2006 Spring Training Preview Part I : The Starting Rotation

2006 Spring Training Preview Part II : The Bullpen

Contrary to the past three Spring Training's, the nine everyday starters are already known going into camp.
The starting lineup returns eight of the nine regulars from last season, with the only departed player being Coco Crisp who was dealt away in an offseason trade. While returning eight of your nine regulars may be a positive from a stability standpoint, considering that Aaron Boone and Casey Blake will still be regulars at least to start the season has to be a concern.

There will be no position battles to watch, but players like Ben Broussard, Aaron Boone and Casey Blake better not get too comfortable because they can and should be replaced rather quickly this season if they start off anywhere near as bad as they did in 2005. At the outset these guys will be the starters at their respective positions. The only battles that will take place will be on the bench, but this will be covered in the next (and final) installment of the Indians Spring preview on SwerbsBlurbs.com.

Last year, after a slow start to the season, the Indians offense picked it up in June. The change in offensive fortunes was a combined result of firing hitting

coach Eddie Murray and replacing him from within with Derek Shelton, and having several players get out of their April/May slumps by facing some bad pitching. In 2006, the AL Central is loaded with very good starting pitching, and the division may arguably have 4 of the top 10 starting rotations in baseball. Offense may be a little harder to come by, so situational hitting will be an even bigger key this season.

Barring any injuries or unforeseen trades here is a thorough look going into Spring Training of what the lineup and bench should look like when the Indians break camp.

Projected 2006 Batting Order (prior year stats in parentheses):

1. Grady Sizemore CF (.289, 22 HRs, 81 RBIs)
2. Jason Michaels (.304, 4 HRs, 31 RBIs)
3. Jhonny Peralta SS (.292, 24 HRs, 78 RBIs)
4. Travis Hafner DH (.305, 33 HRs, 108 RBIs)
5. Victor Martinez C (.305, 20 HRs, 80 RBIs)
6. Ron Belliard 2B (.284, 17 HRs, 78 RBIs)
7. Ben Broussard 1B (.255, 19 HRs, 68 RBIs)
8. Casey Blake RF (.241, 23 HRs, 58 RBIs)
9. Aaron Boone 3B (.243, 16 HRs, 60 RBIs)

C: Victor Martinez

In 2004, Martinez emerged as one of the future stars of the league and since then has arguably become the leader of the team. He is an infectious player due to his love for the game and beaming smile, and his attitude and leadership qualities are very similar to former fan-favorite Carlos Baerga. In his first full season in 2004, Martinez was named to the All-Star team and compiled a .283 batting average with 23 HRs, 108 RBIs, and an .851 OPS. He followed that up in 2005 by hitting .305 with 20 HRs, 80 RBIs and an .853 OPS.

Victor's 2005 season was really a season of two different halves. Before the All-Star break, Victor struggled hitting only .236 with 9 HRs and 35 RBIs, along with a .692 OPS. He has always been known as a slow starter, but the fact it took until early July for him to turn his season around was a big concern among Indians fans and front office personnel. Thankfully, Martinez quelled those concerns after the All-Star break as Victor was one of the hottest second-half hitters in baseball

hitting .380 with 11 HRs and 45 RBIs, and a 1.027 OPS. His resurgence in the second half helped carry the team in the chase for a Wildcard berth while Travis Hafner missed time due to injury.

Victor's jump in batting average from .283 to .305 was a result of him being more effective against right-handed pitching. In 2004 and 2005 he hit .283 and .319 respectively versus righties, while hitting .282 and .274 respectively versus lefties. He also put up a .902 OPS against righties, but only a .743 OPS against lefties. Victor did experience a drop in RBI production from 108 to 80, even though he played in 6 more games and had 31 more plate appearances in 2005. The drop in RBI production is attributable to a decrease in chances, as he had 164 at bats in 2004 with Runners In Scoring Position (RISP) but only 139 at bats with RISP in 2005. Along with less RBI opportunities, Martinez had a decline in batting average with RISP as he hit .305 in 2004, but dropped to .273 in 2005. The combination of a 32 point drop in batting average with RISP along with 25 less at bats with RISP led to the 28 RBI drop from 2004 to 2005. Even still, Victor has proven to be a clutch hitter as he hit .311 with runners on base in 2005, and with 2-outs and a RISP he hit a good .270 (.272 in 2004). Late in close ballgames, Victor came through often hitting .372 with 3 HRs and 19 RBIs in 86 at bats.

