on SportsTime Ohio, which includes a pair of matchups with the Chicago Cubs March 17-18 in Las Vegas as part of MLB's Big League Weekend.

Other highlights include a showdown with division rival Kansas City on March 21 and a final spring training tuneup at Chase Field against the Diamondbacks on March 27.

Radio partner WTAM 1100 AM will broadcast 10 games and FM sister station WMMS 100.7 will air two games and three more on FM 99.1 Fifteen other games will air online via indians.com.

Pitchers and catchers are scheduled to report to Goodyear on Feb. 14. The full squad reports Feb. 18.

Former RubberDucks hitting coach Tony Mansolina named Ducks manager: 'I'm thrilled to be back' by Contributor

When the manager turns over his lineup card for the home opener on April 13, RubberDucks fans might do a double take.

The Indians announced the organization's staff alignment Wednesday and named Tony Mansolino manager of the Ducks.

Mansolino is joined by pitching coach Rigo Beltran and hitting coach Kevin Howard, who served in the same capacity for him in Lynchburg last season. Dennis Malave joins the Ducks as bench coach.

Mansolino, 35, becomes the 17th manager in club history and replaces Mark Budzinski, who was added to the major league coaching staff.

He returns to Akron after serving as RubberDucks hitting coach in 2015 when the Ducks finished third in the Eastern League in home runs (144) and fourth in RBI (589), runs (621) and slugging percentage (.409).

"I'm thrilled to be back," Mansolino said. "I think Akron and Canal Park and the way the front office runs the affiliate, it has to be one of the top five places in minor league baseball.

"It's definitely the best in the Eastern League. It's one of the best overall. From that aspect, I'm certainly glad to be back. ... Without a doubt, I know it's going to be great in Akron."

Mansolino lives in Nashville with his wife, Adrianna, and sons Jackson (3) and Maddox (four months). His father, Doug, is the field coordinator with the Phillies.

A manager for Class A Lake County in 2016, he guided the Captains to a 72-68 record before moving up a rung to coach High A Lynchburg last season.

In 2017, Mansolino led the Hillcats to an 87-52 mark and was named the Carolina League Manager of the Year. Lynchburg earned a share of the title with the Down East Wood Ducks after Hurricane Irma forced a cancellation of the championship series.

Before that, he was a hitting coach in the Indians organization with the Mahoning Valley Scrappers (2011-12), Captains (2013) and Carolina Mudcats (2014).

Mansolino was a 26th-round pick by the Pittsburgh Pirates in the 2005 MLB Draft out of Vanderbilt. He played professionally until 2010 and finished with a .231 career average with 19 home runs and 173 RBI.

While player development is first and foremost, Mansolino comes in knowing how strong the RubberDucks are after winning the EL title in 2016 and fighting until the last week in 2017 before being ousted from the playoffs with a 69-71 record.

"To be honest with you, nobody is going to want to win more than I will on a nightly basis," he said. "The caveat for me is that I will never sacrifice a player's development for a win. I certainly think without a doubt, they go hand-in-hand in so many ways. I have no problem coming into an environment where winning is the expectation. I wouldn't want it any other way."

Mansolino comes into an interesting situation. With the success of the Indians, movement could will be minimal, leaving players from Akron from last season integrated with some call-ups from his Lynchburg squad.

"Historically when you get a major league team competing for a world championship, there's going to be major league depth in Triple A, which in turn is going to hold back the rest of the system," he said. "I don't see a ton of players moving from Lynchburg to Akron.

"Who knows who we'll get. I think it'll probably be a blend of a lot of players in Akron that I've had in the past and a blend of some of the guys in Lynchburg. Whoever we get, the goals are to get better individually and win a game that night."

Beltran, 48, joins the RubberDucks after two seasons at Lynchburg. He also served as the pitching coach for Mexico last season in the 2017 World Baseball Classic. He split time with Lynchburg and Arizona in 2015 after spending 2014 in Lake County. Prior to that, he spent seven seasons in the Cincinnati Reds farm system.

Howard, 36, has been a hitting coach in the organization from 2015-17 for Lynchburg, Mahoning Valley and Lake County.

Malave, 38, was the Indians hitting coach for Arizona the last seven seasons and is in his 14th season in the Indians organization.

