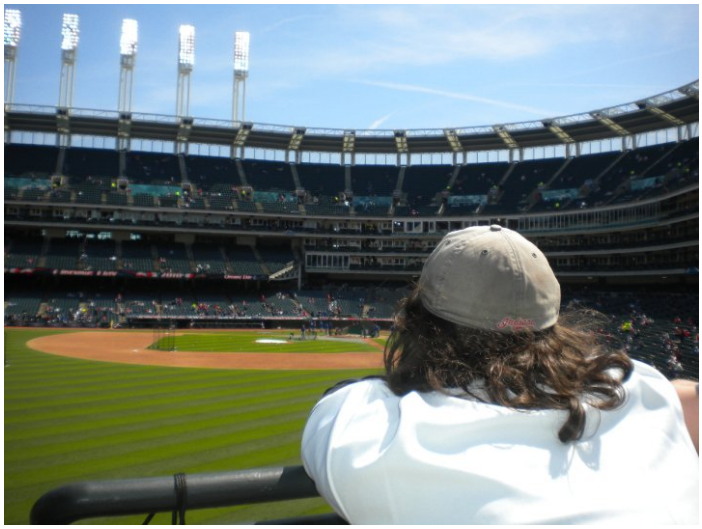

In honor of my TCF colleague Al Ciammaichella's Top 61 Prospects countdown, which is now deep into the top 25 after covering #25-21 , and #20-16 , and #15-11 which will posted by mid-afternoon Saturday, I wanted to rank the players on my projected Indians 25-man roster. To do this, I'm going to consider offensive and defensive value for position players and performance and importance for pitchers. The Indians' organizational strength at that position will also be considered because players that are replaceable will be ranked lower.

This is entirely subjective and your personal rankings may differ drastically from mine. A lot can change between now and April 2, so the 25-man roster may be affected by injuries, late free agent signings or trades, and guys really making a positive impact the rest of the spring. This, however, is the roster I fully explain the Indians to break camp with.

To avoid a 4,000+-word article, I split this up into two parts running on consecutive Saturdays as my weekly View from the Porch article. The first part, #25-13, can be viewed here .

The top half of this roster is going to be critically important to the Indians success this season. These are guys that absolutely must perform to their full potential for the Indians to have any shot at contending. The team, as a whole, looks a lot better than it has in a long time, but it is still not good enough to withstand a letdown from most of these players.

In descending order, here is a rank of my #12-#1 on my projected Indians 25-man roster:

#12: Michael Brantley, LF

Michael Brantley's 2012 season could best be summed up in one word: solid. Brantley hit .288, struck out in less than 10 percent of his at bats, had an OBP near .350, and fell just short of 40 doubles. He did an admirable job in CF, playing around league average in terms of defensive runs saved.

This season, Brantley (probably) drops down in the lineup and moves back to left field, where he is a well above average fielder. One added benefit of a better lineup is that Brantley may get the green light to run more often. In 2009, with Triple-A Columbus, Brantley was 46-for-51 in stolen bases. In 363 MLB games, Brantley is just 39-for-59 in stolen bases.

If Brantley continues to improve, he'll definitely move up this list for next season, but for now, he's just outside the top 10 because he has to prove that last year's upward trends are going to continue.

#11 Joe Smith, RHP

Joe Smith has become one of the top matchup righties in baseball and his improvement against left handed batters has given him a much larger role over the last two seasons. A spike in home runs allowed and walks prevented Smith's 2012 season from being as good as 2011, but the side-armer still turned in a fine season.

The thing about Smith's 2012 is that it looks more like the norm than 2011. If Smith is able to have another sub-3.00 ERA and keep inducing ground balls at a tremendous rate, he will, once again, be a major part of the bullpen. Little spikes here and there were the difference between 2011 and 2012 and those spikes are what we can expect for this season.

Smith will be called upon to get big outs. Leverage index is a statistic that attempts to measure the pressure of a given situation. The determining factors are inning, score, outs, and runners on base. The baseline average leverage index value is 1. Ten percent of situations are above 2 on the leverage index, while 60 percent are below 1. Smith's average leverage index when he

entered a game was 1.34, which ranked 54th out of 138 qualified relievers. When you consider that most of the top 54 are primary eighth inning setup men or closers, that's a very high ranking for a guy whose job is predominantly the seventh inning.

In other words, he pitches in big spots and is a very important piece of the puzzle.

#10: Zach McAllister, RHP

I already wrote in depth about Zach McAllister with my piece on him from Friday , but I'll elaborate here. To me, McAllister is one of the most important parts of the rotation. If his development continues to curve upward, he will be a very solid middle of the rotation pitcher. If he repeats last season or regresses, he could be replaced by Carlos Carrasco, Trevor Bauer, or Corey Kluber at some point.

