

Clevinger laser focused on cracking rotation

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Mike Clevinger knows that the decision will not be up to him, just like last season and the previous year. Given the depth of the Indians' rotation, someone will be on the outside looking in this spring and could be moved to the team's bullpen when the Opening Day roster is configured.

When it comes down to it, Clevinger will take the ball when it is handed to him. Over the past two years, the right-hander has started and come out of the 'pen and experienced success in both roles. This winter, though, while training for the upcoming season, there is only one job that has been on Clevinger's mind during his weekly workouts.

"I'm not even thinking about the bullpen. I want to throw 200 innings," Clevinger said matter-of-factly. "That's the only goal. Whether that happens or not, obviously, we'll see. But, I'm not even thinking about being in the bullpen."

No, Clevinger wants to be a part of Cleveland's highly-touted rotation -- one led by two-time American League Cy Young Award-winner Corey Kluber. Carlos Carrasco and Trevor Bauer are locks for two more jobs, leaving a Spring Training competition between Clevinger, Danny Salazar, Josh Tomlin and Ryan Merritt for two openings. Clevinger, Salazar and Tomlin will enter camp as the favorites.

Most teams would look at the body of work Clevinger pieced together last year and head into a season with the pitcher's name written in ink for the starting staff. The Indians -- to borrow an oft-used cliché -- have a "good problem" on their hands, though. Salazar boasts ace-like potential in his right arm. Tomlin is the longest-tenured player in the organization and offers veteran experience and a precision-based approach.

"It might take care of itself. It might not," Indians manager Terry Francona said of the rotation logjam. "If it doesn't, we'll make a decision."

Clevinger understands the landscape.

"You know there's even more competition than there's been in previous years, which is hard to believe," Clevinger said. "But, that's what's happening. So, if anything, whoever it ends up being -- bullpen, whatever -- it's just a chain reaction of having good depth and people to step in and do their part."

An injury to Kluber last season opened the door for Clevinger to come up from Triple-A Columbus in May. The right-hander's strong performance, along with some other rotation issues, afforded him the ability to stay on the staff for most of the remainder of the season. Clevinger logged 27 appearances (21 starts), finishing 12-6 with a 3.11 ERA in 121 2/3 innings in the Majors.

The work that Clevinger, 27, did with his curveball last offseason paid off, too. He threw the pitch 10.7 percent of the time in 2017, compared to 5.2 percent in '16, per Statcast™. Along the way, opposing batters posted a .280 slugging percentage against the pitch in '17, versus a .778 showing in '16. Among AL pitchers with at least 100 innings in '17, Clevinger ranked fifth in opponents' average (.211), eighth in ERA and ninth in strikeouts per nine innings (10.1).

During the Indians' AL-record 22-game winning streak between August and September, Clevinger went 4-0 with a 0.38 ERA, allowing just one earned run in 23 2/3 innings. Over his final five starts of the season -- prior to a move back into the bullpen for the end of September and the AL Division Series -- the righty went 5-0 with a 0.61 ERA.

That was a great foundation for Clevinger to take with him into the offseason, but he was not content.

"Let's get better and let's keep going," he said. "That's how it should be."

When Clevinger pored through his season, he saw diminished fastball velocity (92.5 mph on average in 2017, down from 94 mph in '16) and a delivery that went mechanically awry. The pitcher began working with a new trainer this offseason to focus on body awareness and control. The goal, Clevinger said, is to get his mechanics back in order, while still drawing from the successes he experienced in '17.

"My whole mechanics changed to where I'm diving," Clevinger said. "I was seeing constant success, so it was, 'Don't change what's not broken.' But this year, this offseason, it was, I think I can do that, and repeat that at throwing 96 [mph] still. So, I'm finding how to get back into my body and using it ... and I think that's going to pay huge dividends."

In Clevinger's mind, those dividends will come as a member of the rotation.

"I think I can offer a lot as a starter and maintain and stay healthy -- knock on wood," Clevinger said. "I just want to get that 32-start season under my belt and keep the snowball rolling."

Martinez out 6 months after Achilles surgery

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Michael Martinez was preparing for his fourth consecutive Spring Training as a non-roster invitee with the Indians. Now, the veteran utility man is bracing himself for a long rehab that could require him to miss the upcoming season.

The Indians announced that Martinez underwent surgery on Wednesday at the Cleveland Clinic to repair a ruptured Achilles tendon in his left leg. Dr. Alan Davis performed the procedure, which comes with a six-month rehabilitation process.

Martinez, 35, signed a Minor League contract on Dec. 11 with Cleveland, which included an invitation to attend Spring Training with the big league club. Martinez made the Tribe's Opening Day roster a year ago as a utility man, but he was likely ticketed for Triple-A Columbus this season. Erik Gonzalez and Giovanni Urshela (both out of Minor League options) will head into the spring as the top candidates for that kind of bench job with the Indians.

Martinez sustained the injury last week during agility drills while training in the Dominican Republic.

