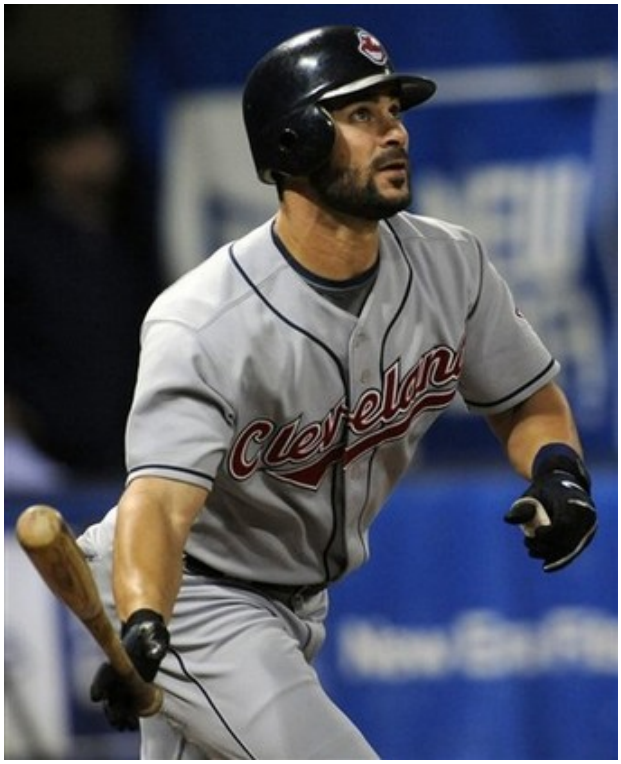
It's been a very popular argument in our Indians message board over the course of the last week. How responsible is manager Eric Wedge for the disappointing starts to the season by many of the Indians key players? One thing we know Wedge is responsible for each night is the lineup card, and it has been mind boggling trying to figure out why he continues to start David Dellucci and Ben Francisco every night over guys like Matt LaPorta and Luis Valbuena. Paulie C can't understand it either, and writes about it in his latest.



In the maelstrom that is swirling regarding the immediate future of The Atomic Wedgie, I started thinking about what indicators are really out there that are widely apparent to the everyday fan in terms of evaluating a manager without knowing the inner workings of a ball club. Obviously, there is a "tone" set for a team that comes from a manager that should bear out in the games, but exactly how the "tone" comes from the manager or the "attitude" that is set by the manager is a fairly ambiguous unit of measure.

Does it look like this Indians' team is buying into the "respect the game", "do the little things" product that Wedge is selling?

Certainly not, but how much of that is on Wedge and how much is on the players is not exactly easy to determine if you're going by what the manager can literally control by his decisions on a day-to-day basis.

That is, how much of a bearing does Wedge's managerial style have on Grady striking out a lot or Asdrubal looking like an All-Star? Isn't that more on the player

than it is anyone doing much more than coaching them (which, as fans, we can only make assumptions on) and putting them into a particular place on the lineup card?

Does Wedge have control of Peralta looking lost at the plate any more than he does on Victor looking as good as he has offensively in his career?

What I'm getting at is that the manager can only tangibly control certain things on a team that is easily seen from the stands or from the couch, with everything else ultimately falling on the players decided upon by the manager who puts them into certain situations.

To me, the things that an MLB manager controls that is easy for anyone to see would be the setting of a lineup, the management of a bullpen and in-game situational decisions like bunting, when to execute a hit-and-run, pinch-hitting, pinch-running, etc.

Things beyond that, at least in my opinion, are dictated by the players between the lines with the manager essentially functioning as the person in charge of ideally placing those players in the best possible situation to succeed or by putting the best players on the field or on the mound as much as possible to optimize success for the team.

Getting back to Wedge then, I think it's pretty safe to assume at this point that to blame him for the meltdown in the bullpen is more than a little misplaced as Wedge is trying whatever mix of players he thinks might be remotely successful, burned by the same pitchers who may have thrown three excellent innings prior to a meltdown. His handling of the relievers can be excused if only because I'd like to see an assertion that the handling of the bullpen has been the problem and not the pitchers that make up the bullpen.

Beyond the bullpen, truthfully, I'm not that interested in debating individual game decisions as calling for a bunt versus not calling for a bunt or executing a hit-and-run versus not calling for one usually balance themselves out over a long season. It may make for interesting at-the-moment conversation and debate, but the long-term effect of one individual move, to me at least, shake out in the wash over 162 games.

