

Indians' catching combo is club's safety net

By Jack Magruder Special to MLB.com

PHOENIX -- A few things define the Cleveland catching combo. They both want to play every day. They both could. Neither makes a big deal out of it.

Yan Gomes and Roberto Perez could make a strong case as the best 1-2 punch in the American League, and it starts with their work on the defensive side, the less glamorous but more valuable part of the job, considering the demands each game presents. A catcher might bat four times a game; he will call roughly 150 pitches and face around 15 runners looking to connive their way into an extra base. Gomes put it nicely into perspective.

"Some hitters are home run hitters," he said.

"We are throw-out guys."

Yes. Yes, they are.

Not that offense is an afterthought, of course. Gomes and Perez combined to drive in 94 runs last season, which was third among AL catching groups. Their 22 homers, 14 by Gomes, was exactly the league average.

The other side of the ball is where they separate themselves.

Cleveland catchers threw out 43 percent of attempted basestealers last season, the best percentage in the Majors, the second season in three in which the Indians finished in the top two and the fourth consecutive year in the top five. The Major League average was 26 percent.

There is little wonder why Cleveland calls among the fewest pitchouts in the league.

"We like throwing out guys," Gomes said. "We like controlling our staff. When you can help a staff out by throwing a guy out, they like it, we love it."

"At the end of the day if you go 0-fer on the hitting side but you doing something really big defensively and we win a ball game, we did our job."

Advanced metrics provide even more evidence of their value.

Gomes and Perez combined to "save" 11 runs more than the average catcher last season, according to baseball-reference.com. Gomes was second in the league with seven. Only the Angels had more, 13, and no other group saved more than six.

Indians manager Terry Francona does not need convincing.

"I feel like we have a frontline catcher catching every day," Francona said. "Rarely is it where you have both catchers and anybody can catch anybody. You don't have to alter the game when one is in the game. When we are scouting teams and [the stolen base is] a part of their game, it is a nice feeling to know we have both of them back there, because there is not a lot worse than not being able to stop guys from running, because it gets ugly."

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The catchers' success in the throwing game transfers to pitching staff as well.

"It gives you a little more, I wouldn't say ease, but you don't have to be as conscious of how quick you are to the plate or how much you are holding the guy," said Mike Clevinger, scheduled to make his third spring start Monday.

"As long as you are doing your job on the mound enough to keep the running game [in check], they are going to keep it shut down." Game-calling goes along with it, at least where Clevinger is concerned. Most of the time, he shakes off signs only when he is told to, he said.

"You don't feel like second-guessing your game plan," he said. "You know they have a good plan of attack in place. There will be times when I trust what they are calling more than I have in my head. I know that goes against pitching philosophy, but a lot of times it works out in good favor."

Gomes and Perez credit the time spent with Sandy Alomar, a former Gold Glover.

"That's my No. 1 thing to do," Perez said. "I take a lot of pride in my defense. I work hard at it. I don't ever want to slide."

Perez has caught most of Trevor Bauer's starts, and Francona said that is likely to continue early this season. Other than that, hot streaks, injuries and matchups will have a lot to do with the starter on a particular night, the way it has been recently.

"They both want to be the guy," Francona said. "I understand that. I actually respect that. We know what we have. The things that we value, catching first, they adhere to that."

Perez and Gomes understand.

"We have a great relationship," Perez said.

"I know he wants to play every day. I want to play every day. But at the end of the day, it's a matter of going out there, whoever is catching, and trying to help the team win any way we can. He's a great catcher. We have a lot of respect for each other. We just want to win."

Kipnis continues torrid start to Spring Training

By Jack Magruder Special to MLB.com

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Home runs.

It is all in a day's work out here for Jason Kipnis, a familiar name not only among Cleveland fans but also among Arizona State followers who remember him from the Sun Devils' 2009 College World Series team.

Several of the hats Kipnis signed after hitting his fifth spring homer in the Indians' 6-2 victory over Milwaukee on Sunday had the ASU logo. His fifth homer, a two-run liner to right field.

Hands in, head of the bat to the ball.

Five games, 14 at-bats, eight hits, five homers.

"Just starting off in a little bit of a groove, of being balanced and on time, getting results," Kipnis said. "I think that is something every hitter works on every year and every day of hitting. You want to be balanced and on time."

Health helps. Kipnis spent time on the disabled list with shoulder and hamstring issues last season, holding him to a career-low 90 games.

"He is a good hitter," manager Terry Francona said. "When somebody gets hurt, the [fans] forget. But we need him to be healthy, because he's that kind of player that can change your team."

Kipnis' strong start seems to be a testament to his offseason dedication and his desire to return to the form that helped him average 145 games a season from 2012-16.