In stints with five big league teams in parts of the past seven years, Martinez has hit .194 with a .504 OPS. His 37 OPS+ is tied with Kevin Cash for the fourth-lowest mark since at least 1913 for a non-pitcher with at least 600 career plate appearances. Last year, Martinez hit .162 (.451 OPS) between stops with the Indians and Rays, and even logged one shutout inning on the mound for Cleveland in an April 13 loss to the White Sox.

Martinez, who has been re-acquired or re-signed by the Indians five times in the past three years, also made the final out in the 2016 World Series against the Cubs. Cleveland values Martinez not for his bat, but for his defensive skill and versatility and his ability to be a mentor to younger players. Gonzalez, for example, is among the players to have praised Martinez for his help and guidance while in the Minors.

Salazar out to prove he belongs in rotation

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Danny Salazar has been touted as an ace-in-the-making for several seasons now, but the power that exits in his right arm has yet to fully coordinate with his potential. So, once again, the pitcher will report to Spring Training with uncertainty surrounding his job status.

When Salazar stood in front of his locker at Progressive Field earlier this month, when most of Cleveland's players were in town for the team's annual Tribe Fest, he smirked when the question he knew was coming was asked. What are his thoughts on the upcoming spring competition for the pair of rotation vacancies?

"It's going to be fun," Salazar replied.

If it were not for the history of injury setbacks and the statistical roller-coaster ride of the past few years, Salazar would seem like a lock for a starting job. His fastball is of the high-octane variety and his split-change is one of the most effective pitches in baseball. Every year, Salazar seemingly is mentioned among the pitchers poised to break out as a top-of-the-rotation talent.

Cleveland already has two pitchers who fit that description in Corey Kluber and Carlos Carrasco, who finished first and fourth, respectively, in American League Cy Young Award voting last year. Trevor Bauer also took a step forward in 2017, so he is penciled in to the club's impressive rotation. Behind that trio, Salazar, Clevinger and Tomlin are the top options for two jobs, with lefty Merritt next in line.

Salazar, who has also had his name floated in trade rumors throughout this offseason, is looking forward to once again earning his place on the staff.

"Everybody proved here what they can do," Salazar said. "We're going to be playing anyway -- in the rotation or the 'pen. We just have to go out there and compete. There's going to be a competition, but I just think we just need to be smart and do what we need to do."

That, in a sense, is one thing Salazar took away from last season.

"When I'm feeling good, I know I'm going to do my job," he said. "If I'm healthy, with only minor soreness in my arm, which is normal in a pitcher, I know I can go out there and do my job."

That has been the main obstacle for Salazar over the past two seasons.

In 2016, the right-hander was on a tear out of the chute, going 10-3 with a 2.22 ERA in his first 15 starts en route to a place on the AL All-Star team. Since the start of July of '16, Salazar has posted a 5.40 ERA with a 1.48 WHIP in 147 innings with multiple stints on the disabled list. Two years ago, there were bouts with shoulder, elbow and forearm soreness. Last season, the shoulder and elbow caused him trouble again.

For a brief stretch in '17, though, Salazar was brilliant. He returned to the mound on July 22, following nearly two months on the shelf, and showed why so many evaluators believe there is an ace in there. Over five starts, Salazar had a 1.39 ERA with 46 strikeouts against nine walks in 32 1/3 innings, in which he surrendered just 18 hits and held hitters to a .446 OPS.

Then, Salazar gave up six runs on 12 hits in 4 2/3 innings in Kansas City. And then, he wound up back on the disabled list.

When the smoke cleared on Salazar's season, which concluded with him in the bullpen for the AL Division Series against the Yankees, he had the second-highest strikeout rate (12.7 per nine innings) in the Majors, among pitchers with at least 100 innings. But health woes limited him to 103 innings (down from 137 1/3 in '16 and 185 in '15). In 23 games, including 19 starts, Salazar had a 4.28 ERA last season.

"Sometimes your body is weird," Salazar said. "I can feel 100 percent today, and then tomorrow you don't know how you're going to feel. Those are the things I need to get better at, just like maybe paying attention to the routine I'm doing here, what helps me the most, and then continue doing that."

Salazar began that process this offseason, bouncing between Cleveland and his home in Tampa, Fla., for his winter workouts. He planned on getting to the team's complex in Goodyear, Ariz., well ahead of the Feb. 14 report date for pitchers and catchers, preparing for the competition ahead.

For Salazar, this winter was a chance to put everything else in the past.

"It's a time to reset everything," he said. "It's a time to forget about everything. The year is done, just learn from your mistakes and move forward."

Cleveland Indians' Michael Martinez undergoes Achilles tendon surgery; will miss six months

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

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Indians utility man Michael Martinez will miss the next six months with a ruptured left Achilles tendon. He underwent surgery on Wednesday at Cleveland Clinic.

Martinez, 35, has squeezed the most out of a career that started in 2005. This could put his career in danger.

The switch-hitting Martinez suffered the injury doing agility drills in his native Dominican Republic in preparation for spring training. The Indians signed him to a minor league deal and invited him to big league camp.

Martinez has spent the last three years bouncing in and out of the Tribe's organization. He has spent big-league time with them in all three seasons, gaining the trust of manager Terry Francona as a reliable defender no matter what position he played.

