On Tuesday, the Indians starting rotation was previewed. Today, TheClevelandFan.com continues its annual Indians preview with a deep look into the Indians bullpen for 2007. In a very thorough effort, Tony Lastoria breaks down the Tribe pen for the coming season, predicts who will leave camp with the team, and provides detailed bios and breakdowns of each of the pitchers in the Indians bullie. Just 40 days 'till Tribe season!

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2006 Flashback: By the Numbers

(Major league ranks in parentheses)

This is a trip down memory lane most people do not want to take, but here is how the Indians bullpen in 2006 stacked up to the competition. The Indians were 11th in the AL (24th) with a 4.66 bullpen ERA, 14th (30th which is dead last) in bullpen wins with 16, 3rd (5th) for most bullpen losses with 27, 14th (30

th

) in saves with 24, 3
rd

(8
th

) for the most blown saves with 23, 14
th

(30
th

) in save percentage at 51%, 11
th

(26
th

) with a .274 BAA, and 11
th

(23
rd

) with a .774 OPS. Yuck.

By contrast, the 2005 bullpen was 1st (1st) with a 2.80 bullpen ERA, 9th (17th) in wins with 22, 12th (27th) in most bullpen losses with 18, 3rd

(3rd

) in saves with 51, 14th

(28th

a good thing) in least amount of blown saves with 15, 1st

(2nd

) in save percentage at 77%, 1st

(1st

) with a .224 BAA, and 1st

(1st

) with a .636 OPS.

Gee, anyone want to debate the gigantic drop in bullpen performance from 2005 to 2006 was by far the largest reason for the Indians failure last year? They were 1st in the majors in several key bullpen statistics like ERA, BAA, and OPS and 2nd in the majors in save percentage. They went from first to just about worst in all those categories in one year. Wow.

The 2007 Bullpen

The Indians bullpen last year was cast right out of a horror movie and had they been in Hollywood would have been titled The Nightmare on Ontario Street. Instead of one homicidal maniac carving people up, this version saw opposing hitters doing the honors by slicing and dicing our relievers apart all year. Indians GM Mark Shapiro set out to put that horror movie franchise to rest this off-season, and eliminate the chances of a sequel popping up later this year. Or did he?

Shapiro's approach this off-season with fixing the bullpen seemed to center around a Buckshot Theory, which called for the signing of as many veteran arms as possible with the hopes you hit on at least 1-2. Whether or not that theory was the right approach or will even work, Shapiro did change the dynamic of the bullpen at least on paper. Compared to the start of 2006, the Indians have virtually reshuffled the entire deck in the bullpen. Gone are Danny Graves, Scott Sauerbeck, Guillermo Mota, and Bob Wickman, and in are and Aaron Fultz, Roberto Hernandez, and Joe Borowski. And Keith Foulke would have been in there had he not retired.

The bullpen will continue to be the biggest question mark for the team, and ultimately will decide the fate of the Indians season. The Indians do have depth in the minors with a lot of kids about ready for full time bullpen roles. Prospects like Rafael Perez, Tom Mastny, Juan Lara, and Eddie Mujica all received significant time at the major league level last year and looked good in limited action. It is possible that one of these kids could win the final bullpen spot and send one of Matt Miller or Jason Davis (or both) packing, but for now it looks like they will start the year in Buffalo. Also, one of the minor leagues premier closer prospects Tony Sipp will be in Buffalo, and could be an option later in the season.

Bottom line, from this corner, Shapiro did not do enough to fix the bullpen. With oft-injured guys like Joe Borowski and Matt Miller, the ineffective Jason Davis, and improperly addressing the left-hand pitching need in the bullpen with Aaron Fultz, the bullpen is one giant question mark in 2007. For this to be an effective bullpen in 2007, the Indians are going to need a lot of things go their way and for 1-2 of the youngsters to break out.