"When you are not healthy, you are spending time doing treatment and other things instead of working on your craft and hitting in the cages," he said. "It is nice to have that freedom and that luxury to be able to go out and train without having to worry about a specific injury. You want to make sure you are flexible and strong. [The season] is a grind, especially more with the spring and the playoffs. It's tough, so your body has to be in good shape."

Kipnis played his final 11 games in center field after he returned from his hamstring issues in mid-September last year, when Jose Ramirez moved to second base and Giovanni Urshela and Yandy Diaz played third. All signs point to Kipnis returning to second base this season.

Wherever he plays, he will make it work.

The goal?

"Have a good year for the team and you," Kipnis said. "Make sure the team has a good year. The second would be yourself."

Kluber, with a 'K'

Corey Kluber gave up four hits, three in the first inning Sunday, although leadoff man Christian Yelich's double to the wall in the right-center field gap was the only one that was particularly well struck.

Kluber gave up a run in the first and was typically overpowering the rest of the way, striking out five and retiring eight of his final nine.

He struck out three of the last five he faced, getting Domingo Santana looking at a breaking pitch to end the third inning. Santana had an RBI single over shortstop in the first.

"The kind of nice thing was, he had to work out of the stretch, which is good," Francona said. "He had to make some pitches with men on base. It was just like Kluber. Every outing, you will see him get a little bit more, and by the time we get to Opening Day, he'll be ready."

Kluber gave up one run and struck out three in his first spring start against Oakland last Tuesday.

He was 15-2 with a 1.62 ERA in his final 23 starts regular-season starts in 2017 after spending May on the disabled list with lower back soreness.

Injury report

- Michael Brantley did more position-specific outfield drills Sunday morning and should be pleased with the progress he is making, Francona said.

"He should be upbeat," Francona said. "He's in great shape. Through thick and thin, he's been diligent in what he's supposed to do. We're going to be thrilled to have him back, whether it's the second week of April, whenever ... because that's a position you don't have to platoon. You just wind him up and let him go play."

- Danny Salazar (shoulder) played catch at 90 feet on Sunday as he continues to work toward bullpen sessions and batting practice. He appears certain to miss at least the first several weeks of the regular season.

- Brandon Guyer took a day off after hitting off a tee the past two days.

Up next

Right-hander Mike Clevinger is scheduled to make his third spring start against the Los Angeles Dodgers at the Dodgers' Camelback Ranch complex at 3:05 p.m. ET on Monday. Left-hander Rich Hill is scheduled to start for the Dodgers.

Clevinger has not been scored upon in his first two outings, covering three innings

Other Cleveland pitchers scheduled to make the trip are Andrew Miller, Cody Allen, Ryan Merritt, Evan Marshall and Robert Zarate.

Indians outfielder Michael Brantley learns from experience, won't return until he's 100 percent healthy by Associated Press

GOODYEAR, Ariz.: Indians outfielder Michael Brantley knows all about the grind of recovering from a major injury. Way too much about the slow process back to the field.

At least this time around, he gets to put that experience to good use.

The 30-year-old Brantley has progressed to lateral agility drills as he works his way back from right ankle surgery in October with an eye toward playing as much as possible this season. If that means he isn't ready for the Indians' opener at the Seattle Mariners, so be it.

"I think I'm getting older and I think I'm starting to understand it more, that I need to make sure that I'm 100 percent healthy when I come back," Brantley said Sunday. "It takes time. It's not going to happen overnight, but put in the hard work that you need to get done and everything comes out good in the end."

Brantley hasn't always had that big-picture approach as he worked his way back from an injury. Manager Terry Francona has noticed a difference this spring.

"Because he's been through so much, I think we haven't had to put the reins around him as much as maybe in the past," Francona said. "I think he's trying to look at this thing logically also. But if hard work means anything, which it does, he's going to be just fine."

If Brantley can stay on the field, he could provide a huge boost for the Indians as they try to recover from last year's disappointing loss to the New York Yankees in the AL Division Series. Before his recent run of injury woes, Brantley was one of the majors' best all-around players, capable of making a key play at the plate, on the bases or in the field.

He had a breakout season in 2014, batting .327 with 20 homers, 97 RBI and 23 steals in 156 games. He was working on another good year in 2015 when he hurt his right shoulder diving for a ball in Minnesota.

The two-time All-Star needed two surgeries to fix his shoulder and played in just 11 games in 2016, missing the Indians' run to the World Series. He appeared to be back on track last year before he injured his ankle while chasing a fly ball to left during a game on Aug. 8.

Brantley made a surprising return late last season and was selected for the playoff roster against the Yankees, but went just 1-for-11 in the five-game series. Despite the string of injuries, the Indians decided to pick up his \$11.5 million option for 2018.