He will be remembered by many for making the last out of Game 7 of the 2016 World Series against the Cubs, but in truth he had more good moments than bad for the Indians.

Martinez's injury should help the causes of Erik Gonzalez and Giovanny Urshela as they compete for the utility job in spring training.

Ex-Indians hitter Oscar Gamble, a 1970s baseball icon for his unique batting stance and hairdo, dead at 68

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

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Ex-Indians hitter Oscar Gamble, whose offensive prowess was overshadowed only by his unique batting stance and noteworthy 1970s Afro hairstyle, has died at age 68.

Gamble's cause of death has not been released. He played for the Indians from 1972-75 before being traded to the New York Yankees for pitcher Pat Dobson prior to the 1976 season.

The Ramer, Alabama native hit .274 with Cleveland, belting 54 home runs. In 17 seasons with the Cubs, Phillies, Indians, Yankees, White Sox, Padres and Rangers, Gamble hit .265 with a career .811 OPS.

Considered a below-average fielder, Gamble played more than a third of his career games at designated hitter. He retired with more career walks (610) than strikeouts (546).

Gamble's prominent Afro hairstyle is the stuff of legends among fans and baseball card collectors. He was often referred to as the man with "baseball's best hair." Gamble's 1976 "traded" card, featuring his Afro sticking out from under a Yankees cap, is highly-sought after by collectors.

Gamble was also noteworthy for his unusual left-handed batting stance, which saw him bent deep at the waist with his back almost parallel to the ground and his bat held vertically behind his left ear. Gamble clubbed 200 career home runs despite getting just over 4,500 career at-bats.

Gamble went on to make two World Series appearances with the Yankees (1976, 1981), batting .286 in the postseason with an .880 OPS and two home runs.

Chief Wahoo compromise makes sense for both sides -- Terry Pluto

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

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- When a compromise is announced, most people usually don't like it.

That's what happened when the Cleveland Indians announced on Monday that they were removing the Chief Wahoo logo from the team's uniforms in 2019.

Some people said, "Why wait a year? Why not do it now?"

Others said, "Why do it at all? Why give in to the politically correct crowd?"

I have been in favor of changing the Chief Wahoo logo since 1996, when I wrote my first column about it.

I was with the Akron Beacon Journal. Over the years I've visited Indian reservations in South Dakota and Wyoming. I quickly realized I'd never want to wear Chief Wahoo at Pine Ridge or the Wind River Indian reservations.

I know the vast majority of people wearing the logo see it as an object of love for their favorite baseball team and a connection to their youth.

In some casual conversations with people on reservations, I didn't find anyone who was bothered by the name Indians. Several didn't like Chief Wahoo.

I never turned this into a personal crusade, but I also knew it was inevitable the logo would change.

The Indians knew it, too. That's why the Block C has been the main logo on most caps for years.

NO WAHOO POLICE

I spent a lot of time discussing the issue with Tribe owner Paul Dolan, who called this the "hardest decision we've had to make during our entire ownership."

He wanted fans to be free to wear their favorite Tribe stuff to the games. The last thing he wanted was the Chief Wahoo police confiscating caps and shirts at the gates of Progressive Field.

Major League Baseball wanted Chief Wahoo gone ... from everywhere.

Dolan fought to have the history maintained. Pictures of older Tribe players wearing Chief Wahoo will not be torn down.

"It's our history," said Dolan.

There's no doubt Dolan was pressured to make the change before the 2019 All-Star Game in Cleveland. He insisted there was "no quid pro quo," no threat from baseball to pull the game unless Chief Wahoo was benched.

But the last thing baseball and the Indians wanted was the 2019 All-Star Game to turn into a debate about Chief Wahoo.

Both sides wanted some type of settlement.

IT'S ABOUT BUSINESS

Major League Baseball decided Chief Wahoo was not only racist, they thought it was bad for business.

The Indians have kept the copyright and will sell some limited Chief Wahoo items because it's good for business.

The team can control the image. If the team stopped merchandising it, then it could end up being taken over by others who would make the logo look even worse.

As for waiting a year, I believe the Indians wanted to start fresh in 2019 when the All-Star game is here. Players will wear an All-Star sleeve patch, instead of Chief Wahoo.

You can be sure the Tribe will market lots of All-Star items and new versions of the uniforms, shirts and caps for 2019.

The Indians want time to make what they consider a major change the right way, so they are waiting a year.

Baseball has the logo gone from uniforms by the 2019 All-Star game.

The fans can wear their Chief Wahoo stuff -- or not.

In the end, this was a common sense settlement, even if both sides don't like it.

It's OK to be sad about losing Chief Wahoo, but how the Indians play matters far more: Brent Larkin

By Brent Larkin, cleveland.comblarkin@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND -- My first Indians memory is from Game 4 of the 1954 World Series.

Were it possible to recreate the old stadium, I could probably come within a few feet of finding the exact location, high in the upper reserves of Section 4 or 5, where I sat with my grandfather.

That Indians memory involves nothing of what happened during the game, but only of immediately afterward: watching a bunch of men wearing grey uniforms celebrate.

Those men in grey played for the New York Giants. They won the game 7-4 (I had to look it up), and 78,102 were there to watch them conclude a four-game series sweep.