Right now, barring injury, here is how the Indians 7-man bullpen should look when the season opens:

Closer: Joe Borowski (RHP) Setup: Rafael Betancourt (RHP) Setup: Roberto Hernandez (RHP) Setup: Aaron Fultz (LHP)

Middle Relief: Fernando Cabrera

Middle Relief: Matt Miller

Long Relief: Jason Davis

Closer: Joe Borowski

2006 Key Stats: 3-3, 36 saves, 3.75 ERA, 1.38 WHIP, .235 BAA *Advanced Stats:* 8.27 K/9, 1.94 K/BB, .323 OBP, .699 OPS, 3.83 DIPS, 1.18 RA+

With Keith Foulke now out of the picture, Borowski is unquestionably the closer. When healthy, Borowski is a pretty good relief pitcher. In 2002 and 2003, he was an anchor in the Chicago Cubs bullpen posting successive sub-3.00 ERA seasons (2.73 ERA in 2002, 2.63 in 2003). He also logged a ton of innings in 2002 (95.2 IP) and saved 33 games for the Cubs in 2003. The overwork caught up with him in 2004 and 2005 as he suffered through two injury plagued seasons (65 appearances and 67.2 IP combined). Last year, he bounced back in Florida and had a solid season as the Marlins closer.

Amazingly, in 2006 Borowski had issues with right-handed hitters as they had a .291 BAA and .782 OPS off him (148 ABs), while left-handers only hit .167/.597 against him (120 ABs).

Borowski was pretty consistent on the season, posting a 3.71 ERA, .219 BAA and 16 saves before the All-Star break, and a 3.79, .250 BAA and 20 saves after it.

Borowski has always been a solid bullpen performer, which is shown by his career 3.87 ERA and .247 BAA. Also, while his career groundball/flyball (G/F) ratio is 1.05, last year he had a 0.68 ratio which would work well for him in Cleveland since fly ball pitchers tend to have more success due to the strength of the Indians defense being in the outfield. He also finished 3rd in the NL in saves, and of his 14 inherited runners only 1 scored.

The success of the Indians season really comes down to Borowski being able to 1.) stay healthy and 2.) remain effective. Over his career he has been able to do #2 well, but #1 has been an issue especially most recently. The Indians will be able to manage if Borowski is out for a short period of time, but any long term injury will leave Shapiro and his staff scrambling for a closer option once again, and at the same time likely see a nosedive by the Indians in the standings.

RH Setup: Rafael Betancourt

2006 Key Stats: 3-4, 3 saves, 3.81 ERA, 1.11 WHIP, .241 BAA *Advanced Stats: 7*.62 K/9, 4.36 K/BB, .275 OBP, .662 OPS, 3.36 DIPS, 1.23 RA+

While the Indians have had a roller-coaster of a ride with the bullpen from 2003-2006, Betancourt has been a mainstay and one of the most consistent performers in the pen during that span. Since debuting with the Indians halfway through the 2003 season, in three and a half years Betancourt has compiled a 3.26 ERA and never had an ERA in a season higher than 3.92.

What makes Betancourt so effective is he throws strikes (4.36 K/BB in 2006) and limits his base-runners (.275 OBP in 2006), and this has translated well over his career as he has a career 3.95 K/BB rate and .285 OBP. Also, some of this success may be attributed to him pitching to the strength of the defense as his G/F last year was 0.47 and his career number is 0.60.

Situationally, over the last three years Betancourt has been somewhat effective against lefties (.256/.713), but he has been largely effective against righties (.237/.632). Betancourt has also shown himself to be very tough in tight situations (sans the 9th inning), as with RISP and two out over the last three years opposing batters have hit .208 with a .605 OPS off of him.

One of the biggest problems with Betancourt is he usually does not perform well on consecutive days, which is why others like Hernandez and Cabrera will likely share the setup role with him. Over the last three years, on zero days rest Betancourt has a 4.88 ERA, .342 BAA and 6.59 K/9 rate, but with one day rest he has a 3.22 ERA, .217 BAA, and 9.13 K/9 rate, and with 2 days rest he has a 2.20 ERA, .248 BAA and 10.01 K/9 rate. Bottom line, as long as Betancourt is not pitching on consecutive days, he is an elite reliever.