Known as a hitter throughout his minor league career where he was a league MVP twice (2001 Kinston and 2002 Akron), Martinez is still considered somewhat of a liability behind the plate. His actual defense is not a problem, but his inability to stop a running game and consistently throw out runners will always crop up as a problem late in close ballgames. The last two seasons, he has a poor 25% (2004) and 23% (2005) throw out percentage of attempted basestealers. Some of this is due to the pitchers themselves, as people who watched regularly know Victor was in a losing battle at throwing out runners when guys like Bob Wickman or Kevin Millwood were on the mound. At some point, the Indians could try a position switch with him to 1B, but such a change shouldn't happen for several more years, if it even does.

In 2006, Martinez will be looked upon to repeat his numbers from the last two seasons and be an important contributer in the middle of the lineup. More importantly, he needs to be more consistent the entire season as the Indians cannot afford to have Victor searching for his hitting stroke like they did from April until early July last year.

1B: Ben Broussard

Broussard will go into the 2006 season as the primary starter at 1B, even after a very so-so season in 2005. After a very solid 2004 season where he hit .275 with 17 HRs and 82 RBIs (in only 418 at bats), Broussard fell off some last year hitting only .255 with 19 HRs and 68 RBIs (in 466 at bats). His performance in 2005 was a disappointment, especially after Broussard appeared ready for a breakout season after his torrid final four months in 2004 in which he hit .290 with 16 HRs and 64 RBI. In the end, Broussard's streakiness at the plate drove fans crazy, which ended up in him catching the wrath of many Indians fans.

While Broussard was very frustrating to watch many times, he wasn't AS BAD as a lot of fans made him out to be. Among MLB firstbasemen in 2005, Broussard ranked 18th in batting average, 20th in on-base%, 14th in slugging%, 16th in OPS, tied for 19th in RBIs, tied for 18th in HRs, and tied for 20th in runs created. Broussard ranked right in the middle of the pack, and did that with roughly 150 less at bats than many of the guys above him. Broussard isn't Jim Thome, but he ain't the Cleveland version of Keith Hernandez either. He probably is Paul Sorrento, which is a serviceable player who can compliment the lineup if used right. Signing Eduardo Perez to platoon with Broussard should help him improve in areas such as batting average and OPS this season since he should be used almost exclusively against righties.

Against right-handed pitching the last three years, Broussard has been decent. From 2003-2005, he has combined to hit .264 with an .813 OPS against righties. Looking at some of his splits, Broussard was consistently average pre and post All-Star break, hitting .255 with 9 HRs, 36 RBIs and a .750 OPS before, and hitting .257 with 10 HRs, 32 RBIs and an .800 OPS after. Broussard was all over the place situationally, as he struggled with none on base (.228 avg), hit okay with runners on (.288), but again struggled with RISP (.224). He was at his best when there was a runner on 1B only, as he hit .365 with a 1.043 OPS in 96 at bats.

How long Broussard keeps a hold on the 1B job is anyone's guess with Ryan Garko waiting in the wings at Buffalo, and highly touted prospects like Michael Aubrey, Stephen Head, and Ryan Mulhern all at AA or higher. Broussard does provide a serviceable bat and a steady glove, so he should be a fixture in the lineup against righties at least for the 2006 season. Now that Broussard is in his arbitration years and making $2.5M instead of around major league minimum at $300K, the Indians will be less patient with him going forward.

2B: Ronnie Belliard

Belliard was a guy no one heard about going into the 2004 season, but after a hot start that year (he hit .417 in April) he quickly became a fan favorite because of his hustle, attitude and unique defensive alignments. Belliard's very good first half in 2004 brought him All-Star honors, and while he didn't make the All-Star team in 2005, he had his best season to date. After hitting .282 with 12 HRs, 70 RBIs and a .774 OPS in 2004, he topped that with his best season as a professional in 2005 by hitting .284 with 17 HRs, 78 RBIs and a .775 OPS.