The details of what the Indians players wore on their uniforms that day entirely escape me. It didn't matter then. It doesn't matter now.

And that's exactly how people should view the decision by Indians ownership to abandon the Chief Wahoo label, beginning with the 2019 season.

The Indians are part of Cleveland's identity but the patently racist Chief Wahoo symbol undercut our welcoming, forward-looking image. We are better than that, writes the editorial board in applauding the Indians' decision to retire Wahoo after this year.

Yes, tradition matters. And, yes, a majority of fans continue to find nothing offensive about Wahoo. But the majority doesn't always rule. And it isn't always right.

What matters infinitely more than what the Indians wear is how the team performs on the field and how players conduct themselves off it.

Baseball teams are judged by how often they win. And the last time the Indians won enough was in 1948, a few weeks after my first birthday.

Growing up here in the 1950s, from April through September, the first thing most young boys did each morning was check the front page of The Plain Dealer.

A smiling little Wahoo face signaled a win, a sad one a loss, a wet one a rainout.

I grew up staring in the morning at a sad Wahoo more often than a happy one.

And speaking of sad, can any rational person actually believe that losing Wahoo is remotely as painful as what I sat through on an agonizing and sultry south Florida night in late October 1997? (Game 7: Marlins 3-2 in 11 innings. Didn't have to look that one up).

Back then, I felt defiantly different about Wahoo.

As head of The Plain Dealer's opinion pages for nearly two decades, I resisted suggestions from a few of my more enlightened colleagues that perhaps the time had come to retire Wahoo.

In the unlikely event I was right then, the Indians ownership is right now.

Indians attendance didn't surge to more than 2 million last season because players wore Wahoo somewhere on their jerseys. It surged for the same reason I bought season tickets.

Because they won 102 times.

The Dolan family, which owns controlling interest in the team, was in a tough spot on this. Pressure from Commissioner of Baseball Rob Manfred and a vocal minority of the fan base was significant.

So they made a decision that lifelong Indians fans have every right to be sad about, but no real reason to be mad about.

The Thursday Conversation: Mike Clevinger on fighting for a rotation spot and keeping tabs on trade rumors

Zack Meisel 3 hours ago

Mike Clevinger spent his winter fishing in Florida, relaxing in Mexico, entertaining his two young daughters and watching a ton of MLB Network. He's hooked on the hot stove rumor mill, although this offseason hasn't provided much in the way of actual transactions.

Clevinger initiated his throwing program in mid-December, after a week and a half of lifting to knock off the winter rust.

"My body still felt a little grungy," he told The Athletic, "so I fixed that up and then started throwing."

He threw four bullpen sessions before he trekked to Cleveland for TribeFest, where he caught up with his competition — Danny Salazar, Josh Tomlin and Ryan Merritt — for what appear to be two unsettled spots in the Indians' rotation.

Clevinger posted a 2.84 ERA and limited the opposition to a .645 OPS in 21 starts last season, but the team opted to shift him to a relief role for the ALDS. He wasn't thrilled with the decision, and he seems intent on being a starter again this year.

In the latest installment of The Thursday Conversation, Clevinger chats about that competition, his addiction to trade rumors, why he doesn't bother to see whether his own name is mentioned in those trade rumors and more.

Zack Meisel: There are seven starting pitchers and only five spots available. How does that sit with you?

Mike Clevinger: It's pushing a lot of guys to work extra hard. That's going to benefit the team as a whole. Either way, one of us is in the pen, one of us is in Triple-A, one of us is in the rotation. Whatever it does, we're still making the next guy better. That's what you need. Hopefully we

go five starters the whole year and never need (depth). But that's not ever the case. So having someone stepping in (is critical); we saw it last year from not just pitchers, but position players. We drive each other, so I better work, because there are too many pitchers.

ZM: You, Tomlin, Salazar and Merritt do each have some bullpen experience over the last two years.

MC: I'm a starter. I'm gonna be a starter. I'll pitch in the pen if that's where my chips fall, but my mindset right now is pure. I want to throw 200 innings.

ZM: A lot of guys say they don't pay attention to the offseason rumor mill and they don't care to know if their name pops up in discussions. Are you in that camp? Do you go off the grid during the offseason?

MC: I wasn't a big fan of watching the postseason. It was a lot harder (than I imagined). I didn't think it was actually going to be like that. I couldn't pull myself to sit there and watch all the games. It was annoying, almost. You start thinking about what you could've done and didn't do. It's never good for anybody. That part was kind of rough.

The transaction part, I do like watching. I want to know what we're going to do. We still have our core and are trending in the right direction. What we all want is to see us keep pushing the chips forward and throwing them in the pot.

ZM: So you aren't searching your name to see if you're involved in anything.

MC: That stuff is so blind. I know that just from being traded. When I was with the Angels, my pitching coach knew some scouts and he told me, 'They keep sending the same head (Red Sox) scout to watch you.' This is when the whole (Jon) Lester thing was going on. Then that trade passed and Lester ended up going to the A's. The trade deadline hit and it was, 'You're not getting traded.' I was in High-A. He's like, 'You cleared it. You're not getting traded.' (A week) later, boom, I'm a Cleveland Indian. And it was after the trade deadline, so that stuff is just eyewash. You're never really going to know what's going on. I still like to see when we sign guys or when we're in talks with so and so. Not necessarily where I'm going, but what components we're going to add, that chess game.