"Whether it's second week of April, whenever, we're going to be really happy to have him back," Francona said, "because that's a position then that you don't have to platoon, you just kind of wind him up and let him go play."

Brantley said everything has gone smoothly so far this spring. There is no public timetable for his first appearance in the Cactus League, and he said he has no number in mind in terms of how many exhibition games he needs to be ready for opening day.

"It's more how I personally feel and respond every day," he said. "I just want to get out there and get the reps when I'm needed and if I'm ready to go, I'm ready to go. If I'm not, I'll be there when I'm 100 percent healthy and get back to helping this team win."

Brantley spent part of his Sunday morning peering over the shoulder of Mike Napoli while he played cribbage with pitchers Josh Tomlin and Adam Plutko. There was a hearty round of laughs as the game broke up and the players headed off to the rest of their day.

Brantley, who was acquired by the Indians in the CC Sabathia deal with the Milwaukee Brewers in 2008, also is drawing strength from his teammates as he looks to rejoin them on the field when he can.

"They help me. They keep me positive and keep me going," he said. "I can't thank them enough for what they do for me. Just picking me up every day if you're not healthy and telling how much they miss you and then at the same time, I'm doing anything I can to help them. It's a team effort all the way around."

Trevor Bauer details the process behind creating his new slider and explains why he's close to reaching his full potential **Zack Meisel 3 hours ago 3**

GOODYEAR, Ariz. — About 36 hours after the Indians' season came to a crashing halt, Trevor Bauer flew to Arizona to throw a bullpen session.

Later that night, he jetted to Los Angeles and, the following day, his process commenced. He jabbed push-pins into baseballs, designed diagrams, watched hours upon hours of video and threw, threw and threw some more, all in an effort to produce at least one new effective off-speed pitch.

He had two candidates: a changeup, modeled after the pitch Stephen Strasburg has mastered, and a slider, an imitation of Corey Kluber's slurve and Marcus Stroman's curve.

The slider ultimately won out, but the process is still ongoing. And, it never stopped — not in the weeks after the season, when most players relax and unwind. Not even during his weeklong excursion to Iceland in November, in which he hauled weighted baseballs in his luggage.

Never change, Trevor.

Bauer said he logged about 30 innings over the winter against hitters. He and his dad, Warren, pinpointed the specific movement profile he wanted on each new pitch and studied the arm angles Stroman and Kluber use to see whether he could replicate their motions.

The Indians pitcher recently spoke at length with The Athletic and MLB.com about his system for developing the new pitch, his reasons for doing so and why he thinks he's as close as ever to piecing it all together on the mound.

Do you have to make adjustments, since you aren't built like Kluber?

Stroman and Kluber throw slightly different than I do, but I figured my arm angle is close enough to it that I can throw it somewhat similar. Strasburg's arm angle is similar enough to mine that he's my main model for a changeup. So that's all part of deciding what axis I need. Then I look at video of myself and how the ball comes out of my hand and how the ball comes out of their hand. I have some video of Kluber from 2,000 frames per second that I've taken over the years, but none of Strasburg or Stroman.

Here's how the ball comes out of my hand. How do I need to orient the seams in order to get the laminar flow aligned with Magnus force so it works in the same direction? That took six hours. Then we went up to my facility, Throw Zone, in California, and spent six hours throwing on slow-motion film. Throw a pitch. Look at it. How did it come out of my hand? How are the seams spinning? Integrate it over and over and over until, at midnight, we had two grips and feels that modeled what I wanted to see, spin axis-wise. I took pictures of them in my hand, stuff like that, took some video, and watched it over and over and over for the next week and a half.

What's the feeling when you see it do what you want it to do? That has to be a rush.

It's like, "Yep, I can do it." It's like a glimmer of hope. Then it's like, "Well, I have to throw X amount of these so I can get it up to the level (I want)." I've been throwing my curveball since I was 10. I have X amount of reps with my curveball, and I don't have any reps with these pitches, so if it's going to be reliable like the curveball, I have to get a certain amount of reps. But at least I know I can make the ball spin that way and in a comfortable way and whatnot. It was encouraging, for sure. Then I just watched film for the next week and a half and burned it into my head. I knew exactly how it comes out of my hand so when I throw one, I can say, "OK, I felt this. It doesn't feel like what I see in my head." And then I started throwing it to hitters on Dec. 3. I started facing hitters. I got some preliminary numbers on it and the numbers didn't match what I wanted it to be.