Belliard was consistent all season, hitting .283 with 8 HRs, 34 RBIs and a .741 OPS before the All-Star break, and then hitting .284 with 9 HRs, 44 RBIs and an .811 OPS after it. He stayed at .281-.300 every month except for August when he hit .255, and his best month was September when he hit .303 wth 5 HRs, 16 RBIs and a .920 OPS. His performance in September 2005 was a complete turnaround from his late season decline in 2004 where he finished the season on a down note hitting .188 with 4 HRs and 9 RBIs in the final 32 games. With RISP, Belliard was average hitting only .259, and he dipped to .242 with RISP with 2 outs.

Belliard's glovework the past two season's has gotten notice (anyone who remembers the play against Tampa the final week of the season with Cliff Lee on the hill will attest to that), and he has been so good that he arguably was the 2nd best defensive 2B in the American League last year. With 2005 Gold Glove winner Orlando Hudson now in the National League, Belliard has to be a favorite for the American League Gold Glove award at 2B.

Among MLB 2B, Belliard finished the 2005 season 12th in batting average and OPS, 7th in HRs, and 5th in RBIs. The Indians rewarded that production by picking up his $4M team option for 2006. Like Broussard, however, Belliard's stay in Cleveland could be short as it appears it is unlikely he'll be retained after the 2006 season. For whatever reason, Indians GM Mark Shapiro in public comments has alluded to a long-term deal as something of unimportance to him at this time. Belliard could change that thinking if he has another very good season, and with the dearth of talent in the system at SS and 2B, letting Belliard go without a viable solution to replace him in 2007 might be a big risk to take.

SS: Jhonny Peralta

The SS position was one that was watched with close detail by the front office and fans in Spring Training and throughout the season last year. Peralta was the most inexperienced player on the roster in 2005, and was not pressured to produce

immediately as he was relegated to the 9th spot in the batting order. Not much was expected other than to be reliable defensively and contribute from time to time offensively. Not only that, but Peralta had the unenviable task of replacing Cleveland legend Omar Vizquel.

By the end of the season, he made a lot of people forget about Omar.

Gone was the flashy defense, but in was the powerful offense. He was very under-rated defensively, as he displayed good quickness in the field and a powerful arm from the hole between SS and 3B. But offense was his strongpoint. After a sluggish start in April, Peralta gained confidence as the season wore on and established himself as one of the top offensive shortstops in baseball hitting .292 with 24 HRs, 78 RBIs and an .886 OPS in his first full season in the big leagues. His production came in roughly 150 less at bats than a normal starting player would get as he had only 504 at bats because he platooned with Alex Cora early in the season.

After a subpar April where he hit .222 with 1 HR, 4 RBIs and a .738 OPS in only 45 at bats, he took off in May hitting .309 with 5 HRs, 13 RBIs and a .967 OPS. The Indians quickly learned that Peralta was ready for fulltime SS duties, and eventually shipped Cora out early July. Peralta continued his effectiveness the rest of the season hitting .280 or better every month, and posting an OPS over .865 every month but one. July was one of Peralta's biggest months as he and Victor Martinez helped pick up the slack offensively when Hafner was out due to injury. He hit .333 with 6 HRs, 19 RBIs, and a .971 OPS, and established himself as probably the Indians #3 hitter in the lineup the next 4 – 5 years. Peralta also was one of the Indians best clutch hitters, hitting .302 with RISP, and .313 with RISP with two outs.

Going into 2006, Jhonny is an integral piece to the team as he along with Martinez, Hafner and Sizemore are the core of the offense. Peralta should be eligible for arbitration after the 2006 season as a Super 2 player, and the Indians control Peralta at least through the 2010 season. Reportedly, the Indians are in negotiations with Peralta and his agent on a long-term deal which should carry him through his arbitration years. Hafner and Martinez struggled early in their 2005 sophomore seasons, so it will be interesting to see how Peralta (and Sizemore) perform early on this season. One year does not prove a player, but a lot of times two very good seasons in a row can prove you have something special. Whether Peralta is the next Miguel Tejada, or just another Alex Gonzalez

should be proven this season.

3B: Aaron Boone

Prior to Spring Training last year, the last time most of us saw Boone was in his home run trot around the bases in the 2003 ALCS when he eliminated the Red Sox with his Game 7 home run in extra innings. Since then, Boone's career took a severe turn. Before the 2004 season even started, he tore his ACL in a pickup basketball game, had his contract with the Yankees voided because of a clause that stated he should not partake in such activities, was signed by the Indians mid-summer of 2004 and then proceeded to miss the entire 2004 season recovering from the injury.