ZM: Merritt said he didn't know Carlos Santana had signed with the Phillies until his wife told him.

MC: Merritt stays pretty disconnected.

ZM: Two years ago in spring training, Terry Francona said you were pacing around before an outing like you were about to pitch in Game 7 of the World Series. How much more comfortable and relaxed are you now, given what you've experienced the last two seasons?

MC: I'm a lot more comfortable now. There's that, 'Which came first: the chicken or the egg?' It's the same thing with confidence and success. What comes first? I'm still on the fence. I felt like I always had good confidence, but it's a different animal when you're first on the field. Seeing success throughout last year — it wasn't just spurts of it. It was, 'Wow, OK. My best month was my last month.' That's something I can feed off of. That gives you the confidence to keep going.

ZM: What about from a team perspective? You guys won 102 games last year, but made an early postseason exit. Your offseason was a month longer than it was the previous year, and you lost a few pieces from the roster. How do you assess things entering the new season?

MC: That part's definitely painful, especially knowing the potential we had in the clubhouse and what we could've done and should've done. But coulda, shoulda, woulda. You can say that all day. The way I look at it is, now we get everyone back and everyone is ready. (Corey) Kluber missed the first month because he was still wearing how many innings he had thrown the year before. He won't have that problem. (Andrew) Miller was dealing with his leg after the innings load he had. We're not going to have that problem. Getting that refreshed group back — we still have our core, our main components — it's exciting. It's what everyone's looking forward to.

Indians' Michael Martinez has surgery for ruptured Achilles tendon

Michael Martinez, who has served in a utility role for the Cleveland Indians, had surgery to repair a ruptured Achilles tendon and will be sidelined for the next six months, the team said Wednesday.

The 35-year-old infielder, who has been invited to spring training on a minor league deal, suffered the injury while preparing for spring training in the Dominican Republic.

He hit .162 in 63 at-bats for the Indians and Tampa Bay Rays last season. He also has played for Boston, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia since entering the majors in 2011.

Chief Wahoo: Indians team, Native Americans together should create new logo | Jeff Schudel

By Jeff Schudel, The News-Herald & The Morning Journal

A Chief Wahoo logo is shown on a baseball at the Cleveland Indians team shop. The Chief Wahoo logo is being removed from the Cleveland Indians' uniform next year. The polarizing mascot is coming off the team's jersey sleeves and caps starting in the 2019 season. The Club will still sell merchandise featuring the mascot in Northeast Ohio.

A Chief Wahoo logo is shown on a baseball at the Cleveland Indians team shop. The Chief Wahoo logo is being removed from the Cleveland Indians' uniform next year. The polarizing mascot is coming off the team's jersey sleeves and caps starting in the 2019 season. The Club will still sell merchandise featuring the mascot in Northeast Ohio. Associated Press
Count me among the many who are disappointed the Indians decided Chief Wahoo will no longer be part of their uniforms or caps starting in 2019.

I have no way of knowing how many Native Americans the Indians logo truly offends, or for that matter how many even know such a thing as Chief Wahoo exists. The reason I wonder is a good friend of mine, who follows professional sports (although not rabidly) five years ago had no idea who LeBron James is. So if someone doesn't know an athlete as famous as James, perhaps a great many people would be unable to draw a sketch of Chief Wahoo.

Majority doesn't rule when it comes to being politically correct, however, so it doesn't matter that many on social media disagree with what the Indians are doing.

It is safe to say if the Indians were owned by Daniel Snyder, owner of the NFL Washington Redskins, that Chief Wahoo would be smiling around Progressive Field as long as he is signing the paychecks. Snyder has been under constant pressure to change the name of his team, but he won't budge.

The Indians are following the lead of MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred. Indians owner Paul Dolan knows many fans are upset, but has agreed to the change to, in the words of Manfred, help build "a culture of diversity and inclusion throughout the game" of baseball.

"We have consistently maintained that we are cognizant and sensitive to both sides of the discussion," Dolan said in a statement. "While we recognize many of our fans have a long-standing attachment to Chief Wahoo, I'm ultimately in agreement with Commissioner Manfred's desire to remove the logo from our uniforms in 2019."

So starting in 2019 the Indians logo will be a block "C." I can't imagine anything more boring unless they decided to go completely without a logo on their caps and uniform sleeves. No logo, incidentally, worked pretty well for the Browns when they were one of the best teams in the NFL, but that is not my solution to the Chief Wahoo dilemma.

The Indians and MLB should get together to seek the advice and consent of a Native American artist to come up with a logo that would make Native Americans proud to have it displayed on uniforms, jackets and other merchandise belonging to the Cleveland Indians. Certainly, the way the Indians organization is run, starting with Dolan on down through team president Chris Antonetti and manager Terry Francona, is enough to make any group proud.