(The numbers he's referencing: velocity, spin rate, vertical/horizontal movement)

The majority of December, I'd throw twice to hitters with fastball/slider and then I'd throw the next week twice with fastball/changeup and the time I was throwing fastball/changeup, on the days in between, I was working on the slider — working on what grip, where do I put the knuckle,

where do I put the thumb, how much do I spike it, how much pressure do I put, trying to figure out the control points for shifting the axis in the horizontal and vertical plane, so I can get a combination of the two on the axis to make it move the way I want. I did that all of December and then, finally, maybe like the first week of January, I felt like I had the slider moving how I wanted it to. Going into the offseason, I figured if one of the two pitches worked out, it'd be a massive success. So once I had a pretty good feel with the slider, I stopped throwing the changeup against hitters and just threw the slider so I could accumulate reps and feel for it. I'm still working on the changeup in practice, but I'm mostly focused on the slider.

Is the slider more sweeping and tighter than the one you threw last year?

So last year, it ended up being a pitch that broke that had between zero and negative-2 inches vertical and 4 inches lateral, which is OK. That's at the end of the year, once I changed the cutter into a slider. It's going to be about the same velocity as last year. That's not important. This year, hopefully, we're going to see, on average, about 7 to 8 inches lateral and zero inches (vertical). That's ideal. It'll probably end up having about negative-2 inches vertical, but it'll have, like, twice as many inches (lateral). I wanted a lateral breaking pitch.

When choosing the pitches that you want to replicate, do you start with a wide net of pitchers and narrow it down, or did you know from watching enough of Kluber, Stroman, and Strasburg that they had what you wanted?

You start with the most effective pitches in the league. If you can have the best fastball in the league with the best changeup and best curveball, that would be ideal, right? But you also have to work that in the framework of what I currently throw. My curveball is already one of the top curveballs in the league. So I have a vertical breaking pitch that I'm very comfortable with. I want something that's different than that. When I first started throwing the slider, it was like 5 inches lateral and negative-7 inches vertical. My curveball is like 4 inches lateral and 10 inches vertical. That pitch isn't going to do me a whole lot of good. It's just a worse curveball.

So I started trying to find pitches that I didn't have in my arsenal. I can make the ball run this way hard. I can make it run that way with a changeup at a middle speed. I can make the ball go down slow. I can make the ball stay straight or cut a little bit at a middle speed. I don't have anything that is slow and goes lateral, so I needed something that did that so I can split the plate multiple ways and at multiple speeds. And my changeup was a middle-speed pitch and it had a lot of run, but not a lot of depth. I wanted something that had more depth and went both ways, so that was the emphasis behind what I worked on. I felt that would give me three levels to go: 10 inches vertical on the fastball, zero on the slider and changeup and negative cut on the curveball, at three distinct speeds and with distinct movements arm-side and glove-side.

To fill that hole on my arsenal, I needed something that had a lateral break. I needed a little bit more depth on the changeup. That's what I set out to do, so I found guys who had high swing-and-miss rates on depth changeups, like Strasburg. Kluber had one of the highest, but he hardly ever throws it, so it's hard to tell if it's a characteristic of that pitch or if it's just hitters aren't looking for that. Strasburg uses his changeup a lot, (about 20) percent of the time. It has one of the highest swing-and-miss rates on it in the league, so I figured that pitch, hitters know it's coming and they still can't hit it, so it's probably a good pitch to model, and the same thing with Kluber's slurve and Stroman's slider. They use it a lot, and people don't hit it that well. So that was the process I used on which pitches to model. And then I figured how I wanted to model them. What was the goal with refining the changeup? You were trying to work on the split-change last year.

Same thing, but last year it didn't work out. I wanted something I can throw middle-middle that ends up below the zone but doesn't have enough movement where hitters can pick it up early. My curveball has too much movement to tunnel and be effective in combination with other pitches. If I throw a curveball for a strike, I have to throw a fastball, like, up above the head.

To change the hitter's eye level.

Right. So I need something that comes out upper thigh that then ends up just missing the zone, so it doesn't have too much movement where they can identify it, and that's something with zero vertical. My fastball is here, and a 10-inch vertical difference gets you to about the knee, so that shares the same initial trajectory and holds the line long enough that I don't get checked swings. I get a lot of checked swings on curveballs in the dirt that don't get called, so if I can share that tunnel for another 5 feet, I'll get calls or they'll fully commit to swinging. So that's the idea behind having something with zero vertical, and that's what I was going for with the split, but I never could develop a grip to get side spin to get that movement that was comfortable that I could reliably execute.

When you first came to the Indians, you were focused so much on your delivery. Now, you're focused on pitch-specific work. Are you what you were envisioning back then, or are you close to it?

Not quite. I'm close.

Talking back then, you said this would be a years-long process. You don't feel like you're quite there yet, though.

