Some exciting stuff for you today.

Michael Brantley and his agent Josh Kusnick will be on Smoke Signals tonight, a radio show hosted by myself and Paul Cousineau.

The show starts at 9:30pm ET and will run for 60-90 minutes.

Josh will answer questions from us as well as take calls from fans on anything they want to talk about, and Brantley will be on for an on-air interview.

The phone number to call is 646-716-8012.
As a reminder, for those that cannot listen live at the hyperlink provided above, the show is podcasted and can be downloaded and listened to at anytime by visiting the same hyperlink.

It took almost three months, but the player to be named later in the C.C. Sabathia trade that went down on July 8th finally became known this past Friday when the Indians decided on outfielder Michael Brantley.

As was rumored right from the start, the player to be named came down to a list of two players:

Brantley and infielder Taylor Green.

Contrary to other reports, the list never involved any additional players such as Jonathan Lucroy, Alcides Escobar, Lorenzo Cain, Jeremy Jeffress, and so on.
Indians GM Mark
Shapiro said it on the day of the trade that the list was only two players they had to choose from, and they had until the end of the season to decide.

While Shapiro did not hint at who the players were, reports immediately came about within hours of the trade that it was a choice between Brantley and Green and that the Indians would use the next two months to scout the two players.

In the end, that is exactly what happened.

The Milwaukee Brewers sent outfielder/first baseman Matt LaPorta, right-hander Rob Bryson, and left-hander Zach Jackson to the Indians on the day of the trade, and the player to be named was always considered to be the second best player the Indians would receive in the deal. At only 21 years of age, Brantley has raced up the prospect rankings and climbed the minor league ladder quickly to where he just finished his second season - his first full season - at Double-A Huntsville where he hit .319 with 4 HR, 40 RBI, 28 stolen bases, and a .793 OPS in 106 games.

When he opens next season in Triple-A Columbus, he won't turn 22 until mid-May, almost two months into the season. Brantley was in line to be a sure-fire Brewers top ten rated prospect going into next year, and in a much stronger and deeper Indians system is a borderline top ten guy.

Brantley is currently out in Arizona at the new Goodyear complex, and after completing a physical on Monday is already running drills and taking instruction out in the Fall Instructional League. With the trade becoming finalized, it brought to an end a whirlwind second half of the season for him where since the Sabathia trade speculation placed him as the front-runner in the player to be named sweepstakes.

"I was waking up to texts every morning for the last couple months from my buddies asking if I had been traded because they heard I had," said Brantley in a phone interview on Tuesday afternoon. "I had not heard anything so it was a little distracting, but at the same time you just have to push it to the side and focus on what is in front of you right now.

The last couple of days [before the trade was announced] were kind of hectic.

I had a couple indications from teammates who were sending me some texts and from the rumors that were out there on the Internet.

But other than that I just tried moving forward and kept working hard."

When the news of the Indians decision on who to pick as the player to be named finally became official in the early afternoon last Friday, Brantley had already been notified by the Brewers earlier that morning and had talked to the Indians. Brantley received the word when he got a phone call from Milwaukee Brewers Vice President and Assistant General Manager Gord Ash.

"I got a call from the front office," said Brantley. "They called my trainer that was with me out in the Arizona Fall League and told me to be around my phone in about ten minutes. Gord Ash actually called me and told me to just kind of hang tight and wait for the phone call and that is what I did."

Now that he has become official property of the Cleveland Indians, so far Brantley likes what he has seen and heard of his new organization.

"I really did not know what to expect [when I got here]," said Brantley. "I heard Cleveland was a great organization, and I have a couple of buddies out here who were

obviously traded here before me and they told me they were happy as well.

So when I came here I got to meet all the staff and it has been a great experience."

Brantley brings a much needed asset to the organization that had been missing in the upper levels of the system, which is a bona fide leadoff hitting prospect. Outfielder Trevor Crowe was always thought to be that guy, but with his inconsistent play and injuries over the past three seasons his standing in the organization has slipped.

Crowe is still viewed as a good leadoff candidate, but prior to Brantley's arrival he was really the only one in the system.

Now the Indians have two very good leadoff hitters as prospects, and arguably a better option now with Brantley.

At 21 years of age, Brantley has displayed an elite level approach at the plate striking out just 27 times in 420 at bats this past season, and ranked second in the entire minor leagues with a strikeout per plate appearance ratio of 17.7 (27 K in 479 PA). In his four year minor league career, Brantley has struck out just 142 times in 1633 total plate appearances (11.5 AB/K).

