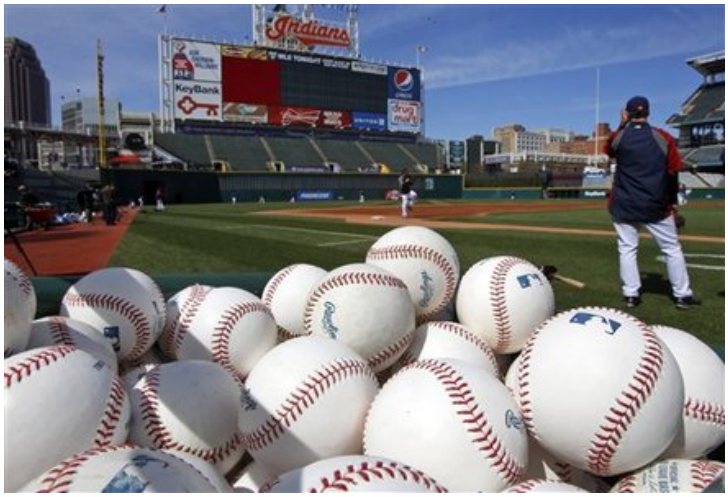


Last season, on this day I provided you with a unique preview of the Indians season. You can go anywhere to get a tradition

So in the same breath as last year, let's take a trip around the interwebs and check out other people are saying. The theme last year involved one central question. Can the Indians shock the world?al preview and by now, if you read this space often enough, I know you are an educated fan that doesn't need me to regurgitate the same stuff that's been going around all spring and what others have likely already said way better than I can.

Okay really, what were we thinking? In hindsight, it

makes sense to us that the Indians finished in second place. The White Sox fell apart, the Twins got rocked with injuries, and the Royals were the Royals. But if you remember when things started out, the Indians were shocking the world. They were the toast of the MLB town, the leaders in the AL Central until things regressed and Detroit started to take over.

The idea was to go around and see if anyone was picking the Indians to not win the division, but finish higher than fourth. There was one random CBSSports 'expert' that had less Twitter followers than I did at the time and he picked them third.

Even he was wrong about the Indians last year. Was the Indians finishing higher than fourth something that would "shock the world." Perhaps not, but winning the division might.

This year? Well, a lot of people have the Indians in the top two or three but in a sense, the could shock the world. They could topple the almighty Detroit Tigers, who everyone, and I'm not spouting hyperbole here. Everyone is picking the Tigers. If you've read the many previews, the Tigers are atop. And not to spoil the surprise of this entire article, but there isn't a single soul out there that has any faith in any other AL Central team.

So with that, let's go mainstream, where there surely isn't anyone that's going to buck the trend.

[GOING MAINSTREAM]

Buster Olney's AL Central preview is really ESPN's only expert ranking of the divisions. He has the Tigers first, obviously, with the Indians coming in third, right behind the Royals... Dive a little deeper and Olney will elaborate...

Best-case scenario: *Ubaldo Jimenez, who spent the offseason strengthening his core, rediscovers his fastball and his success of 2010 (19 8, 2.88 ERA). Jimenez, Justin Masterson and a dominant bullpen led by Vinnie Pestano rival Detroit's staff as the best in the division.* ***Worst-case scenario****: Jimenez is again plagued by control problems, and scouts label him -- and Cleveland's trade-deadline deal for him last July -- a bust. By year's end, the Indians' window for future success seems to be closing, and they rebuild all over again.*

Olney has the Indians very dependent on Ubaldo Jimenez, going as far as suggesting that if he doesn't turn things around, the Indians could close their window and start rebuilding. Ouch.

The rest of ESPN's 49 experts? You heard me, 49, giving true meaning to last year's statement "Everyone's an expert" as they increase from 46. They're all on the Tigers . I'm not kidding you. It was like the Boston/Philadelphia World Series matchup of doom that they all had last year. Last year you didn't know who to pick in the Central and now there is no one else for people to pick.

I'm starting to feel this is one of those exercises in futility. But I guess there is some jostling for second, third, fourth, even fifth, to discuss.

Yes, even fifth. More on that in a second, but the common theme seems to be second. The Indians probably pose the most "sure thing" among AL Central teams not named the Tigers. Most people will look at the other teams and have concerns, but with the Indians, they have a little bit of hitting, a little bit of defense, a little bit of pitching to make most people pick them second over everyone else.

Except for the gentlemen at Yahoo, who all pegged the Indians for 78-79 wins and third in the AL Central, twice behind the Royals, once behind a 80-win Twins team.

Over at CBSSports you have resident Indian lover of 2011 Al Melchior sticking with the Tribe at second, joined by just one other expert. Three more have the Tribe at third and two have them at fourth. We'll save the last remaining expert for later.

Everyone over at SI.com is on the Tigers as well and in Tom Verducci's projections, the Indians will repeat their 80 wins, but this time finish third behind the Royals.

In this AL Central Preview from the other day, I mentioned the numerous AL Central Preview headlines that all seemed to indicate the Tigers were not getting contested this year. Some of those headlined previews give us the following.

The AL Central preview from Anthony Castrovince and the AL Central beat-writers from last year was very informative, and the same format returned in 2012, but like everything else, it turned up Tigers. The writers picked the Best Lineup, Rotation, Bullpen, and Defense.

All Tigers, except for defense, which went to the Royals.