I might be this season, depending on how the slider works out. If I'm able to execute it reliably, then yeah, I'll be back where I envisioned myself. There's a hierarchy, though, in training. The first thing you have to do is be able to stay on the field. Because if you can't stay on the field, no amount of execution matters, because you're hurt and you don't get to compete. So the first and foremost (thing) was to focus on staying on the field. That's why I changed my delivery, because it was clear to me after 2012 that if I continued throwing like that, I wasn't going to stay on the field. So I sacrificed 2013 and changed my delivery to help me stay on the field. That worked, clearly. And then, it was about learning how to be effective in that, refining the delivery.

The year you overhauled your delivery, you said the results probably wouldn't look good, but that wasn't the goal.

Anytime you make conscious mechanical changes, you can't perform well. In order to perform well, you have to have a narrow external mindset. There are two variables: There's narrow and broad and there's external and internal. The worst possible one you can have for performance is a narrow internal focus. How exactly am I moving this finger when I release the ball? The best possible one is, I'm going to throw this ball 100 — narrow — to that spot — external. That's the best one you can have for performance. In 2013, I was internal the whole year, because I was trying to make physical change. So, performance suffered. As I've gotten more comfortable with the physical change, performance has increased because I've been able to focus more externally.

And, at this point, it's muscle memory.

Right. Second nature. So the base level of the pyramid is taken care of: Stay on the field. The next one is I have to perform well enough to stay on the field so I don't lose my job. So I have to have velocity. I have to be able to execute, throw enough strikes. I have to be able to generate swing-and-miss. So over the past couple years, I've shown that I can do that to a certain level. It's increased every year. My performance has gone up every year. But it's still not to the level that I want. But that's the cycle: Be able to generate swing-and-miss, be able to punch people out, be able to throw enough strikes to compete. I've proven I can do that in spurts.

Then the next one is: high-grade everything pitch-mix-wise and what pitches I throw and how I utilize it to make myself the most effective version of me I can be. And so I thought about developing a changeup, developing a cutter, developing a slider, developing all this different stuff. I modified my curveball a couple years ago to make the shape and spin rate more what I wanted. High-grading the arsenal.

I'm going to roll into this season with the most high-graded arsenal I've ever had, the most experience on how to utilize it that I've ever had, as healthy as ever. Assuming the slider works out the way I envision it, the way it should, given the numbers I have on it so far, the only thing that would really be left is high-grading the changeup, assuming that doesn't work out. There's no data to suggest it won't be better than it was last year, but I haven't spent as much time on it. But once I have this year under my belt, looking forward to next offseason, there's just not a lot of things to work on from an actual pitching standpoint. I can always get better and I will. I'm not ignoring that.

As an athlete, it would seem to be easy to get caught up in that narrow view and just try to do what works in the moment. How important is it, not just for you, but for guys to take the long view?

I have been very fortunate that I was good enough in college to be given the timetable in pro ball to do that. If I wasn't a first-rounder, I would've had 2013 and I never would've been (successful). Not everyone has the luxury of being able to take that approach. For a lot of guys, it's, "I have to be good this year. It's my last year on the 40-man. I have to make the big leagues or I'm probably not going to get back up, because I'm going to be taken off the 40-man and then it's really hard to get back up." Or, "I've been a big-leaguer for two years, and I feel like someone's going to take my job unless I do something."

It's hard for everyone to have this long-term view, because if you have a long-term view, you just never get there because it's circumstantial. I've been very fortunate with that. That being said, I think having some foresight in what you work on in the offseason and a dedicated process and why you're doing this is super important. It could be as simple as, "I need to throw harder or I'm going to be cut." And so then that's your process. That's part of the building block. But I've already maximized my mechanical efficiency and I've already maximized my training, so I have taken care of it.

I think it's super important to have a good secondary pitch. A lot of people struggle with that. They just don't have a good feel for a secondary pitch. Like, if Zach McAllister had a wipeout secondary pitch, that brings tremendous value to him, it brings tremendous value to the organization. He's put in a lot of work trying to develop something that he can throw reliably. If you transplant Andrew Miller's slider into Zach McAllister, all of a sudden you have a super durable reliever who can throw all the time, throws hard and has a wipeout breaking pitch — that radically changes his career path, his role in the organization and whatnot. I don't mean to single out Zach. Just talking about concepts here.

It all starts with being an accurate self-evaluator. Where am I right now? What can I do well and what can I improve on? And then finding a way to improve upon those things. That's why I spend a ton of my time doing research on the offseason: How do I high-grade my training regimen? How do I teach myself how to have command? Because three years ago, all we talked about was my command. And now no one mentions my command. How do I go from a guy who can't throw enough strikes to compete — led the league in walks in '15 — and then all of a sudden in '16 or '17, it's like, overnight, all of a sudden I command the ball and we don't talk about it anymore. How is that possible? Well it's a high-graded command training regimen. I spent a ton of time in the offseason researching, "How do I shorten the learning curve on this? How do I maximize this process?"