While he has only drawn 199 walks in his career, he has an extraordinary ability to consistently put the bat on the ball.

Along with his plus speed, Brantley appears to be the number one option to supplant outfielder Grady Sizemore from atop his leadoff perch in the Indians lineup in the near future.

The Indians just days ago admitted that Sizemore someday soon will ultimately slide to the three-hole in the batting order.

Is it coincidence that this was mentioned shortly after the arrival of Brantley?

I think not.

The Indians have been waiting for a player to come along to plug into the leadoff spot in place of Sizemore, and Brantley might be the guy.

The ability to make contact at a high rate and hit for a high average is a skill rarely found in baseball this day and age. His hand-eye coordination has also been put on display in more sports than just baseball as Brantley played basketball and golf growing up, and was actually a pretty good golfer in high school where he typically shot in the low 80s.

Whether this is simply an innate ability he has always had, or is the payoff from all the hard work he and his father - former major league outfielder Mickey Brantley - put in, it is a skill he has grown accustomed to having.

"Honestly, it just came from playing baseball so much," said Brantley. "From

always working with my father day in and day out and him being such a great help.

I can't thank him enough for that.

But it is an approach I used growing up as a kid and I have kind of stuck with it and it has been working for me so far."

Of course, the ability to hit for a high average and put the ball in play at such a ridiculous level comes at a price. That price is the result of some poor power numbers as he only had 23 extra base hits this past season in 420 at bats, and in his minor league career has just 66 extra base hits in 1392 at bats. It should be noted that Brantley probably would have fared much better in the extra base hit department this year had he not suffered an ankle injury in early July which hindered him the rest of the season.

Prior to the injury he was on pace for about 25-26 doubles and 6-7 home runs, but in the almost two months of play after the injury he had just two doubles, two triples and no home runs.

"Brantley is a well rounded player who possesses speed and solid defense with an above average bat," said a National League scout I spoke to earlier in the week. "He's athletic and can play at any of the outfield spots. Naturally, you can delve into his gene pool and that his bat is a strong tool. He projects open next year at Triple-A and is not far away from his major league debut.

He should be a doubles type hitter as his power could develop along the way."

Brantley is listed at 6'2" and 180 pounds, but this is actually his height and weight when he was drafted at 18 years old. He is now just a shade under 6'3" and is 195 pounds and expected to get even bigger. He certainly has the body to be more powerful as he is hardly built like a 5'8" 160-pound "slap-hitter", but for him to become more powerful and drive the ball more consistently into the gaps it all depends on his bat speed and strength in his hands and arms.

Brantley has sacrificed some of that bat speed in order to make more consistent contact, so if he can continue to mature and grow into his body and also learn how to speed up his bat without taking too much away from his bat-to-ball ability, he could become a special player.

"Absolutely," said Brantley. "I think the older I get, the stronger I get, the more mature I get, and the more time I get at the plate everything will come full circle.

I truly believe that, and as long as I keep working hard and stay healthy the sky is the limit and hopefully everything will work out."

Brantley likely will never be a guy who projects to 20+ home run ability, although some of the Indians comments since their announcement of the trade imply that they think he could have that ability down the road. Brantley's best comp may be as a Kenny Lofton type offensive player, a hitter who can pound the gaps and hit the occasional home run and pile up 40-50 extra

base hits in a season. It should be noted, Lofton's best season total in the big leagues for extra base hits was 1994 and 1996 when he had 53, and he never broke 50 in any other season. And, if you look at their minor league career numbers to date, there are some strong similarities:

Brantley's Minor League Career (Age 18-21):
383 games, 1392 AB, 53 2B, 7 3B, 6 HR, 199 BB, 142 K, 104 SB, .311/.399/.372/.771

Lofton's Minor League Career (Age 21-24):
363 games, 1423 AB, 46 2B, 24 3B, 6 HR, 159 BB, 266 K, 168 SB, .300/.370/.379/.749

In no way is this to say Brantley will be the second coming of Lofton because Lofton is a borderline Hall of Famer, was just an incredible defensive outfielder, and was a more advanced threat on the bases. That said, at least at the plate Brantley has the potential to be everything Lofton was, and those fans of the Indians teams in the 90s know just how important he was at the top of the lineup to those teams. One scout I talked to in the past week even suggested that the haul of LaPorta and Brantley for Sabathia " *could* very well become the 2000's version of Belle/Lofton".

Boy, wouldn't that be nice.