The post [Former RubberDucks hitting coach Tony Mansolina named Ducks manager: 'I'm thrilled to be back'](#) appeared first on [Ohio.com](#).

Indians pitcher Corey Kluber, former Cavs center Zydrunas Ilgauskas, Wadsworth senior Joey Baughman take home Greater

Cleveland Sports Awards

by **Ryan Lewis**

Cy Young winner Corey Kluber was named the Professional Athlete of the Year and the Indians' 22-game winning streak took home the title of Best Moment in Cleveland Sports at the 2017 Greater Cleveland Sports Awards, held at the Renaissance Cleveland hotel Wednesday night.

The Indians' 22-game winning streak was comprised of arguably the greatest 22-game stretch in major-league history. It stands as the longest winning streak in AL history and the second-longest in major-league history, bested by only the 26-game streak put together by the 1916 New York Giants.

The Indians in those 22 games had a run differential of +105 and won by an average of 4.77 runs per game. They also trailed for only eight innings during the streak out of a possible 199.

Indians manager Terry Francona, always looking to remain in the moment, didn't enjoy it as much at the time as he does now that things have slowed down.

"I honestly didn't realize at the time what it meant to people," Francona said. "When I got back to Tucson this winter, more people were like, 'Wow, it was amazing. I stopped what I was doing when you guys got to like 15.' It was pretty cool to hear that, because when you're living it, you heard me every day, it was like, 'We're going to turn the page and move on.' And we'd do that pretty good. So, I don't know that I took the time to maybe enjoy it as much as I should have. When you look back on it, it's pretty special."

While accepting the award for Best Moment, Francona also made a promise that the Indians will be looking to get back to work once spring training begins next month.

"After the sting of losing to the Yankees, in 28 days, I guarantee you we're coming back with a vengeance," he said.

Kluber in 2017 won his second Cy Young Award after putting together a blistering four-month stretch once he came off the disabled list on June 1. Still managing a back issue all year, Kluber finished with an 18-4 record and led the American League with a 2.25 ERA and 0.869 WHIP to go with an 11.7 K/9 rate.

Catcher Roberto Perez was in Cleveland to accept the award on behalf of Kluber, who sent in a video message.

"I'd like to say thank you and how honored I am to be selected Cleveland's 2017 top professional athlete," Kluber said. "There's so many great athletes around the city, not just in the Indians' clubhouse, but the other teams as well. So, I think this is a huge honor for me, personally. I'd like to thank Roberto for accepting this award on my behalf tonight. Without the leadership and guidance of our catchers—both Roberto and Yan [Gomes]—I wouldn't be in the position to receive this award. Also, I'd like to thank the rest of my teammates who supported me throughout the entire season."

Kluber dealt with a callus issue on Opening Day and then a back issue for a month before hitting the disabled list. Once he returned, he rediscovered the type of dominant form which had already won him a Cy Young Award, the first coming in 2014.

"That was very impressive," Perez said of Kluber after June 1. "You don't see a guy come off an injury and deal like that. He works hard to be the best pitcher. As a catcher, I expect a lot of big things from Kluber. The way he prepares, he's so professional and his work ethic [is impressive] and he deserves it."

Thursday Conversation: Sandy Alomar on Hall of Fame hopefuls Jim Thome and Omar Vizquel, yellow Porsches and Carlos Santana
By Zack Meisel 2 hours ago

No BBWAA-elected Hall of Famer has donned an Indians cap in Cooperstown since Bob Lemon in 1976. That could change this year.

Next week, we'll learn the 2018 fate for the Hall of Fame cases for Jim Thome and Omar Vizquel. Early returns indicate Thome could be bound for the Hall this summer. Vizquel will likely have to wait.

No one had a better view of Vizquel's defensive wizardry or of Thome's powerful stroke than former Tribe catcher Sandy Alomar, now the team's first-base coach. In this week's Thursday Conversation, Alomar shared his perspective of both players, revealed whether Vizquel still drives a yellow Porsche and touched on the Indians' revamped coaching staff, his cycling accomplishments and the departure of Carlos Santana.

Zack Meisel: You, Thome and Vizquel all played together for a long time and helped create a special era of Indians baseball. So what goes through your mind when you see their names on the Hall of Fame ballot?