And so I've been able to do that. I've been able to apply the same thing to pitch design and to velocity. I think that process in general, a science-based improvement process, is super important. Being able to take a long-term view and sacrifice a year is not something that a whole lot of people have the opportunity to do. I'm super fortunate that I was in a position and with an organization that would allow me to do that and understood what I was trying to do and believed enough in me to let me do it and let it play out.

Given the work you've put in and how you feel about your potential this season, mentally, how eager are you to get going to validate to yourself that it was all worthwhile?

I love competing. I hate throwing bullpens. I used to throw bullpens all the time because I wanted to work on stuff, but I need to face hitters, because that's where I am on the development curve. I threw to hitters for 30 innings this offseason. Then I come into camp and I'm throwing a bullpen, like, "This isn't doing anything for me." I want to see hitters. I want to go out and compete and pitch and learn. Mostly, I just want to be out there competing. I love that.

I think being comfortable with the team helps. It takes a couple years for me to get comfortable with a new team. It did in high school. It did in college. So 2014 was really my first full year up, '15 and '16 happened and all of a sudden in '17, I was like part of the team and made strides and whatever. Same thing in college: freshman year, the team didn't really like me; I was there half a year. Sophomore year, everyone was like, "Eh, I don't know who this kid is." And then junior year, it was like, "Oh, he's not so bad." And I was more comfortable. Same thing with high school. So that has helped a lot, getting past that initial two to three years of people getting to know me, me getting to know them and learning how to interact with each other, stuff like that. That's helped tremendously.

But also, I feel like I can actually contribute to the team now because I feel like I'm close. It's very hard for me — I want to be the absolute best. I don't like the fact that there's someone sitting next to me who's better than me. At anything. So when I know that I'm not the best, I don't feel like I'm contributing to my potential, to the level that I should be contributing. I was the best in high school. I was the best in college. I haven't been the best in pro ball, so I haven't felt I'm contributing to the level that I know I can. And so it makes it hard to feel a part of the team because I don't feel like I'm doing my work, if that makes sense. I feel like I did my job a lot better last season, especially toward the end of the season. I feel like I'll do my job better this year than I did at any point last season. So I feel like I'm actually contributing how I'm expected to, which makes it a lot easier to feel a part of something.

This has been a lifelong project, baseball-wise, with your dad since you were little. Have you ever thought, "Why is my dad making me do this?" or thought it ever seemed silly?

There have been plenty of things that have seemed silly. But it all goes back to the process I talked about. My dad's an engineer. I was trained as an engineer. There's a certain mindset. Where do I want to be? Design a process, test it, refine it, test it, refine it, integrate it. My dad never played baseball, so he didn't approach things as a baseball guy. He approaches it as an engineer. If I'm to believe that you want to stay inside the ball — everyone says to stay inside the ball, so how do we train that? Well, you're going to stand 6 inches away from the fence and try to swing and not hit the fence. Stuff like that. So there's a reason behind it. There are different reasons for everything that we did. There's a direction, a reason for doing it. It was never, "Hey, do this."

At the beginning of last year, maybe the first month of the season, my dad told me, "Hey, I want you to try something with your cutter. You use it high-arm side a lot; it's up in the zone a lot. I want you to try to move your thumb to the side of the ball and throw it like that. I want you to try to throw it a couple times in catch and let me know what you feel." "No, that's stupid." I held the ball and was like, "I can't throw a pitch like that." I just didn't do it. And then a month later, he's like, "Hey, I want you to try this. I think it might help. Just throw two or three in catch." I was like, "Fine. I'll throw two or three in catch."

I threw two or three in catch and was like, "It doesn't work." And then about a month and a half later, he's like, "Hey, I want you to try this." I'm like, "Dammit. We already went over this." So I went out and threw it in the bullpen and the ball was down where I wanted it to be, so I was like, "Again, he's right. Great." So it pains me to tell him that, "Yes, your idea was correct." It's a pride thing.

But there are certain ideas, like building a laser grid so that when I throw pitches, I can measure exactly front to back. At first, I was like, "That doesn't make any sense." And the longer I think about the implications of it and start playing with it, this makes a lot of sense. I can see why we're doing this. At least, I understand the process and the thought behind it. And for me, as long as there's a thought behind something and you put the time into thinking about it and you have a reason for doing something that you can explain well, I'm all for trying. I'm not much for someone saying, "Do this because I said so." That's what's always been done. But if you say, "Hey, you should try this because here's this data." OK, that makes sense. I can respect the process behind it.