That being said, his development is critical to this rotation. With one average starter, Masterson, and two below average starters, Jimenez and Myers, in the top three of the rotation, the Indians have to gain a competitive advantage from the fourth and fifth spots. If McAllister is good, he will do that pitching predominantly against #3-5 starters.

Remember that my criteria for pitchers include both performance and importance. I have higher hopes for McAllister than most, but if he can manage to be a 14 or 15-game winner, the Indians' chances of being relevant in September are going to go way up.

#9: Mark Reynolds, 1B/DH

Mark Reynolds is ranked pretty high on this list. The Indians have not had a right handed power hitter for a long time. Based on the projected construction of the lineup, Reynolds will probably hit fifth or sixth, which means he's going to get a lot of RBI chances. Yes, he strikes out a ton. Yes, he hits quite a few home runs. Yes, his batting average is terrible. Yes, he walks and sees a lot of pitches.

Reynolds also possesses a .256/.360/.508/.868 slash line with runners in scoring position. Even considering the strikeouts, using wRC+, a statistic I have discussed before that operates on a scale of 100 being average and is adjusted for park and league factor, Reynolds checks in at 120 with runners in scoring position. That means Reynolds is 20 percent better than an average hitter with RISP.

He'll be the definition of a feast or famine hitter. He'll be maddeningly frustrating at times and also hit some big three-run homers at times. For his career, 84 of Reynolds's 181 home runs have come with runners on base. Sixty-five have come with two outs. He can be a major asset to this lineup with 30 HR and 85 RBI.

#8: Jason Kipnis, 2B

Jason Kipnis got a trial-by-fire in 2012. After a little more than a cup of coffee in 2012, playing in 36 games before missing the final month with an oblique injury, Kipnis put together an outstanding first half. He batted .277/.345/.419/.764 in the first half before the workload of the season caught up with him. His second half, .223/.322/.328/.651, coincided with the Indians' collapse.

One of the most athletic players on the team, Kipnis went from being an outfielder to being a Major League second baseman in a short time and was above average at the position. He stole 30 bases, nearly hit 15 home runs, and is a very good all-around player.

Like Brantley, with more help in the lineup, the pressure will be off of Kipnis and it should lead to better results. Also, with a competent backup in Mike Aviles, the Indians should be able to keep Kipnis fresh throughout the season.

One of the reasons that Kipnis is so high here is because his defensive value at second base is extremely important to the Indians and that should even improve as he gets better at the position and stays healthier throughout the season.

#7: Michael Bourn, CF

Michael Bourn's skill set is extremely unique. He provides a great dimension of speed at the top of the lineup. A lot of Bourn's value comes from running the bases and running wild in the outfield. But, he is also one year removed from batting .294 and made up for last season's batting average drop with a spike in home runs. If Bourn combines the two this season, coupled with his defense, he's could be seven wins above a replacement player.

With a league change, Bourn's offensive numbers may not be great. In fact, they may be close to league average. But with the ability to turn walks and singles into doubles and blazing speed that will score him from first on nearly every double and from second on nearly every single, he's going to provide a ton of value to this lineup.

Bourn will draw comparisons to Kenny Lofton in center field. Bourn attempted 55 steals last season, the lowest number of attempts since 2008. It's unknown how Terry Francona, a believer in sabermetric thought, will approach Bourn's penchant for stealing bases, but if Bourn returns to stealing 50+ bags, he's going to put immense pressure on the opposition every time he's on base.

#6: Chris Perez, RHP

Chris Perez was excellent in 2012. It's not easy to stay sharp when pitching sporadically and Perez was able to improve greatly on the 2011 stats that sagged. He regained his ability to get hitters to swing and miss and he lowered his walk rate. For closers, those are two of the most important stats. His 3.69 K/BB ratio was by far the best of his career. His ground ball rate, which was an abysmal 28.3 percent in 2011 climbed back to 40.3 percent in 2012.

His ERA was slightly worse, but that's not a concern. His peripheral numbers improved immensely and that's the most important thing. As mentioned later down column with Vinnie Pestano, the Indians cannot give games away. The onus will be on Perez to shut the door when the Indians enter the ninth inning with a lead.

#5: Asdrubal Cabrera, SS

Asdrubal Cabrera can go back to focusing on playing baseball. Serving as the de facto leader on a club devoid of leadership, Cabrera now has a vocal, supportive manager and a supporting cast of veterans in the clubhouse. Saddling himself with far too much pressure, Cabrera turned into an incredibly streaky hitter. He had a 12-game hitting streak from May 25-June 10. He also had a stretch where he went 2-for-36 from August 21-31.