Sandy Alomar: I'm so excited for both of those guys. I had a front-row seat to watch them play and I can tell you that those guys were special players, both of them. Omar grew on everybody. When he came in, he was this small guy who was brought up as a defensive wizard. But he became a pretty good offensive player when he got inserted into the top of our lineup. He did a fantastic job.

Thome, he's one of my favorite players. He's such a genuine guy and his production offensively — he got on base so, so much. His on-base percentage was over .400. I had a chance to see those guys from the front row. It was fun watching them. It doesn't surprise me that they have a chance to be elected.

ZM: You and Omar had a lot of fun together. You've shared stories of him speeding past you on the highway in his yellow Porsche. How much fun was he behind the scenes?

SA: He had this fiery spirit. He came to the ballpark every day ready to play. He was a funny character, the way he dressed. You couldn't do anything but smile. If you weren't having a good day, you'd see Omar and just smile. He's a funny individual. He enjoys the game of baseball, loves the game of baseball. He came ready to play every day and showed it on the field. But he had a sense of humor. All you could do was laugh. His outfits were wild, his car. He's an artist. All you had to do was take a look at his car, a bright yellow Porsche. That tells you the rest of the story right there.

ZM: Did you find yourself marveling at his defense every day?

SA: I reference Omar as The Human GPS. It won't get validated by the Hall of Fame or the stats, but only people who played with him can tell you about the sixth sense of the game, and Omar was one of the guys blessed with that. He didn't need any coaching. He positioned himself. He knew how the guy was pitching. He paid attention to the location, how the guy was swinging the bat, if it goes inside out. When he was playing with Robbie, it was unbelievable to watch that. They made great plays. They were fantastic with the glove. But there were also many, many times the ball was hit and they were right there. There was no going to the left or the right. They would position themselves in the perfect spots because they were students of the game. Omar was a student of the game. Even though he had a lot of fun playing it, he knew everybody inside out. His defense is the best I've seen from a shortstop. He was remarkable.

ZM: To some, he's docked points in the Hall of Fame discussion because he compiled stats over 25 seasons. But at the same time, he lasted 25 years at a demanding position. That isn't easy to do.

SA: He wasn't a big guy, but he had a good physique. He worked at it. It's surprising that he played that long at a demanding position, but he took care of himself. You never saw him overweight or anything like that. He was in great shape every year. Omar was a well-fit guy. He wasn't oversized, but he took care of his body.

ZM: How will his intelligence and personality play as a minor-league manager (for the White Sox A-ball affiliate in Winston-Salem)?

SA: Omar's a bright guy. He's not that kid that he was when he was playing. He's a very mature guy. He has the baseball instincts to manage. He could manage in the big leagues. I think that experience he had with the Detroit Tigers coaching first base helped him a lot. I think he'll eventually have an opportunity to interview with somebody, or somebody will give him a chance. I really do respect Omar. He's going back to the minor leagues to manage, so obviously he's interested in managing.

ZM: Will he be driving a yellow Porsche to the A-ball stadium?

SA: The last time I talked to him — I don't think he's driving Porsches anymore. I think he went from Porsches to Ferraris. In the minor leagues, I hope he doesn't take those cars over there. His players will be asking for rides.

ZM: Do you remember when Thome came up in 1991, a stick figure wearing No. 59 and then No. 6?

SA: His first year, he was rooming with me in spring training. I love Jimmy. He's such a genuine guy. He was an innocent kid when he came up. You could tell that his plate discipline was going to take him a long way. He had a great eye. Nobody talked about the sabermetric numbers, on-base percentage. It was about home runs and RBI. But Thome walked a ton. That really helped him throughout his career, being selective and being on-base and driving in runs even though he walked that much. If you have an on-base percentage of .402 over a 22-year span, that's an unbelievable number.

ZM: And 17 postseason homers (all with the Indians).

SA: He was always under control. He was looking for his area to hit. If that pitch wasn't there — we know Thome struck out a lot. Power hitters tend to sell out a little bit and strike out because they're going for a bigger swing. But he was always selective with his area. He was hard to fool. When he got his pitch in the area he was looking for it, he rarely missed it. He was a phenomenal hitter. You had him, Albert Belle and Manny Ramirez in that lineup, you got to witness three of the best power guys in that time.