If everyone had the willingness to embrace outside ideas or be so experimental, would there be pitchers from the past who might have been Hall of Famers and we just never would've known?

That's my main advantage is that I have an insatiable desire to work and improve. That's just what I choose. I take two days off and I feel guilty. No one will ever outwork me. Now, I'm not the most physically talented guy. I compete against a lot of guys who are massively more physically talented. They can dunk. They can run fast. They're powerful and they lift a lot of weights. They're super explosive. I'm none of those things. The only reason I'm here is because of my work ethic. No one's ever going to outwork me and that's my only way to maintain an advantage, because all these training things I do that I work so hard to push into baseball because I believe in them, then the super-talented athletes get a hold of them and now their training routine is high-graded and I'm at a disadvantage because they're doing the same training, but they're more athletically gifted.

The only way I maintain my advantage is by putting in more hours than anyone else is going to. I think I do a good job of that. I'd challenge anyone to find a professional ballplayer at all who puts in more hours year-round than I do.

You only took off three days after the season?

(I took) a day to pack my locker. And then I started. I threw four times when I was in Iceland. I took weighted balls with me, played catch.

You could never go on a honeymoon.

Yeah. Well, that would require me being married, which sounds miserable in its own right.

What do the Cleveland Indians have cooking besides Jason Kipnis at this point of spring training?

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

CLEVELAND, Ohio - The Indians have been in spring training since Feb. 14. They will play their 10th exhibition game on Monday against the Dodgers. That's roughly one-third of the spring season.

So what have we learned to date about the team that won 102 games last season and disappeared far too quickly in the postseason?

For starters, Jason Kipnis looks healthy. He hit his fifth homer in five games Sunday against the Brewers. He has come to camp with a healed right hamstring and right shoulder and a point to prove. An offseason of hearing his name mentioned in trade rumors has put the chip back on his shoulder.

He says he plays better that way and the results are hard to argue with. If only the regular season started Tuesday.

If Corey Kluber and Trevor Bauer aren't two of the top frontline pitchers in the American League, something is wrong. And if the Indians aren't working on an extension for Bauer, the question is why not?

Carlos Carrasco certainly belongs in that group after winning 18 games last season, but he won't make his first spring start until Tuesday. After pitching 200 innings last year, and experiencing a sore right elbow last spring, the Indians are bring him along slowly.

Just imagine the excitement a pitcher feels after getting invited to his first big-league camp. Then imagine the disappointment he would feel if he broke a rib helping his parents move just before reporting to camp. Welcome to right-hander Cole Sulser's world.

On Aug. 4, 2015, Evan Marshall was pitching for Class AAA Reno, Arizona's top farm club, in El Paso, Texas. He was hit in the head with a line drive and suffered a fractured skull. The force of the ball caused bleeding in Marshall's brain and he needed emergency surgery to save his life.

He did not pitch again that season, but appeared in 15 games for Arizona in 2016 and nine games for Seattle last year. He's in camp as a non-roster free agent this spring with the Tribe and Thursday pitched a scoreless inning to earn a win against the Dodgers.

"He was very good Thursday - velocity, movement, threw a couple of good breaking balls," said manager Terry Francona. "We're aware of what happened. A scout with the Rockies told me when we signed him, "He's my pick to click. You guys are getting him at a good time. There's a lot to like."

There's one job, maybe two, in the bullpen. The Indians have so many relievers in camp it's hard to keep track of them. But Marshall is unique. One reliever working under the cover of darkness has been Alex Ogando, who has made four scoreless appearances, striking out six, walking two and allowing three hits. At one time he was a dominating reliever for Texas.

The Indians are still looking for a replacement for departed Bryan Shaw. Could Zach McAllister be that guy? He's already made four appearances, pitching 1 2/3 innings and two innings in his last two trips to the mound.

After the Indians brought Mike Napoli to spring training on a minor league deal, one of the first things he asked Francona was who he wanted him to mentor. Francona said Bobby Bradley, the first base prospect who came to camp this spring 30 pounds lighter than last year.

On Sunday morning, Napoli was playing cribbage and one of the spectators watching the game was Bradley.

With tension building between the players and owners after so many years of labor peace, the Indians did a good thing by inviting Napoli to camp and giving him a chance to get in shape and sign with another team. You can be sure the gesture wasn't missed by the majority of free agents still looking for work.

When Michael Brantley's career is over, he'll be qualified to start a second career as a rehab coordinator. That's how much work he's put in to get back on the field following two operations on his right shoulder and one on his right ankle. It was noted Sunday that Brantley has been upbeat this spring.

"He should be," said Francona. "He's worked his rear end off. We haven't had to put the reins on him as much as we've done in the past. . .He's still got a career in front of him. Through thick and thin he's been diligent. We're going to be thrilled to have him back. Whether it's the second week of April. . .whatever."