Some things work, some things don't...let's move on.

Filling out the lineup card, however, has been more of the issue with Wedge...particularly recently. The offense this year has been uneven at best, as easily capable of 9-run outburst as much as it is a long stretch of futility. Obviously, this isn't that much of a surprise given that EVERY team goes through the ups and downs of the season.

What has been interesting is the way that Wedge has defended his struggling players, asserting that the players that remain in the everyday lineup "have a track record of success" in MLB that earns them the benefit of the doubt. With some of the struggling players, this is certainly true:

Grady has earned the benefit of the doubt...

Peralta has earned the benefit of the doubt...

DeRosa has earned the benefit of the doubt...

The line ends there, though, as Ben Francisco and Dave Dellucci...they have not.

And with the presence of a couple of highly-touted prospects now on the team and not waiting for the call in AAA, there has been absolutely no reason for either to start a game since May 3rd, when Matt LaPorta and Luis Valbuena were called up from Columbus.

No reason, you say?

I know I've laid this out there before, but here are some pertinent statistics for each of those players.

Ben Francisco in his first 19 games in 2008

.365 BA / .397 OBP / .619 SLG / 1.016 OPS in 63 AB

Ben Francisco since those 19 games through Monday's game

.249 BA / .322 OBP / .399 SLG / .721 OPS in 481 AB

Now, if The Ben Francisco Treat were showing signs of life after dovetailing last year, maybe an argument could be made for him to get even a sporadic start. But

for the player on the team with the lowest OPS of anyone on the team not named Jhonny Peralta with more than 50 plate appearances, it's time to relegate the Frisco Kid to the 4th OF role that he should have been a week and a half ago when LaPorta and Valbuena arrived.

As for the other culprit in stealing playing time from the youngsters (and being enabled by his skipper), let's examine what The Looch has put forth as an Indian. Before reading this, you should be warned that this may make you nauseous when you consider that the only numbers I'm putting up here (for the benefit of everyone involved) are those for Dellucci against RHP, the pitchers that he was brought to Cleveland EXCLUSIVELY to face because of his track record against RHP:

Dellucci 2007 vs. RHP

.240 BA / .306 OBP / .403 SLG / .703 OPS in 154 AB

Dellucci 2008 vs. RHP

.251 BA / .319 OBP / .426 SLG / .746 OPS in 319 AB

Dellucci 2009 vs. RHP

.259 BA / .310 OBP / .333 SLG / .644 OPS in 27 AB

Ready for the grand totals of The Looch, as an Indian, against RHP?

Drumroll, please...

.248 BA / .315 OBP / .414 SLG / .729 OPS in 500 AB

Again, that's taking OUT any AB against LHP that Dellucci is known to be incapable of hitting, that's ONLY against RHP, the very pitchers he was brought into hit.

Hit them...he has not, and his inclusion on the roster past the return of Travis Hafner (at the very latest) is a decision that should be apparent to anyone with even an elementary grasp of analysis.

That inclusion on the roster is to say nothing of his inclusion in the everyday lineup as he's started nine of the eleven games for the team since his return from AAA. Beyond the obvious frustration, why does the presence of his name on the lineup card game after game against RHP reek of bullheadedness?

Here's why:

Matt LaPorta in MiLB vs. RHP

.311 BA / .407 OBP / .626 SLG / 1.033 OPS in 441 AB

Is this against MiLB pitching?

Absolutely, but his OPS in the Minors against RHP is actually 254 points HIGHER than it is against LHP, so he's shown that he hits RHP better than LHP in the Minors and the idea that the level of performance that is known to come with Dellucci is going to outpace what may come from LaPorta gets to the whole crux of the issue.

That is, of course, that the Indians know (or at least they SHOULD know) what they have in Francisco and Dellucci. An OPS of .721 by Francisco in the 421 AB since his hot start last year pretty much tell us that Frisco is what he is, just as Dellucci's cumulative .729 OPS against RHP as an Indian give as much information as is needed to relegate these two to the bench or to some fishing boat in the Gulf of Mexico.

After the promotion of LaPorta and Valbuena, the assumption was that both Francisco and Dellucci would find themselves in reduced roles as the Indians are reticent to call up top prospects and are more than adverse to calling them up and sitting them, not even taking into consideration the issue of LaPorta's service time that he's accumulating on the bench.