At 6'3", athletic, and with plus speed, Brantley moves like a gazelle out in the outfield (Devon White anyone?). He has had trouble getting good jumps on balls which has limited his range somewhat, and he has an average to below average arm, so he will never be an elite defensive outfielder. Even still, after the Brewers messed around with Brantley at three different positions in left field, center field and first base, the Indians plan to focus on keeping Brantley in center field. He still projects to be at least an average to above average defender and will continue to work hard on improving defensively.

"It doesn't really matter to me [where I play]," said Brantley. "I'll play wherever it is going to help the Indians the best.

I was told I would be playing the outfield again and not so much first base and they would keep me primarily in center.

At least that's my understanding right now.

They have been straight up with me so far and told me what I need to work on and that is what I am going to do.

I have been working very hard the last few days out here with them, and I have been training real hard to improve.

I just love playing the outfield and just love playing baseball."

Brantley made the rare jump in 2007 from Low-A to Double-A when he was promoted mid-season after he hit .335 with 2 HR, 32 RBI, 18 stolen bases and an .854 OPS in 56 games at Single-A West Virginia. A lot of players may go right from short-season ball to High-A and skip Low-A altogether, but very few skip High-A completely like Brantley did.

The Brewers decision to push Brantley right to Double-A was a clear indication of how far along they felt he was as a prospect and how important he was to the organization.

Although he struggled some the rest of the 2007 season at Double-A Huntsville hitting .251 with 0 HR, 21 RBI, 17 stolen bases and a .647 OPS in 59 games, he returned there this past season and impressed enough to where he finished the year as one of the Southern League's Top 20 Prospects per Baseball America .

"I actually never went to High-A, so I went from Low-A to Double-A last year in 2007," said Brantley. "That was actually the biggest jump I ever had and highest hurdle I had to get over. I learned so much that season and just built from it, and obviously the next season I had was a lot better than the first time I stopped at Double-A for half a season. So I just learned so much and it was a tough transition.

I agree with what they say about Double-A as it was the real deal and it was a good experience for me."

As a player moves up the minor league ladder the competition obviously gets better and better, and according to Brantley the pitching was the hardest thing to adjust to when he first got the call to Double-A Huntsville.

"The pitchers are pretty much the same, but they are smarter," said Brantley. "They mix up their pitches better, their breaking balls are better, their changeups are better and their location is a little better.

As a hitter you have to recognize that, and then adjust from there.

The game is about adjustments, and the faster you can do it the quicker you can move up."

One of the big advantages Brantley has at his disposal is his father Mickey Brantley is a former major league player. The elder Brantley played four seasons in the majors and a total of 11 seasons professionally, and recently was the hitting coach for the Blue Jays.

Growing up around a major league clubhouse and having a former player as an in-home hitting instructor has been a big help along with way for him.

"That is a huge advantage," said Brantley about his father being a former major leaguer and hitting coach. "He was a big league hitting coach for a couple years. We

used to work on everything together and improve my swing after workouts everyday.

I can't thank him enough as I always had someone to talk to about the situations that I went through throughout the season in the good times and tough times.

He is always there for me, and he has experience with it and he is just a quick phone call away."

Brantley's father was the player who gave way to Ken Griffey Jr. when he made his debut in the big leagues as a 19-year old kid in 1989. Both Brantley and Griffey Jr. were close, and the younger Brantley idolized him as a child and still does today.

"He was my biggest idol growing up," said Brantley of Griffey Jr. "Ken Griffey would come to the house all the time as a kid since he and my dad were real close at the time since they were playing together.

So that was one reason he was my idol growing up, and he is still my idol and I still love watching him play because he is such a great player."

At the moment, Brantley is going to continue to hang out at the Goodyear complex until Fall Instructional League wraps up next week. By then he should know whether or not he will be going to the Arizona Fall League (AFL) to play on the Surprise Rafters roster.

The reason this is still up in the air is because the Indians already have used their full allotment of players to send to the AFL, but since Brantley was slated to participate with the Brewers organization a special exception is being looked into in order to put him on the taxi-squad (only active every Wednesday and Saturday).

If Brantley does not go to the AFL, he would likely play somewhere else this winter to get some at bats either in the Dominican Republic or Venezuela, although it is possible he could go home for the winter to get some much needed rest before he reports to the Indians Winter Development Program this January at Progressive Field.

Brantley will go to big league camp this spring, and while he will not be in any position to win a job out of camp due to the crowded outfield situation above him and not being on the 40-man roster, a strong performance would give a lasting impression on Indians GM Mark Shapiro and manager Eric Wedge to consider him for a callup if needed later in the season. His days as a minor leaguer may be numbered, and his major league career could be here before he knows it.

Photo courtesy of John Blackwell