Here's a scout's take on Yandy Diaz: "He sees the ball out of pitcher's hand so fast. That's hard to do. He picks up the spin really quick. He's so strong. What if ever learns to pull the ball? I don't see how the Indians can get rid of him."

Veteran catcher Ryan Hanigan is 37, but the fire is still burning bright. During Friday's game against Texas, right-hander Kela Keone threw too close to him one too many times. After the inning, Hanigan was screaming at the Texas dugout before the plate umpire calmed things.

All-Star third baseman Jose Ramirez is learning key phrases of the English language. When he saw a group of reporters in the locker room one morning before the games began, he looked at them and jokingly said, "Not today."

In other words, there would be no interviews today. About a half hour later, he walked by the same reporters and shook all their hands. Just another day at the ballpark.

Corey Kluber strikes out five, Jason Kipnis hits 5th homer as Cleveland Indians beat Brewers, 6-2

By Paul Hoynes,

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Corey Kluber struck out five and Jason Kipnis hit another home run as the Indians beat Milwaukee, 6-2, Sunday at Maryvale Baseball Park.

Kluber, in his second start of the spring, allowed one run on four hits in three innings. He struck out five, including two each in the second and third innings, and didn't walk a batter.

Kipnis put the Indians ahead, 2-0, with a first-inning homer off Jhoulys Chacin. Francisco Lindor scored in front of him after reaching on an error by first baseman Ryan Braun to start the game. Kipnis, hitting .571 (8-for-14), has five homers in five games this spring.

Nellie Rodriguez made it 3-1 with a RBI single in the fourth. After the Brewers closed to within one run at 3-2 on a Lorenzo Cain double off Zach McAllister in the fifth, Lindor brought home two runs on a wind-blown double behind second base for a 5-2 lead in the sixth.

Eric Stamets made it 6-2 with a leadoff homer in the seventh. It was his second homer of the spring.

McAllister, who is having a good spring, has allowed one run in 5 2/3 innings. Tyler Olson struck out two and retired the side in order in the sixth. Jeff Beliveau, Preston Claiborne and Ben Taylor followed with a scoreless inning each.

The Indians finished with nine hits, including two each by Lindor, Rodriguez and Bradley Zimmer.

The Tribe improved to 7-3-1 for the spring.

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Mike Napoli experiment begins Sunday vs. Brewers: Cleveland Indians spring training lineup

By Paul Hoynes,

CLEVELAND, Ohio - The Mike Napoli experiment begins today.

The Indians signed Napoli to a minor league contract last week, but they didn't do it to make themselves better. They did it as a favor to Napoli.

Napoli was an unsigned free agent in the player association's spring training camp in Bradenton, Fla. The Indians, because of how he helped them in 2016, felt he deserved a shot in a big league camp to sign with another team before the start of the regular season.

Manager Terry Francona said injury was the only way Napoli would have a chance to stick with the Indians. They have Edwin Encarnacion at DH and Yonder Alonso at first base.

When he starts at DH today against the Brewers, it will be his first game of the spring. Napoli, 36, hit .196 (82-for-425) with 29 homers and 66 RBI last season for Texas. He struck out 163 times, drew 49 walks and posted a .713 OPS.

Corey Kluber will make his second start of the spring today. In his first start, he allowed on run on one hits in two innings against Oakland. He struck out three.

Indians' pitchers scheduled to follow Kluber include: Zach McAllister, Tyler Olson, Jeff Beliveau, Preston Claiborne, Josh Martin, Ben Taylor and Roberto Zarate.

Brewers' pitchers scheduled to follow Chacin include: Yovani Gallardo, Corey Knebel, Josh Hader, Matt Albers, Oliver Drake, Tyler Webb and Ernest Frieri.

Who's next?

Mike Clevinger is scheduled to start against the Dodgers on Monday and Carlos Carrasco is scheduled to make his first start of the spring on Tuesday against the Reds.

Going, going, gone

Encarnacion hit his first home of the spring on Saturday against the Giants. It was a high drive off the batter's eye in center field at Goodyear Ballpark.

Last season Encarnacion hit 38 homers with 107 RBI. Hew is the only players in the big leagues who has hit 30 or more homers in the last six years.

After spending the last couple hours in orbit, we can confirm that @Encadwin's moonshot has landed.

The chip is back

Jason Kipnis, after playing just 90 games last season because of injuries, has come to spring training with a chip on his shoulder. He says he always played with that chip until last year.

This spring a healthy Kipnis is hitting .636 (7-for-11) with four homers in four spring-training games this spring.

Jason Kipnis is off to a [?] start this #TribeSpring.