A vast majority of fans apparently think of Chief Wahoo as an emblem they've always associated with the Indians and I am in their camp, but I'd have to be totally insensitive to not understand how it could offend others.

It doesn't have to be all or nothing. The logo for the NHL Chicago Blackhawks depicting an Indian with a slight grin wearing minimal war paint and four feathers in his hair is accepted, even by Native Americans.

I believe Cleveland Indians fans would endorse a new logo and eventually reflect on Chief Wahoo as a dear friend who passed away.

Indians' Jose Ramirez, translator Anna Bolton a winning team behind the scenes

By David Glasier, The News-Herald

It was a familiar scene in the Indians clubhouse at Progressive Field.

Reporters gravitated to Jose Ramirez, the Indians' All-Star third baseman, 2017 Silver Slugger Award winner and dynamic cog on one of major-league baseball's best teams the past two seasons.

Before the questioning began, Ramirez glanced quickly to his left to make sure Anna Bolton was in place and ready to translate the questions into Spanish and his answers into English. Hired by the Indians in May 2016 as the team's official translator and player engagement coordinator, Bolton has been the omnipresent bridge between Spanish-speaking players and English-speaking reporters. She works with designated hitter Edwin Encarnacion, catcher Francisco Mejia, infielders Erik Gonzalez and Yandy Diaz and all players with limited command of the English language,

Because Ramirez so often is in demand for interviews based on his contributions at the plate, in the field and on the bases, Bolton's association with the 25-year-old native of the Dominican Republic has brought her into the public eye.

The latest meeting of the media and Ramirez came on Jan. 19. He was in Cleveland along with many Indians players to make appearances the next day at TribeFest. The annual off-season showcase was staged this year at Huntington Convention Center.

Q&A, RAMIREZ-STYLE

The trace of a smile came to his face as Ramirez nodded in the direction of Bolton, signaling the start of the session. Bolton was engaged at every step of the process, listening intently to questions and answers while moving between the two languages.

Reporter: What do you remember most about last season?

Ramirez: It seemed like we were always winning, and then it was over. But so many good things happened to me and this team.

Reporter: What was your reaction to getting the start at third base for the American League team in the 2017 All-Star Game?

Ramirez: It was a great experience, something my family and friends in the Dominican Republic could be proud of. I'm so happy to have gotten all those votes from the fans.

Reporter: How did you feel about manager Terry Francona saying you'll probably move back to third base this season so Jason Kipnis can stay in the lineup at second base?

Ramirez: It's not even on my mind. My job is to do my best to get prepared for the season.

Reporter: Do you prefer second base or third base?

Ramirez: Second base is the position I played in the minor leagues, but I'll play wherever this team needs me to play.

Reporter: Do you think you can win the American League batting title this season after finishing third last season behind Jose Altuve of Houston and Avisail Garcia of the Chicago White Sox?

Ramirez: I don't worry about where I'm hitting in the (batting) order or what I'm hitting.

Reporter: What do you say to fans worried about the losses of Carlos Santana, Jay Bruce, Brian Shaw and Austin Jackson?

Ramirez: They need to trust those of us who are here. We'll come out every day to do the best for ourselves and the fans.

ON, OFF THE FIELD

Indians fans have come to know Ramirez as one of the most versatile, productive players in the big leagues.

In 2017, he posted career high numbers in batting average (.319), at-bats (525), hits (186), runs (107), doubles (major-league best 56) triples (six), home runs (29), RBI (83), total bases (341), on-base percentage (.374) and slugging-percentage (.583).

Ramirez finished third in balloting for American League Most Valuable Player, behind Altuve and New York Yankees rookie slugger Aaron Judge. The Indians finished 102-60 in the regular season to claim a second straight AL Central Division title. They were beaten by the Yankees in five games in the AL Division Series.

In 2016, his first full season in the big leagues, Ramirez batted .317 with 11 home runs and 76 RBI as the Indians won the AL Central title and advanced to the World Series before losing in seven games to the Chicago Cubs.

Partly because of the language barrier, fans aren't as familiar with Ramirez's background as they are of many of his teammates.

Born and raised in Bani, a city of 73,000 on the south-central coast of the Dominican Republic, he is one of four children of Xiomara and Enrique Ramirez.

Other big-league players hailing from Bani and the surrounding area include Jose Bautista, Miguel Tejada, Luis Vizcaino and Juan Uribe.

Ramirez was two months past his 17th birthday when he signed with the Indians as a free agent in November 2009. After a slow start in the minor leagues, he joined the full-season Single-A Lake County Captains in June 2012 and put himself on the map, batting .354 in 67 games. He moved up quickly after that, spending parts of the 2013, 2014 and 2015 seasons with the Indians before arriving to stay in 2016.

Before the end of spring training in March 2017, Ramirez and the Indians agreed to terms of a five-year, \$26-million contract that was transformative for someone who came from extremely modest means.

Bolton said nothing in her dealings with Ramirez suggests the money has changed the essential character of the young man with the distinctive bounce in his step.

"He's a really good guy who cares deeply about his family, friends and teammates," Bolton said. "Jose's family is so proud of him and what he's accomplished. He's in touch with his mom every day, whether it's on the phone or texting."