Will Jim Thome be inducted into the Hall of Fame this summer? (Tommy Gilligan/USA Today Sports)

ZM: Did you ever think you were playing with a Hall of Famer when you were his teammate, or did that not register because he was quietly consistent and had longevity, instead of the in-your-face, MVP-type statistical seasons?

SA: He had great consistency. He drove in 100 runs nine times. He walked a ton. When you're playing, I don't think you're thinking about the Hall of Fame. You know that guys are special. So if you think this guy is special, by the end of his career, you're thinking, 'This guy is probably going to be in the Hall of Fame.'

ZM: Your brother made it and that was, obviously, meaningful for you. If Thome is elected on his first try this year, what will that mean to you, having been side by side with him for much of his journey?

SA: I'll be so happy to see a person, a family guy, a great teammate who I played with for many years get elected to the Hall of Fame. It's almost like I'm there with him. It's a surreal moment to have somebody that you played with, played championship games with. To be elected to the Hall of Fame, and if it's the first ballot, even more — I'm very proud of Thome and Vizquel. If they accomplish that feat, it's like a part of me is with them. I got to experience many games with those guys.

ZM: We're less than a month from spring training. Will it be strange to have new faces on the coaching staff after five years of continuity?

SA: It'll probably be strange at the beginning, but these guys are familiar with Carl Willis. He's been here before. It's not like he's a stranger.

It's going to be strange not to have the same guys who were here for a long period of time, but when you win and coaches have success in what they're doing, other organizations are going to take notice and ask them to manage or to take a higher role in their department. I'm happy for those guys, but I welcome the other guys also.

ZM: You worked closely with Carlos Santana for a long time, back to his days as a catcher. What was your reaction to his deal with the Phillies?

SA: I'm really happy for Santana. He got that contract. I wish we would've kept him. I have a ton of respect for Carlos, because he's out there grinding it out every day. It's very difficult to get a player who plays 150 games every year. Carlos is one of those guys who is going to be in the lineup and he doesn't complain when he's hurt or banged up. He goes out there and plays. We're going to miss him on the field and in the locker room.

We welcome Yonder Alonso. For some guys, it's good fortune. Other guys get opportunities, too. Alonso turned a corner last year. I hope he can help us out. He seems like a pretty good hitter and a great guy. I've had a chance to talk to that guy all the time at first base. He's always talking to me.

We are going to miss Carlos.

ZM: You're an avid cyclist. How much have you done over the winter?

SA: I had this challenge, I needed to get to 4,000 miles by the end of the year. I didn't ride that much during the season last year, but I was able to finish up before the year was over, 1,800 miles in five or six weeks. Now I've slowed down a little bit until I go to spring training. After games and practice, I'll go out and ride a little bit.

ZM: Will you have the same goal of 4,000 this year?

SA: It all depends on how my body feels and the schedule, the weather. I try to keep it around 4,000-6,000 per year and we go from there, but I'd like to do more than 4,000 this year. It's hard with travel. If I didn't work, I'd put in more than 6,000. But that's plenty for me.

Commentary: Fate of the Indians rests in hands of 'Big Three'

Jim Ingraham | The Chronicle-Telegram Published on Jan. 18, 2018 | Updated 7:25 a. m.

The Indians' Big Three of Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco and Trevor Bauer was the best Big Three in the American League last year, and, arguably, the greatest Big Three in the history of the franchise.

The message from the Indians' front office to the Indians' Big Three in 2018:

Do it again.

As the hot stove league lumbers quietly through the winter, with the Indians being as quiet as a church mouse, one fact is becoming crystal clear.

If the Indians are going to win their division, play deep into the postseason, and perhaps even finally win that ever-elusive World Series, they are going to do it led by their Big Three — or they aren't going to do it at all.

There are worse mule teams to which to hitch your wagon. Much worse.

Kluber (an American League-leading 8.0), Carrasco (5.4), and Bauer (3.1) had a combined 16.5 WAR for the 2017 season. That was easily the best of any Big Three in the American League. Of the 13 Indians teams that have reached the postseason in the 117-year history of the franchise, only one Big Three had a better WAR than the firm of Kluber, Carrasco and Bauer.