As a sidenote, you have to question Wedge's use of Betancourt last year. He threw only 57.2 IP because of injury, but 17 of those innings were pitched on 3 or more days rest, and only 34 of his 50 appearances (68%) came on 0-2 days rest. As noted above, history has proven that Betancourt works best on 1-2 days rest, and given that the Indians had bullpen issues all year, it is hard to explain why he was not afforded more opportunities to pitch more often and to his strengths. I mean, if you have to go to your bullpen, the idea is to use your best relievers right? By contrast, when Bob Howry was with the Indians in 2005, 64 of his 79 appearances (81%) were on 0-2 days rest. Just thought I'd mention that.

With Foulke's retirement, everyone else in the bullpen has now been bumped up a notch. With Borowski moving from the setup role to closer, the battle in camp now may actually be who ends up the primary 8th inning right-handed setup man. Most likely, the Indians will use a combination of Betancourt, Hernandez, and Cabrera in this role throughout the year, but the favorite going into camp to get the bulk of the 8th inning work will probably be Betancourt.

RH Setup: Roberto Hernandez

2006 Key Stats: 0-3, 2 saves, 3.11 ERA, 1.46 WHIP, .248 BAA *Advanced Stats: 6*.79 K/9, 1.50 K/BB, .336 OBP, .696 OPS, 3.90 DIPS, 0.97 RA+

Hernandez, 42, may turn out to be the Indians best off-season pickup. Many fans shrugged off his signing as Shapiro getting yet another washed up retread for the bullpen. But, Hernandez has shown no real signs of slowing down, and may be a right-handed version of Jesse Orosco, a guy who might very well pitch into his mid-40s. This will be Hernandez's 17th big league season, and with 960 games already pitched, he is 14th on the all-time list for games pitched.

The amazing thing about Hernandez is how extremely durable and effective he is, which was probably the biggest sell to Shapiro. Since 1993 he has made at least 53 appearances out of the bullpen every year except the strike shortened 1994 season when he had 45 appearances as the White Sox closer, and since his rookie year he has never had an ERA higher than 4.91.

Hernandez is no longer the power pitcher and big strikeout guy he was very early in his career from 1994-1997, but while his strikeout rate has dropped since those days, it hasn't wavered much since the initial drop after the 1997 season. Since 1998 he has been consistent with his K/9 rate as he has hovered in the 6.50 to 7.50 range every season up through last year. He shows no signs of slowing down as his last two seasons in 2005 and 2006 may have been his best seasons since his days with the White Sox in the mid-90s.

The impressive thing with Hernandez is when you break down his numbers situation-wise, he has been dominant. Against right-handers in 2006, he held them to a .219 BAA and a paltry .596 OPS in 146 at bats, and over the last three seasons (405 ABs) he has held them to .247/.666. In 2006, left-handers killed him to the tune of .290/.852 in 100 at bats (last three years .268/.782), so hopefully Eric Wedge will have the common sense to limit his exposure to lefties this year. Also, Hernandez's closer mentality showed last year as with runner's on-base they hit .205/.647 (last three years .244/.701), with RISP they hit .227/.712 (last three years .234/.692), and with RISP and two-out they hit .161/.656 (last three years .223/.690) off of him. In addition, for the Mets the last two seasons of his 44 inherited runners only 9 scored. This guy is battle tested, and he knows how to work out of jams and it shows.

With the loss of Foulke, Hernandez now becomes our backup plan at closer. For a short spell, Hernandez should be able to handle temporary closing duties as he is an experienced closer given his career 326 saves which ranks him 10th on the all-time list. But, if Borowski were to struggle or get seriously hurt and thereby force Hernandez into a more permanent role as closer, the Indians will be in trouble. He'll likely bounce around between the 7th and 8th inning and share setup responsibilities with Betancourt.

LH Setup: Aaron Fultz

2006 Key Stats: 3-1, 4.54 ERA, 1.51 WHIP, .288 BAA *Advanced Stats:* 7.82 K/9, 2.21 K/BB, .350 OBP, .811 OPS, 3.62 DIPS, 1.01 RA+

While Hernandez may have been Shapiro's best signing of the off-season, Fultz may be the most puzzling addition to the bullpen. One of the Indians greatest needs was a good matchup left-hander for the bullpen to use late in games, and while the pickings were slim in free agency, it is hard to make a case Fultz fills this need in the bullpen or that Fultz was the best Shapiro could come up with.