Some might say his bat missed the 2005 season due to injury, as he was very bad in 2005 hitting .243 with 16 HRs, 60 RBIs and an atrocious .677 OPS. Boone had competition from Casey Blake for Worst Indian….hell, Worst Player In Baseball in 2005, but Boone was clearly the weakest link on the team in 2005. Much has been said that he wasn't 100% when the season started, and it takes time to recover from an injury, but Boone was awful the first three months….so bad, that on June 3rd he was hitting .151 on the year. Boone was struggling so bad, he might not have cracked .200 against some of the pitchers in the Little League World Series. Why was he still employed? His $3M salary had a lot to do with it, and there being no alternative in-house solution to replace him with. So Indians fans were treated with the pleasure of watching him flail away miserably at the plate for half a season, and just being mediocre the other half.

Going into 2006, the Indians have options to replace him and MUCH less patience with him. If Boone hits .123 in April again like he did in 2005, he should be in the unemployment line and newly acquired big-time prospect Andy Marte should be the starting 3B. If he isn't, Shapiro needs to get his head examined and they need to revoke the 2005 Executive of the Year accolades rained upon him last fall. With Andy Marte now on hand (more on him in the Buffalo preview), the Indians should give Boone the quick hook in the event he struggles early on.

After his rough 2005 season, according to numerous reports, all signs point to Boone being healthy and ready to contribute in 2006 for the Indians. He did show signs in 2005 that it is possible that he can maybe get back to his career norms, which is about a .265 average and about 18-20 HRs and 70-80 RBIs a season. After hitting .157 with 4 HRs and 15 RBIs combined in April and May, from June

1st through the rest of the season he hit .278 with 12 HRs and 45 RBIs. If he did what he did from June on last year and approached his career norms, the bottom of the lineup would be much improved this season.

DH: Travis Hafner

Offensive efficiency and production is generally gauged by a player's OPS, which combines a player's on-base% and slugging%. In 2004, Hafner's .993 OPS was surpassed in all of baseball by only nine other players, and in 2005 he was even better as he posted a 1.003 OPS, good for 4th best in all of baseball. On the season, he hit .305 with 33 HRs and 108 RBIs in 2005.

Hafner is an elite hitter, and seems to only be getting better. Hafner was in the top 10 in the AL in categories such as batting average, home runs, RBIs, walks, slugging%, on-base% and OPS. He also was hit by pitches 17 times, tying him for the AL lead. Lefthanders neutralized him somewhat holding him to a .269 average and .868 OPS, but he made up for it against righthanders posting a .321 average and 1.062 OPS. His production across the board offensively led to him finishing in the top 5 in the AL MVP voting last fall.

Hafner’s situational hitting in 2005 was impressive. In just about every situation, he hit .300 or better. Whether it was with runners on (.306), RISP (.333), RISP with two out (.328), man on 3rd less than two out (.308), close and late (.300), and the bases loaded (.300), Hafner came through. Even more impressive, his OPS in all those situations was .998 or better. Obviously, Hafner was the Indians best clutch hitter as he actually had better at bats when runners were on base as teams could not pitch around him.

An elbow injury has limited Hafner to spot duty at 1B the last two years, 12 games total in 2004 and 2005. Hafner is considered a liability in the field defensively, and may be too important offensively to risk playing him in the field. Going forward, the Indians plan to use him a little more at 1B to let Victor Martinez DH so they don’t lose Martinez’s bat when he needs a rest from behind the plate.

Hafner signed a 3 year deal for $7M last April, and is under the team’s control through the 2008 season. His emergence has helped to stabilize the middle of the Indians lineup, and he should hit in the 3rd or 4th spot in the lineup for at least the next three years. Hafner is one of the most important cogs of the offense and it is imperative that he stays healthy because of the production he provides. If

Hafner continues to improve at the plate, the Indians will no doubt benefit in the win column and Hafner may even win an MVP.

Up Next: The outfielders and bench.

Coming Soon: Pitching and lineup previews for minor league affiliates Buffalo, Akron, Kinston and Lake County.