That was the Big Three in 1920, when the Indians won the first of their two World Series titles. And that Big Three was actually more like a Big Two, plus one. The Big Two were Stan Coveleski (8.5) and Jim Bagby (8.4). The other guy was Ray Caldwell, who somehow won 20 games in a season in which his WAR was 0.4, the lowest WAR in major league history by a pitcher with 20 or more wins (according to Baseball-Reference's Play Index).

The Indians next year clearly intend to go to war led by their top three starters, Kluber, Carrasco and Bauer, each of whom are coming off career years, and each of whom may have to pitch even better than that, collectively, for the Indians to make a deep postseason run.

There is still about a month to go before the start of spring training, and about 10 weeks before the start of the regular season, so a lot can still happen between now and then. It just probably won't happen in Cleveland.

Yonder Alonso was the Indians' big-ticket item this year, and he alone is not going to make up for the loss of three players who were in the Indians' starting lineup for Game 5 of the Division Series loss to the Yankees.

Carlos Santana, Jay Bruce and Austin Jackson won't be playing in Cleveland this year. Neither will two of the team's top four relievers from last year, Bryan Shaw and Joe Smith. Over the last five years, Shaw pitched in 378 games, 15 more than any other major league pitcher. Smith was acquired by the Indians in a mid-season trade last year, and in 21 appearances he held opposing hitters to a .229 batting average, with 20 strikeouts and no walks.

Those are five key contributors to the Indians' reaching the postseason last year for the third time in the last five years.

So the lineup and the bullpen both have taken some hits during the winter. What hasn't taken a hit is what is so good at preventing hits: the starting rotation.

Led by Kluber, who led the league with a .193 opponents' batting average last year, Indians starters held opposing hitters to a .241 batting average, again the best in the league. Mike Clevinger was second to Kluber in the league (pitchers with 20 or more starts), with an opponents' batting average of .206.

Clevinger makes up the second wave of Tribe starting pitchers, behind The Big Three. Josh Tomlin and Danny Salazar are also in that group, which we can call the Not So Big Three, but only if we want to be inaccurate.

Clevinger, Tomlin and Salazar last year combined to go 27-21, with a 4.16 ERA. That might seem like a very pedestrian ERA, but it's not. It's 38 points better than the league average for starting pitchers.

In other words, the Indians Nos. 4, 5, and 6 starters last year had a combined ERA that was significantly better than the league average. How many teams can claim that?

Small wonder, then, that Indians officials haven't touched the key component of a roster which, over the last five years has the best record in the American League.

If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

The Indians' Big Three, Second Three, and all the other starters certainly aren't broken. They have done most of the heavy lifting in the Tribe's march into the postseason three times in Terry Francona's five seasons as manager.

When it came time to tinker with the roster this offseason, the tinkering has been done elsewhere. The starters remain the same, and so do the marching orders:

Do it again.

Luke Carlin to manage Captains in 2018

By David Glasier, The News-Herald

POSTED: 01/17/18, 11:10 AM EST | UPDATED: 15 HRS AGO # COMMENTS

Luke Carlin worked briefly at Classic Park the last two Septembers as an instructor when the Indians brought minor-league prospects there for the Fall Development Program.

The 37-year-old Maryland native is about to get prolonged exposure to the Eastlake ballpark that opened in 2003 as the home of the Lake County Captains.

The Indians on Jan. 17 announced that Carlin in 2018 will manage the full-season Single-A affiliate playing in the Midwest League.

"I love the place," Carlin said of Classic Park in a telephone interview from his home in Texas. "It has everything you need to run a first-class operation."

Carlin made his minor-league managerial debut last season with the short-season Single A Mahoning Valley Scrappers of New York-Pennsylvania League.

He guided the Scrappers to a 44-29 finish, good for first place in the NYPL's Pinckney Division.

"It definitely was a good group of guys, players and staff. We had some fun and won a lot of ballgames," Carlin said.

Carlin had a playing career that spanned 14 seasons after the Detroit Tigers selected him in the 10th round of the June 2002 draft as a catcher out of Northeastern University.

He spent parts of four seasons in the big leagues, including four games with the Indians in 2012. He had a .179 career batting average with three home runs and 11 RBI in 56 games.