Shapiro may have been suckered by Fultz's impressive 2005 campaign in Philadelphia when he simply dominated with a 2.24 ERA, .186 BAA and .567 OPS. But, for whatever reason Shapiro appears to have ignored Fultz's six other seasons and especially his 2006 campaign where he has never come close to being that effective. Compared to his career best ERA, BAA and OPS from 2005, his best numbers after that are 2006's 4.54 ERA, 2001's .259 BAA and 2004's .738 OPS. For his career, he has a 4.37 ERA, .262 BAA, and .748 OPS.

His situational pitching is spotty. Against lefties last year, they had a .277 BAA and .662 OPS against him, and in the last three years they have hit .238/.629 off of him (although heavily skewed by his 2005 performance). While he did bear down some with RISP and two outs (.250/.627), he just did not perform well in several other tight situations, notably with runners on base (.273/.770) and RISP (.280/.750). Also, of his 58 inherited runners in 2006, 23 of them scored. One thing that may work in Fultz's favor is he is a fly ball pitcher (G/F 0.92 in 2006, 1.18 for his career), which as noted above works in well with this defense….assuming that those fly balls are not balls going over the outfield wall.

Fultz would make a solid second lefty in the pen, but to go into this season with him as the primary and likely only lefty in the pen is setting this bullpen up for potential disaster for late inning left-on-left matchups. I liken him to Scott Sauerbeck, who was nice as the Indians second lefty in 2005, but as the primary guy in 2006 he was a calamity. The Indians have several very promising left-hand pitching options like Rafael Perez, Juan Lara, and Tony Sipp on call-waiting in Buffalo, but they most likely will not be with the team at the start of the season. If anyone wants to put the finger on one position Shapiro failed to fix this off-season, this would have to be it. I hope I am wrong, but Fultz looks like Scott Sauerbeck or even Scott Stewart Redux to me.

Middle Relief: Fernando Cabrera

2006 Key Stats: 3-3, 5.19 ERA, 1.40 WHIP, .243 BAA *Advanced Stats:* 10.53 K/9, 2.22 K/BB, .337 OBP, .799 OPS, 4.80 DIPS, 0.91 RA+

Cabrera is one of the only bullpen prospects the Indians have developed since “The Plan” went into effect in mid-2002. Cabrera is still actually developing, and while there is a logjam of promising prospects stashed away at Buffalo, the fact Cabrera is the only real in-house relief prospect on this roster almost five years after the inception of The Plan is ludicrous.

Cabrera was a major disappointment last year. After his impressive performance in 2005 where in 15 games (30.1 IP) he went 2-1 with a 1.47 ERA and was one of the main weapons used out of the bullpen in our August/September playoff run, many fans (including me) were excited about him going into 2006. Some even lobbied for him to be tabbed the closer for 2006. It can be argued that The World Baseball Classic hindered him somewhat last year, as he was not able to go through a normal Spring Training, and he battled through some injuries early in the year. When you look at he pre-All Star numbers (6.46 ERA and .264 BAA) and post-All Star numbers (3.90 ERA and .222 BAA), you have to wonder if this really was the case.

Cabrera has limited situational numbers, but for his career against righties they have a .243 BAA and .737 OPS off of him, and lefties a .209 BAA and .677 OPS. While he has struggled in his short career with runners on base (.250/.788) and with RISP (.241/.791), he has done well

with RISP and two outs (.150/.617). He also has a career G/F ratio of 0.82, which again fits in well with this team.

Cabrera will likely be used at various times in games this year, probably in the 6th/7th inning to start the season. There is no question that Cabrera has electric stuff as he gets his fastball up there and his secondary pitches are devastating. The problem, though, is consistency, which is not such a bad thing at this point given his age. However, the Indians will need Cabrera to round into form and be much more reliable and effective this season. This kid has backend bullpen stuff, and with Tony Sipp on the horizon, this duo could be a major part of the 8th/9th inning bullpen setup for many years, maybe even by late this year.

