The Indians are getting a lot of press these days from numerous baseball pundits predicting big things for the team in 2007. With that in mind, Tony Lastoria decided it was time to search these guys out and find out why. In the first of a series of Q&A's he conducted with some of the most respected baseball writers in the industry, Tony tracked down Jeff Sackmann from The Hardball Times, a superb website that generates daily, original baseball commentary and analysis on a wide range of topics such as baseball history, statistics, current events and the minor leagues.

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One such person was Jeff Sackmann . Jeff is a writer for The Hardball Times , and recently predicted the Indians would rebound and put up a 90+ win season .

For those unfamiliar with The Hardball Times, the site was co-founded by Aaron Gleeman and Matthew Namee, who is a former Bill James assistant. It is a baseball website that generates daily, original baseball commentary and analysis on a wide range of topics such as baseball history, statistics, current events and the minor leagues. In addition to the daily stories, the site also includes a variety of baseball stats and graphs, and is the only freely available source of batted-ball and updated win shares data on the internet.

For those that are regular readers of The Hardball Times, you will recognize Jeff Sackmann as one of the main contributors. A loyal Brewers fan, Jeff is also the creator of MinorLeagueSplits.com . For avid minor league followers, this site is the only source for comprehensive splits and situational stats for every active minor leaguer. Also, Jeff runs the sabermetrics site BeyondTheBoxscore.com and contributes to the fantasy magazine Heater . And, his newest creation, CollegeSplits.com , should become a new favorite site for baseball draft geeks.

I recently was able to sit down and "chat" with Jeff on variety of topics pertaining to the Cleveland Indians. Thanks to the help of fellow colleague Steve Buffum and a few Indians fans, several very good questions were brought up. A big thanks goes out from me to Jeff for taking the time to answer the myriad of Indians questions.

With that, onto the Q&A:

Q: As an avid minor leaguer follower, your MinorLeagueSplits.com site has been a godsend. Where did your idea for this site come from, and why has there really been no one before or after you to do this?

Jeff Sackmann (JS): Last offseason, some folks at Baseball Think Factory were thinking of forming a group to manually go through the play-by-play descriptions at the Minor League Baseball official site. That sounded to me like a process that could be automated, so I did it. Before then, I really wasn't much of a prospect watcher, but twelve months of immersion later, I'm hooked.

The play-by-play data necessary for splits wasn't available until a ways into the 2005 season, so simply having the capacity to do it is relatively new. (Though I believe some companies--STATS, inc., etc.--have limited splits going back quite a bit longer.) What you see on my site is really just scratching the surface of the data I've collected; I have complete play-by-play for every game of the 2005 and 2006 seasons, so I can explore everything from minor league base-running skills to clutch performance.

Q: While on the subject of the farm system, after the research you did on the minors in the book The Graphical Player 2007 it was determined that the Indians have the second best collection of talent in the minors. Care to expand on this and explain your methods that resulted in this conclusion?

JS: I explain my methodology in detail in this article . Basically, I rate every player in the minor against his peer group: 20-year-olds against 20-year-olds, etc. The Indians had 13 players who were among the top 10% in their age group, which I believe was tied with the Dodgers for best in baseball.

One caveat is that it's not a projection system: it rates systems based on performance in 2006. Those 13 top prospects include Andy Marte, Kevin Kouzmanoff, and Ryan Goleski, so it doesn't exactly reflect how strong the organization is today.

Q: What Indians prospects intrigue you? Do you see any sleeper candidates which are not as well known that your research shows may be in for a breakout year?

JS: Nobody springs to mind as a breakout candidate, but I've always been a Franklin Gutierrez fan. I think a lot of people have written him off now that he's lost some prospect luster, but he's still only 23, and my numbers suggest he's a solid center fielder. Based on that, I don't know if his future is with Cleveland, but he still has the potential to be a very useful player.

Q: What are your thoughts on the Indians this year? Are you in line with other national sportswriters who are predicting big things from the Indians this season?

JS: I certainly think they'll be closer to 90 wins than to 80. Whether that's enough to get into the postseason is another story.

Q: Pythagorean expectation said the Indians should have won 89 games last year, what happened? Why were they 11 games short of this number (isn't this close to a record?)?

JS: I don't know if it's a record, but it must be close. Some of that is luck, and some of it is poor relief pitching. Like watching a stock price from month to month, it's one of the frustrating things about baseball analysis: you know that a lot of the variation is just noise. But it sucks to have to write off an entire season to noise, especially when there just might be a good reason for it.

Q: Over the past several years, the Indians have become known as bargain bin shoppers and routinely sign free agents to one year deals, as well as several guys coming off of injury looking to re-establish their market value. What do you think about this approach?

JS: I think it's the way small-market teams have to compete. A friend of mine joked that the new market inefficiency for the "smart" teams to exploit is injured players, and I think there's some truth to that. The best example was signing Keith Foulke and Joe Borowski (before Foulke called it quits, anyway). The odds are long that both of those guys would be lights-out. But, sign two guys like that at a discount, and one of them is bound to be pretty good.

Q: What player not named Sabathia, Sizemore, Hafner or Martinez has the best chance to become a solid contributor in the lineup this year?