Ramirez's on-field demeanor is alternately business-like and buoyant.

"His personality is a unique combination of both," Bolton said. "His mom says he was really shy as a youngster. All he wanted to do was play baseball."

Behind the scenes, especially in the clubhouse, Ramirez is extroverted and popular with English-speaking and Spanish-speaking teammates.

“Jose is hilarious. He can dish it out and take it, too,” said Bolton, who added that his emergence as a player has allowed Ramirez to show more of himself to teammates and team employees he’s with every day.

“He came out of his shell a lot last season. It’s easy to feel confident when you’re hitting like he was,” Bolton said, laughing.

As for the language barrier, Bolton said she senses Ramirez has a steadily improving grasp of what is being said to him in English, even if he still prefers to converse in Spanish and conduct interviews in his native tongue.

“Every single day, his English gets better,” Bolton said. “But it’s two different things being comfortable with English-speaking teammates in the clubhouse and standing in front of reporters recording every single word you say. I don’t think it will be long, though, before Jose starts to give some answers in English.”

EXPANDING HER REACH

Bolton is a North Carolina native who earned degrees in Spanish and education at Virginia Tech. Before she was hired by the Indians, she was a language teacher in her home state, Florida, Virginia and the Dominican Republic.

The team’s front office was so impressed with Bolton’s impact on Ramirez and other Spanish-speaking players on the big-league club that a new position was created for her, education and language coordinator.

She will go to spring training next month in Goodyear, Arizona, with the scope of her work expanded. She will create and administer language and cultural education programs geared to Spanish-speaking players at all levels of the minor leagues. During the season, she will split time between the training complexes in Arizona and the Dominican Republic as well as the Ohio-based minor-league affiliates in Columbus, Akron, Eastlake and Niles.

The Indians indicated her duties also will call for her to have some interaction with the big-league team during the season.

“I’m going to miss the daily contact (with the Indians) so much,” Bolton said. “But it’s so important to make sure these young guys have access to education and provide the support they’ll need as they make their move to the U.S. There are times when I wonder how many talented Latin American players have slipped through the cracks of all teams due to language and culture differences.”

Bolton admitted it was emotional sharing the news of her promotion with Ramirez and the other Spanish-speaking players on the Indians.

“They asked me why this is happening and wanted to make sure I was happy with the it,” Bolton said. “But they all understand how important education is and how important it is to me to help other players following in their footsteps overcome the challenges they’ll face moving to a new country with a different language and culture.”

Bolton will have a say in the hiring of a new translator for the Indians.

Rosenthal: Mets can't make a decision; Brewers think Cain is improving; Realmuto for Taylor?; more notes

By Ken Rosenthal Jan 28, 2018

For insight into why the free-agent market remains mostly paralyzed, consider the New York Mets’ approach to addressing their needs at second and/or third base.

The Mets are weighing four players for those spots, according to major league sources—free agents Eduardo Nunez, Todd Frazier and Neil Walker, plus a trade candidate, the Pittsburgh Pirates’ Josh Harrison.

Club officials see the four as mostly similar—all produced between 2.1 and 3.0 Wins Above Replacement last season, and all project to be between 1.2 and 2.2 this season, according to Fangraphs’ version of the measure.

So, what do the Mets want? The same thing all clubs seem to want in this cold, efficiency-driven off-season—the best value. The problem is, the statistics do not present a full portrait of each player.

Harrison, 30, arguably is the best fit—he is the youngest of the group and would bring energy, versatility and other winning qualities. But Harrison—signed for \$10 million in 2018 with club options of \$10.5 million in ‘19 and 11.5 million in ‘20—also might prove the most expensive. And to get him, the Mets would need to give up outfielder Brandon Nimmo, who is under club control for five more seasons, sources say.

Should the Mets bypass Harrison if they can get one of the other infielders for a few million less? Should they be so wedded to Nimmo when they have Michael Conforto under control for the next four seasons and Jay Bruce and Yoenis Cespedes under control for the next three? These are reasonable questions, especially when reserve outfielders are not exactly in short supply. But other factors enter the equation, too.

The low walk rate of Harrison—and Nunez for that matter—would not necessarily be desirable for a team that currently includes a number of other free swingers—shortstop Amed Rosario, as well as reserves Jose Reyes, Juan Lagares and Wilmer Flores.

Walker, 32, is more proficient at getting on base, but he would be problematic for another reason—the Mets already have re-signed two other players who were at one time members of last year's 70-win club, Bruce and Reyes. The return of Walker would lead to increased grumbling from an already disgruntled fan base, and spark justifiable criticism that the Mets are re-assembling a losing team.

Frazier, a native of Toms River, N.J., likely would be a more popular addition among fans, and he is a difference-maker in the clubhouse, as the New York Yankees witnessed last season.

His solid walk rate is the reason his career on-base percentage is .321 even though his batting average is just .245, and he also is an above-average defender. But Frazier, too, is not a standout compared to the others, and the Mets might balk if he holds out for a multi-year contract entering his age 32 season.