His minor-league coaching career began in 2016 with the Akron RubberDucks, the Indians Double-A affiliate.

Carlin is scheduled to make his first public appearance as Captains manager when the team stages its annual Hot Stove Dinner on Feb. 8 at Holiday Inn Mentor.

Other members of 2018 Captains staff are the following:

- Joe Torres, pitching coach
- Pete Lauritson, hitting coach
- Kyle Hudson, bench coach
- Juan Acevedo, strength and conditioning coach
- Jake Legan, trainer

The Captains' season opener is scheduled for April 5 at Classic Park against the Fort Wayne (Ind.) TinCaps.

Nick Cafardo / SUNDAY BASEBALL NOTES - Can the Red Sox afford not to take a big swing at J.D. Martinez?

By Nick CafardoGlobe Staff January 13, 2018

There's not a lot going on with the Red Sox as we get closer to spring training. Maybe this is a staredown with Scott Boras over J.D. Martinez, and maybe eventually a deal gets done, even if it means the Red Sox getting into a six- or seven-year deal in the \$25 million-\$30 million per year range.

But what if the Red Sox do nothing else? Could they compete with the Yankees in the AL East and get beyond the first round of the playoffs?

"If David Price gives them that legitimate No. 2 guy, one who can win 17-20 games, and they have a staff that gets better, particularly Rick Porcello, then they could easily be a 95-plus-win team even without the big bopper in the middle of the lineup," said one AL executive.

This is precisely the tack Red Sox management took last offseason when they declined to pursue Edwin Encarnacion and went with no legitimate replacement for David Ortiz. The Red Sox still won 93 games and their division, and did so with Porcello having a horrible season and Price out of the picture for most of the year.

The Red Sox felt that their starting rotation would be so good that it would make up for the power shortage and overall lineup thump.

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There's no doubt Martinez is the guy they need in the middle of the order. His 45 homers last season ranked third in the majors behind Giancarlo Stanton's 59 and Aaron Judge's 52. The Red Sox finished last in the AL in homers with 168. If the Red Sox and Boras can't reach an agreement and Martinez winds up signing elsewhere, then what?

Boston's offense hasn't changed from last season. It needs a boost.

Could that boost come from within?

Could Bryce Brentz become the DH and loft the baseball as he did so well from mid-May on last season, when he hit a career-high 31 homers with Pawtucket? Don't you also think Hanley Ramirez, given that he has a vesting option for 2019 for \$22 million, can get his act together and have at least the type of season he had in 2016?

With new hitting coach Tim Hyers's emphasis on lofting the ball, will that help Xander Bogaerts hit more home runs? Can Jackie Bradley Jr. get back to 25-plus homers rather than the 17 he hit a year ago? What can Rafael Devers do with a full season in the lineup? Will his power translate to 30-plus homers? How about Andrew Benintendi? Is he capable of 25-30 homers in his second full season in the majors? Will Christian Vazquez, who made strong inroads with his offense, hit more homers if he's the primary catcher in 2018?

There's no question that not securing Martinez would be seen as a failure for president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski. After all, Martinez is a non-compensation free agent. That's huge for a team, instead of having to give up a high draft pick to sign a free agent who was extended a qualifying offer.

The flip side is the Red Sox will likely have to pay more for Martinez because they are earmarking him as a DH. Why would they pay more for a DH? Because the feeling from the Martinez side is that they would be devaluing him by making him a DH rather than a positional player, which would hurt his value after the contract is over and Martinez is back on the market in his mid-30s.

We dwell on Martinez because there's really nobody else of that ilk available, if you believe Jose Abreu and Manny Machado are out of the Red Sox' reach on the trade front.

The Red Sox could entertain sluggers such as Logan Morrison, Mark Reynolds, and Jose Bautista, but they don't have the current track record that Martinez has.

The other theory is that the Red Sox are saving for the free agent class of 2019, which includes Machado and Bryce Harper, who will both be 26 when they hit free agency.

The counter to that would be that the Red Sox need to address their power shortage here and now, that they can't afford not to given the monsters in the middle of the Yankees' order.