Instead, both Francisco and Dellucci found themselves in the lineup as the youngsters found sporadic starts since the May 3rd promotion:

Francisco - 8 starts in 9 games
Dellucci - 7 starts in 9 games
LaPorta - 4 starts in 9 games
Valbuena - 4 starts in 9 games

It's one thing if Francisco or Dellucci have that one redeeming skill that keeps them on the field, but Dellucci's one alleged skill (the ability to hit RHP) is one that hasn't been exhibited now in 500 AB against said RHP and Francisco's defense, or lack thereof, would likely put him on the bench for most teams regardless of his lack of offense. Neither player has any compelling skill to see everyday action or even anything close to it.

Now, if you want to stash either on the bench for a rare PH opportunity or for Francisco's "ability" to play all three OF to allow the Indians to give someone a day off, that's fine. But with LaPorta and Valbuena on the team and with their success in AAA this year validating their status as likely everyday players in MLB, there's even less of a reason for either to play.

If you want to have the argument of what the lineup should look like (who should hit where), that's fine and have at it, but to me the construction of a lineup falls well below the content of the lineup in terms of how the offense can succeed...and the lineup of players that puts this team in the best position to win doesn't include Francisco or Dellucci.

The lineup of players that puts this team in the best position to win right now looks something like this:

Shoppach/Martinez - C
Martinez/LaPorta/Garko/DeRosa - 1B
Cabrera//Carroll- 2B
Peralta/Cabrera/Valbuena - SS
DeRosa/Peralta/Valbuena/Carroll - 3B
LaPorta/DeRosa - LF
Sizemore - CF
Choo/DeRosa - RF
LaPorta/Garko - DH

That's it and there are hundreds of ways that those player combinations can bear themselves out and hundreds of ways to then find the right mix of players for the offense until consistency is achieved...but none of them include Francisco or Dellucci.

Now, in full disclosure, it should be noted that The Atomic Wedgie may be coming along to this line of thinking as per Castrovince's blog post last night prior to

the 9-4 win:

- *No Matt LaPorta again tonight. Wedge is sticking with his "regulars" (and David Dellucci is included in this mix), essentially because of the 40-minute players meeting that was held Saturday night. "These guys got together and looked each other in the eye the other night, and I want to give them a chance to stand behind it and do something about it," Wedge said.*
- *But it sounds as though that chance will last exactly two days, and the Indians already wasted one of them with Sunday's 5-3 loss. If things don't turn around tonight, expect some changes. Expect LaPorta to be in tomorrow's lineup, regardless, because left-hander Clayton Richard will be on the mound, but LaPorta might get a more extended look. And he might see time at first base, where he's been seeing regular time during pregame drills.*
- *Wedge might start playing Jhonny Peralta at third base and Mark DeRosa at first to get Luis Valbuena more time. He might use Ryan Garko at DH or in the outfield. He's expecting Jamey Carroll to be back any day now, and that will have an impact. Carroll, in fact, might be back as soon as tomorrow or Wednesday. Wedge said he'll talk to him after tonight's game.*

This whole "give the guys a chance" thing is fine if we're talking in a vacuum and it really did just affect Sunday and Monday's games, but there were a whole week of games prior to the players' only meeting, during which LaPorta and Valbuena were available to an already-scuffling club, that reek of Wedge's stubbornness to go with "the army he's gone to battle with before" without taking the performance of two of the components of that army into consideration.

Maybe it can be argued that the inclusion of Francisco and Dellucci had little bearing on the performance of the team recently, but with the team scuffling as it was (particularly offensively), their inclusion asserts a misplaced confidence on the part of the manager. That misplaced confidence on Wedge's part is one that's not new to Indians fans as Wedge's misplaced loyalties to average players that he knows come at the expense of the potential of players that Wedge does not know or perhaps trust. Again, these aren't a new development with Wedge's usage patterns with players, but the difference here with the continued playing time for Francisco and Dellucci has been that the options to replace them were already ON THE TEAM and not waiting for the call-up in AAA, and each represented an

immediate potential upgrade sitting in uniform in the clubhouse and on the bench.

Whether or not either LaPorta or Valbuena represents an upgrade remains to be seen but the bar isn't set that high for either to be an improvement over what Francisco and Dellucci were providing. The only thing keeping that potential improvement from occurring over the last week can be traced to Wedge's stubbornness, the same stubbornness that may serve as the grease in his chute out of town.