Middle Relief: Matt Miller

2006 Key Stats: 1-0, 3.45 ERA, 1.28 WHIP, .212 BAA *Advanced Stats:* 6.89 K/9, 1.33 K/BB, .338 OBP, .704 OPS, 5.58 DIPS, 1.41 RA+

You have to feel for Miller. At 32 years of age, the guy finally gets a shot in the majors with the Indians in 2004. But since then he just can't stay healthy. After the impressive 2004 debut when he went 4-1 with a 3.09 ERA in 57 games, Miller has only pitched in a combined 37 games and 45.1 innings the last two years.

His career numbers are very good: 2.74 ERA, .219 BAA, .625 OPS, and a 8.14 K/9. In his three-year run with the Indians from 2004-2006 totaling 94 games, he has simply dominated right-handed hitters holding them to a .205 BAA and .551 OPS. Lefties haven't fared much better as they have a .235 BAA, but the .764 OPS is concerning which is due to the large increase in his walk-rate and him getting touched up more for extra base hits against lefties. Also, situation-wise, he has proven to be quite reliable with runners on (.208/.625), with RISP (.195/.625), and with RISP and two out (.203/.697). In addition, of 85 inherited runners, 24 have scored.

Bottom line, when Miller pitches, he is effective. He'll likely pitch in the 6th/7th inning, and may be a late-inning specialist against right-handed hitters. But, at 35 years of age and being injury prone the last two years, it is hard to count on him. Prior to Keith Foulke's departure, Davis and Miller were going to be in a dog fight to win the final bullpen spot, but barring an injury or trade both are guaranteed to make the team.

Long Relief: Jason Davis

2006 Key Stats: 3-2, 1 save, 3.74 ERA, 1.46 WHIP, .302 BAA *Advanced Stats:* 6.02 K/9, 2.64 K/BB, .346 OBP, .738 OPS, 3.07 DIPS, 1.06 RA+

Davis is an enigma. He has the stuff to be a dominating pitcher in the league, but he lacks focus and consistency. For someone who throws as hard as he does and has some nasty secondary stuff, it is amazing how he is unable to put hitters away (6.02 K/9 last year and 5.47 K/9 career). Also, opposing hitters treat him like a batting practice pitcher. Last year opponents hit .302 off of him, which is awful, and for his career he has a .288 BAA.

Last year, he was horrendous in just about every situation. Righties hit .294/.714 off of him. Lefties hit .316/.781. With runners on base they hit .317/.813. With RISP they hit .383/1.034. With RISP and two outs they hit .406/1.125. 15 of his 21 inherited runners scored. The guy simply imploded in any tight situation, which as a reliever, is not a good thing as you typically call on a reliever to get you out of jams or maintain leads. And this was hardly an anomaly, as over the last three years righties have hit .313/.807 off of him, with runners on base they have hit .303/.783, with RISP they have hit .300/.816, and with RISP with two outs they have hit .341/.935. Um, why is he still here?

The one positive is he did perform better down the stretch, as before the All-Star break he compiled a 5.04 ERA and .314 BAA (30.1 IP), and after the break he had a 2.16 ERA and .287 BAA (25 IP). Plus, he did only give up 1 HR in his 55.1 IP last season, which is very good. But that's it.

Davis is very durable and can pitch multiple innings any given night, which is why he will likely be the long reliever. The question is why the Indians are even bothering keeping this gas can

on the 25-man roster, and why one of the kids like Mujica, Perez, Lara or Mastny are not given a shot in his place. Maybe they will, as it is possible Davis is dealt by the end of camp or is released. But, while Davis is on the bubble, he likely will make the team. And, if he makes the team and continues to fail in the bullpen, he will be released (he is out of options) and then one of the kids will get a shot. Unfortunately, as is always the case with Shapiro these days, we have to wait for a veteran to crash and burn before a kid gets a shot.

Buffalo Bound:

Eddie Mujica, Tony Sipp, Juan Lara, Tom Mastny, and Rafael Perez. These players will be profiled in the upcoming Buffalo preview.

Extended Spring Training Bound:

Cliff Pollitte. A good pickup by Shapiro, but Pollitte is not expected to be available until May/June. He could be a big help late in the year, and could be another Bob Howry-like signing from 2004.

Up Next: The Infielders

Coming Soon: The outfield and bench as well as previews for the minor league affiliates Buffalo, Akron, Kinston and Lake County.