According to Joel Sherman of the New York Post, the Yankees are playing the same kind of value game as they assess Frazier, Nunez and Walker, not seeing much difference among the three. The Mets likely would prefer a combination of say, Frazier and Nimmo, to the possibility of Harrison by himself. But the process has grown torturous for the Mets, Yankees and other clubs seeking to extract every ounce of value out of every acquisition.

Here's a radical suggestion: Pick the player you like best and get that guy.

Wait a second

Aren't the Milwaukee Brewers supposed to be more analytical under general manager David Stearns, who previously worked for the data-driven Houston Astros? And isn't Lorenzo Cain entering his age 32 season, making his five-year, \$80 million free-agent contract an odd move for a low-revenue club trying to manage risk?

The answer to both questions is yes, but the Brewers view Cain as an exception for a number of reasons, according to sources with knowledge of the club's thinking.

*Cain has performed at such a high level that he should provide sufficient production throughout his contract even if he starts to decline. His average annual value over the past four seasons, using Fangraphs' WAR-driven estimate, was \$35 million.

*Cain is so well-rounded, providing offensive, defensive and base-running value, that he does not need to rely on one set of skills to justify his worth. If anything, his hitting talent gets somewhat overlooked due to the attention on his speed and defense.

*The Brewers actually see signs of improvement in Cain at a stage in his career when players normally begin to regress. One example: Cain's walk rate last season was the highest of his career while his strikeout rate was his lowest.

Good Domingo, bad Domingo

Milwaukee Brewers right fielder Domingo Santana hit 30 home runs and produced an .875 OPS last season. He is only 25, and under club control for the next four seasons. Yet, his trade value might not be all that it appears.

One rival executive dismissed Santana as a "bad defender," while another said he is "not a winning player." Any criticism of Santana's defense is valid, based on the advanced metrics. But the assessment of Santana as "not a winning player" is probably too harsh. True, his strikeout rate rose in the final two months of last season, and, ideally, he would put more balls in the air. But Brewers people describe Santana as bright and mature, someone who wants to be good.

As I reported on Friday, the Brewers do not necessarily view Santana as the odd man out, believing he could team with Cain and Christian Yelich to form one of the best outfielders in baseball. Center fielder Brett Phillips, under club control for the next six seasons, also could be the centerpiece of a trade for a starting pitcher.

Michael Taylor for J.T. Realmuto? Who says no?

Nationals general manager Mike Rizzo rarely backs off when he gets laser-focused on a player. But sources say that Rizzo is not going to trade outfielder Victor Robles, the sixth-best prospect in baseball according to MLB Pipeline.com, for Miami Marlins catcher J.T. Realmuto, who is under club control for three more years.

The stalemate raises the question of whether the teams actually can complete a deal involving Realmuto, but the Nationals can offer numerous other prospects. They also might be willing to part with outfielder Michael Taylor, though it's unclear whether the Marlins would want Taylor, who will earn \$2.525 million this season and then be eligible for two more years of arbitration (of course, he still would be cheaper than Realmuto, who will earn either \$2.9 million or \$3.5 million in arbitration).

Taylor, who produced 19 homers and an .806 OPS in just 432 plate appearances last season, projects as one of the Nats' starting outfielders. Robles could replace him, joining Adam Eaton and Bryce Harper. But some club officials oppose trading Taylor, knowing Eaton is coming off surgery to repair a torn left ACL and Harper is entering his free-agent year. The Nats still might need Taylor—and if he indeed is on the verge of stardom, they might not want to face him with the Marlins 19 times a year.

Jilted Beckham takes the high road

Tim Beckham said all the right things on Saturday after Orioles manager Buck Showalter announced at the team's FanFest that Manny Machado would be the team's starting shortstop this season. But Beckham, who will move to third base, has every right to be upset about the turn of events.

As I reported on Jan. 10, Orioles general manager Dan Duquette told both Beckham and Machado at different points this off-season that they would be the team's starting shortstop in 2018. The landscape, however, appeared to shift after Machado made it clear that he wanted to return to short, his original position, rather than remain at third base.

The Orioles granted Machado his wish, even though he is entering his free-agent season and might be traded at the July 31 non-waiver deadline, or even before. Beckham, who has made only five career starts at third, knows he might be back at short in, well, relatively short order.

"(Machado) was originally a shortstop and that's where his heart is and, like I said, if I have to move to third base, I'm open for it," Beckham told reporters. "It's exciting, man. It's a new position for me. I'm ready to go over and have fun, for sure."

The problem with Kipnis

The Yankees have shown on-and-off interest in Cleveland Indians second baseman Jason Kipnis, but for now it seems mostly off, sources say.

Kipnis' relatively low luxury-tax number—\$8.75 million, or the average annual value in his six-year, \$52 million contract—would hold appeal for the Yankees. But the amount of actual cash he is owed—\$30.5 million over the next two seasons, including a \$2.5 million buyout on his 2020 option—is the reason the Indians are struggling to trade him.

Kipnis, who will play next season at 31, hit 23 homers and produced an .811 OPS in 2016. But right-hamstring issues limited him to 90 games last season and perhaps contributed to his defensive regression. In the view of one rival executive, he's worth a shot as a bounce-back candidate, but not for \$30.5 million.