JS: I think Tribe fans will be pleasantly surprised by Trot Nixon. He's a solid defender, which often gets obscured because he's always described as "righty-masher Trot Nixon." He is that, and he probably shouldn't play every day, but he's better than your typical platoon player. I wouldn't be surprised to see something like 290/370/480 from him in 400 ABs.

Q: Do platoons work? The Indians will employ a lefty/righty platoon in the lineup of David Dellucci/Jason Michaels in LF, and a Trot Nixon/Casey Blake/Ryan Garko combo at RF/1B. Will Dellucci help with the poor production last year in LF by using him and Michaels to their strengths in the platoon?

JS: In theory, platoons are brilliant. Nearly every player has a platoon split, and if you're willing to strictly alternate a couple of guys (and they can handle it), you can take a player like Dellucci, who wouldn't be very good as an everyday player, and make him an extremely valuable part of a team.

On the other hand, it goes against the way most managers seem to want to do things. They want to play the hot hand, or go with an established vet. I hope Wedge sticks to his guns here: if he successfully runs two or three platoons all year long, not only will the Indians benefit from it in the win column, but it will justify the pleading of some platoon-happy analysts.

Q: What is your favorite combination of defensive metrics? Clay Davenport's translations on Baseball Prospectus tell me that Jhonny Peralta is a good defensive shortstop, while my eyes tell me ... well, what they tell me can't be printed on a family site. Can Peralta play shortstop, and how can I tell?

JS: I'm not a fan of BP's FRAA and FRAR. The best systems these days are the ones that use specific batted ball data, such as _ David Pinto's Probabilistic Model of Range (PMR). I start with PMR, and often don't bother with anything else. For what it's worth, Peralta does well in PMR, better than about 3/4 of MLB shortstops.

Q: Stathead mantra says that batting order makes at most a very tiny difference to the expected runs scored for an offense. Intuitively, we'd like to see Grady Sizemore's power being used to drive in runs out of a lower position (3?). What are your thoughts about the order, and how much would it really matter if Sizemore were dropped and someone like Trevor Crowe eventually led off?

JS: I gotta go with the mantra here. Tons of ink and pixels are wasted on lineup discussions, and yeah, it just doesn't matter very much. That said, I hear where you're coming from: my team, the Brewers, are likely to bat Rickie Weeks leadoff this year. That's not as bad as putting Alfonso Soriano in that spot, but it does seem like a waste.

I haven't done the math on this, but I do think it's better to leave a power/speed guy like Sizemore or Weeks in the leadoff hole than to move them down and put a low-OBP guy (think Juan Pierre, recently) in the leadoff slot. My biggest beef with managers is their obsession with using bad veteran hitters in the #2 slot.

Q: What is the best way to evaluate a relief pitcher? With the volatility of relief pitchers from year to year, is the large-bore buckshot approach Shapiro seems to be using as good a strategy as any? Which young Cleveland-system pitcher do you see as a good bet to develop into a closer?

JS: Buckshot is the way to go. If I had to pick one, I'd probably go with Fernando Cabrera, but your guess is probably better than mine.

When I'm looking at relief stats, I completely ignore ERA and look at peripherals like K, BB, and HR rates. If those are shaky, I look at GB/FB ratios. If a reliever does okay, but does it with a low K rate and a lot of fly balls, send him to Buffalo.

Q: Is there a measurable quantity that predicts how much a player will struggle/improve when changing leagues? Was Bronson Arroyo a fluke or a product of the NL Central? Will Josh Barfield take a long time to adjust to AL (especially Central) pitching, or will it be too hard to separate league change from normal youthful development?

JS: It may be measurable, but not very precisely, if only because of all the noise involved, as you suggest in Barfield's case. I'm curious how Arroyo does in his second year back in the NL; maybe hitters will catch up with him. Seems like the adjustment period varies a lot from player to player, and is tough to separate from everything else that might be going on (development, park, randomness, etc.).

Q: Should I be concerned about Jeremy Sowers' K-rate? Westbrook can get away with it as an extreme GB pitcher: Sowers doesn't have that kind of ratio going for him, but "knows how to pitch."

JS: You probably know more about this than I do, but Sowers is an interesting case. He struck out more than a batter per inning in his half season in Kinston in '05, and it's been downhill from there. It makes me think that someone is coaching him to "pitch to contact" and he's taking it too seriously.

If Sowers's K rate is still in the 4 or 5 per nine innings range after 2007, yeah, you should be concerned. If that happens, though, the rest of his performance may put him back in the minors.

Q: My eyes tell me that Ozzie Guillen (and to an extent, Ron Gardenhire) manages his pitching staff very well, while Eric Wedge does not. Is that simply frustration, or is there a way to measure this?

JS: You can measure it by looking at a stat called leverage . It basically analyzes how close the game is for the pitcher's average appearance; you can see the Indians 2006 stats here . Note that Rafael Betancourt, Bob Wickman, and Fausto Carmona were the highest, while Matt Miller and Edward Mujica were really low.

Theoretically, the best results should come from putting your best pitchers in the highest-leverage situations (tie games, one-run leads, etc.) rather than less important spots. No manager is great at this, but Wedge didn't do a very good job of it last year. Some of that isn't his fault, though: at times, he didn't have a lot of good options or, at least, nobody knew exactly who the good options were.