As a switch hitter who is good from both sides of the plate, Cabrera inherently has added value. His batting average and on-base percentage have been remarkably consistent over the last three seasons. In terms of slugging percentage, Cabrera has dramatically increased his offensive value over the last two seasons.

Without the added pressure of being one of the few hitters on the team, Cabrera could be in line for the best offensive season of his career.

#4: Vinnie Pestano, RHP

Remember the leverage index stat I mentioned above? A metric that determines the pressure and importance of a given situation. Vinnie Pestano's average leverage index when entering a game ranked sixth among all qualified relievers last season at 1.76. Win probability added is a stat that works side-by-side with leverage index to determine how much a player added to his team's chance of winning. Among 136 qualified relievers, Pestano ranked fourth in that category.

In other words, the guy is damn good. If we include 2011, Pestano's WPA ranks third among all qualified relievers. If the Indians are going to contend, they absolutely cannot blow leads late in games. Furthermore, with their offense, they're not going to be out of a close game late. The back end of the bullpen will have to do its job and Pestano is the most reliable of those guys.

Pestano was his usual dominant self from April through July, but posted bad months in August and September. There's no reason to expect Pestano to regress this season.

He is this team's rock and it's most reliable player. Not just most reliable pitcher, but most reliable player.

#3: Justin Masterson, RHP

For Justin Masterson, 2011 appears the exception and not the norm. For the Indians, they're hoping and praying that 2011 Justin Masterson can return. A high walk rate and a high home run both did damage to Masterson's 2012 campaign. With Masterson now under the tutelage of new pitching coach Mickey Callaway and his former manager in Boston, Terry Francona, the 2013 season for Masterson is a bit of an unknown.

Tim Belcher did wonders with Masterson while serving as the Indians pitching coach in 2011. But, based on a comparison of the 2011 statistics with Masterson's career numbers, that season was a fluke.

Masterson is very reliant on his defense as a ground ball pitcher. The Indians were terrible defensively in 2012. Their outfield defense has improved, but their infield defense is largely the same. Masterson needs to focus on not issuing walks. If guys get on base via a hit, so be it. Free baserunners are costly.

He's the de facto ace of the staff. He'll have to be better than 2012 for the Indians to have a chance to compete for a postseason berth.

#2: Nick Swisher, 1B/RF

The Indians are going to build a big portion of their season, both from a production standpoint and a PR standpoint, around Nick Swisher. Swisher, the Ohio State grad and infectious personality, will bat in the middle of the order and will be expected to remain the consistent bat he has been most of his career.

In six of the last seven seasons, Swisher has been worth 3.2 wins above replacement player or so. He takes a lot of walks, hits between 20-30 HR, drives in between 75-90 runs, and doubles between 30-40 times. I have some reservations about what happens to his numbers going from Yankee Stadium, a very favorable ballpark for lefties, to Progressive Field, a decent ballpark for lefties.

His versatility will be an asset to this lineup, which also helps his ranking in this list. He'll play nearly everyday at one of first base, right field, or DH and the fact that he's a switch hitter will make the middle of the Indians lineup very hard to match up with.

#1 Carlos Santana, C

To me, Carlos Santana is the biggest key to the season. If he posts similar numbers in 2013 to what he posted in the second half of 2012, the Indians lineup is scary good. The light may have come on for Santana in the second half, when he batted .281/.389/.498/.887, with 13 of his 18 home runs.

Santana should hit and having extra lineup protection will help. What I'm most interested in is seeing if Santana makes a commitment to being a better catcher. He's going to have to navigate a very mediocre starting rotation through a difficult season and do so by helping them out as much as possible. That includes better footwork when attempting to throw out runners. That includes not being lazy on balls in the dirt.

It's time for Santana to take the catching position and make it his. The learning curve should be starting to slow down for Santana, a converted third baseman. He's nearing the prime of his career and he can establish himself as one of the best players at his position if he continues to mature as a player. This is the season for Santana to do that.

There's no sabermetric stat that quantifies the effect on a player with some of the pressure taken off of him thanks to better talent in the lineup. This is the case for Santana, Kipnis, and Cabrera. That should lead to better offensive production for all three. The Indians offense has the opportunity to be really, really good.

As most people have said over and over again this offseason, the starting rotation will have to hold up for the Indians to be a contender. But, make no mistake, this Opening Day roster is light years better than the last several seasons and should give Tribe fans plenty of hope and optimism.