"I just don't see doing nothing being an option for the Red Sox," said one AL East GM. "Not with the Yankees so active. Both teams may deny they do things based on what the other is doing, and that's true to some degree, but you always have to counter what the other team is doing and both have the resources to do it. Standing pat won't excite Boston's fan base."

And that, too, is a consideration. In a town where the Patriots are No. 1 and the Celtics perhaps the favorite among millennials, the Red Sox need to dominate the news cycle one of these days soon or they really are in jeopardy of falling to No. 3.

One thing is for sure: Whatever decision is made will be made by Dombrowski. Even though Boras has done deals with team ownership in the past, even he acknowledged that Dombrowski has been given the power to make big decisions, as he did with the seven-year, \$210 million deal for Price.

STOCKPILE OF ARMS

Yankees' pitching depth is enviable

Why are the Yankees in the best position of any team to make blockbuster deals and feel good about their future? Because they have the best pitching prospects in baseball.

Lefthander Justus Sheffield and righthanders Albert Abreu and Freicer Perez are as good a threesome of pitching prospects as there are in baseball. Righties Chance Adams, Domingo German, Taylor Widener, and Jio Orozco are highly regarded starters, and righty relievers J.P. Feyereisen and Cale Coshov have good arms. The Yankess have another half-dozen valued pitching prospects behind them.

This is quite an arsenal of major league-caliber arms, some of whom could see time with the Yankees this season.

Sheffield, 21, went 7-6 with a 3.18 ERA in 17 starts for Double A Trenton last season. He struck out 82 and walked 33 in 93½ innings and also missed time with an oblique injury.

Abreu, 22, played for three teams in the Yankee system last season and went a combined 2-3 with a 3.38 ERA in 13 starts and one relief appearance. He'll be in major league camp this spring as part of the 40-man roster.

The Yankees are also pursuing a free agent starter like Yu Darvish. If the Yankees are able to land Darvish, they could use some of their prospects to fill other needs via trade. That's the beauty of having this deep of a farm system, especially when you have pitching.

That was the biggest difference between the organizational depth of the Yankees and Red Sox. The Red Sox had top positional prospects, but once they traded away Michael Kopech (in the Chris Sale deal) and Anderson Espinoza (in the Drew Pomeranz deal), they didn't have much pitching depth left in the minors. The Red Sox are trying to build that back up.

"It's almost not fair," said one longtime scout who watched the Yankees' young pitchers quite a bit last season and during the Arizona Fall League. "For that franchise to have that kind of talent and all the money in the world, opens up a lot of possibilities for them."

It'll be interesting to see over the next few weeks how general manager Brian Cashman deploys his young pitching in potential trade talks. He has some redundancy in his talent, but one thing Cashman hasn't done is trade his front-end prospects. Given the fact the Yankees could solve their last pitching need through free agency, it doesn't appear Cashman will have to deal too many young players.

He has obvious needs at second base and third base, but it appears Gleyber Torres will fill one of those spots and Miguel Andujar could fill the other. More than likely, Cashman may opt for a veteran at at least one those positions. Free agent Todd Frazier could still be in play to return.

Apropos of nothing

1. Both the Astros and Yankees made a run at Gerrit Cole, and on Saturday Houston landed the righthander. No pitcher struck out more batters with a runner on third base last season than Cole, who whiffed 30 of the 78 batters he faced. Chris Sale and Chris Archer tied for second with 24 strikeouts.

2. The Twins, according to one major league source, "are in on everybody" when it comes to pitching. That means Yu Darvish, Jake Arrieta, and Alex Cobb. Minnesota GM Thad Levine was with the Rangers during the same time as Darvish. The last time the Twins went after a big-time free agent pitcher, after the 2014 season, it worked out well with Ervin Santana. They'd like to repeat that. After all, this is a great time for the Twins to take that next step. The Indians and Twins are the only teams in the AL Central that have a chance to win the division.

3. Still no word on whether John Lackey will keep pitching in 2018. The 39-year-old free agent has been trending in the wrong direction. In 2015, he had a 2.77 ERA over 218 innings. In 2016, his ERA was 3.35 over 188½ innings. Last season, it was 4.59 over 170½ innings.

4. This sounds like fun. MLB Network's Jon Paul Morosi, a Harvard alum, will host an MLB executive panel made up of Crimson grads on Jan. 22 at the Harvard Club on Commonwealth Avenue. Tickets are \$75. Included on the panel are Marlins president of baseball operations Michael Hill, A's GM David Forst, MLB senior VP of baseball operations Peter Woodfork, Rockies GM Jeff Bridich, and Red Sox vice president of player development Ben Crockett.

5. Fifty-one scouts have been fired by major league teams over the last four months, per Bob Nightengale of USA Today. Some have been replaced by analysts. The Red Sox no longer have an advance scout. They will scout opponents via video, an awful trend.

Updates on nine

1. Joe Mauer, 1B, Twins — Mauer enters the final year of that enormous contract and makes \$23 million. Obviously he can still hit, but his production as a first baseman is subpar. Mauer is the face of the franchise, so it appears his fate will be tied to Twins ownership. Hard to see them giving Mauer another big contract.

2. Kelvin Herrera, RHP, Royals — The Royals have received a number of calls on Herrera's availability, but they are likely to keep him unless they get a huge haul coming back.

3. Josh Donaldson, 3B, Blue Jays — The Jays avoided arbitration with Donaldson by agreeing to a record \$23 million salary. The sides, however, did not work out a long-term agreement, likely meaning Donaldson, 32, will become a free agent after the season. There had been talk of the Jays dealing Donaldson, but that has quieted as management wants to win this season.

4. Blake Swihart, C/INF, Red Sox — Swihart continues to draw interest around the league, but the Red Sox have taken a no-trade approach to the once prominent prospect. Teams would still pursue Swihart as a catcher, given that he's a switch-hitter.

5. Eloy Jimenez, OF, White Sox — Obtained from the Cubs in the Jose Quintana deal, Jimenez is being described as a Giancarlo Stanton/Aaron Judge facsimile after his outstanding 2017 season, in which he produced a .312 average with 19 homers and 65 RBIs in just 89 games playing for three teams. Jimenez, 21, is 6 feet 4 inches, 205 pounds, and still growing. The White Sox have been asked about him in trade talks, but they feel they may be sitting on a monster.

6. Jay Bruce, OF, Mets — Some have opined that Bruce's three-year, \$39 million deal will somehow affect what J.D. Martinez will get in the open market. Ah, no it won't. Scott Boras is not swayed by what he considers inferior deals, and Bruce is not comparable to Martinez, despite his 36 homers and 101 RBIs in 2017. Good job by the Mets in inking Bruce to a team-friendly contract.

7. Bob McClure, pitching adviser, Twins — The Twins are one of the modern analytic-oriented teams, but they still value old-school coaching. Earlier this winter they hired McClure, the former Red Sox and Phillies pitching coach, to work with their major league and minor league staffs and players. McClure was with the Red Sox in 2012 under Bobby Valentine, but was fired Aug. 20. He's still considered a strong pitching coach.

8. Chipper Jones, retired — Tom Glavine reflected on his ex-teammate, who is expected to be elected to the Hall of Fame in his first year on the ballot: "From the day he came into our camp as a rookie, you could tell what a great athlete he was. Did we know he was going to be in the Hall of Fame someday? Of course not. But as his career went along, it was obvious he was putting up numbers that would someday get him there. Great player."

9. Omar Vizquel, retired — Vizquel has received little love (about 30 percent) from Hall of Fame voters, according to an early ballot check. One reason seems to be that Vizquel didn't reach the bar set by Ozzie Smith, but who has? Just because Vizquel was a notch below Smith doesn't mean he doesn't belong in the Hall of Fame. It's like saying Willie McCovey wasn't as good as Willie Mays. True, but he still belongs.

Extra innings

From the Bill Chuck files — "Aaron Judge led the majors with 24 HRs with runners on; Giancarlo Stanton who had 23, followed him. Mookie Betts led Boston with 11." . . . Also, "In 2014, free agent pitcher Jake Arrieta had a fly-ball percentage rate of 15.1; in his 2015 Cy Young season, it was 14.0 percent; in 2016, it was 16.1 percent; but in 2017, it jumped to 24.4 percent. His homers allowed have gone from 31 combined in 2014-16, to 23 in 2017 alone." . . . Happy birthday, Sonny Siebert (81) and Pete Daley (88).