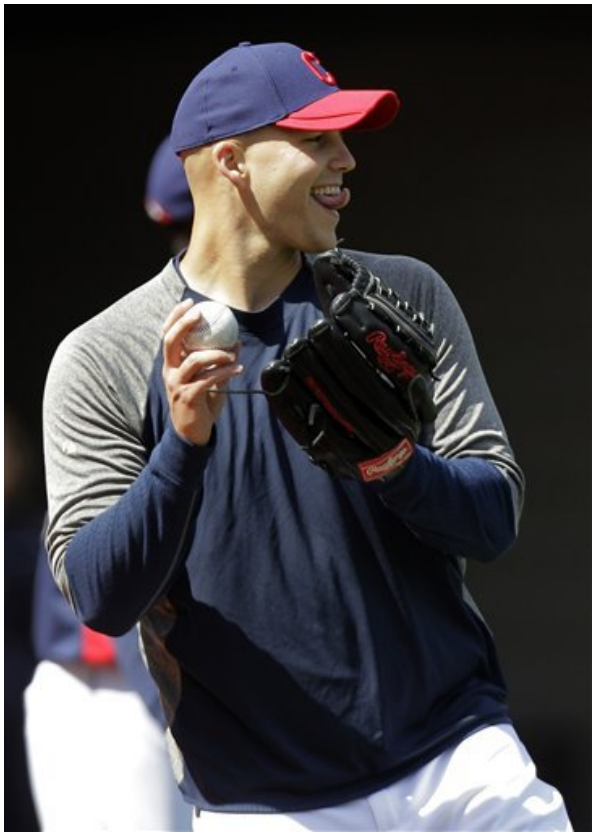
I have a problem with this. The Tigers bullpen is the best? Castrovince notes that the bullpen for the Indians can't match the established arms the Tigers have, but how quickly do we forget that they had the best pen in the Central last year? With the same pieces coming back, how can you

not give them the nod?

And the Tigers with the best rotation? I know it's banking off a lot but I'd almost pick the White Sox before I would pick the Tigers. Can I just pick Justin Verlander? I know Doug Fister had a good year, Max Scherzer can strike some people out and Rick Porcello is still young.

But sheesh, I could bring up so many other arguments against the Tigers that make the Indians and White Sox look just as good.

All this being said, the Indians were picked second, but this more than any preview gives a lot of not-worthy discussion.



[INDIAN LOVIN'] There are some fun things out there. Tim Brown of Yahoo picked Justin Masterson as his AL Cy Young "Long Shot". SI's Verducci has a video preview on the Cleveland Indians, calling them a sleeper team for 2012. There are some matters of no-love. How must Ubaldo Jimenez feel that Scott Baker beat him out on Sporting News' AL Central rotation. Baker is starting hurt for the Twins. Yup. He is their X-Factor though.

[BLOGGERS DELIGHT]

The most unique preview definitely came from one of my favorites, Big League Stew in which they had a conversation about the five teams, then gave some picks. The bloggers are where you will see the Indians really start off a good run of claiming second place.

You won't get that from HardballTalk (but you will get four more Tigers for AL Central picks), but you will get Craig Calcaterra's initial Power Rankings .

Craig has the Indians 17th saying that they'll surprise for a nice long stretch but also disappoint for a long stretch and finish behind the Tiger. Rinse and repeat. Based off the fact that the Royals are next at 19, Twins at 22, and the White Sox at 26, I think we can guess where he's going in the division order.

[IN THE TRIBE]

The fact of the matter is this... No one is offering up a pick. No one is really offering up a preview right now... All remains rather quiet in regards to our Tribe from our Tribe bloggers.

That or we're getting the remaining scuttle on spring training, minor league news, or Paulie C's always awesome Indians lineup in song format
.

Wahoo's On First did manage to do a well-rounded preview off a panel that myself and fellow TCF writer Ed Carroll were on. Kudos to Ed for picking the Indians to win the division, but we as as Indians scribes cannot officially count that in our rundown, but Ed will be the first man I congratulate when the bubbly is uncorked, no doubt.

[THE ONE]

The most egregious act of them all comes from CBSSports' Jon Heyman, who continues to baffle us every day with something more silly. He places the Indians last and is the one and only person to do so. Last year we had "The One" to pick the Indians to finish ahead of two other teams, now we have "The One" who has picked them to finish behind all of the teams.

Last year, the pick of the Indians led me into a discussion about how the Padres did something crazy the previous year and I even said this.

The San Diego Padres ALMOST won the NL West last year...If someone out there, even a Padres fan, picked them to win 90 games, they would have been called a crazy person on some sort of hallucinogen, or a Padres fan, or perhaps both.

Until October, when they were called a genius, but likely still on a hallucinogen.

Don't worry, I'm not going to go on a rant similar to last year about why not the Indians winning the Central. Again, it seems to be an exercise in futility.

What I do want to talk about is the possibility of them finishing last. Is this a realistic possibility for anyone? Can we look doom in the face and say, "Yeah I think it's possible."

Surely, if the Indians find themselves as the Minnesota Twins did last season, injured, damaged, licking their wounds, that could certainly happen. But is that what Jon Heyman is banking at, or does he really think the Indians have assembled the worst talent in the AL Central?

I mean, there is no rotation worse than the Royals. They may have an excellent offense full of young potential (and if you read my AL Central preview, I pretty much professed my love to Eric Hosmer, Mike Moustakas, Lorenzo Cain, Billy Butler, and Alex Gordon) but they don't have a good starting staff and are now missing their closer.

The Twins have so many issues in regards to health and even then, they may not have the horses. The White Sox? Questions galore.

All certainly with potential, but are the Indians really not that good in his mind?

This is one guy. No one else has the Indians that low. A few people around the internet has them at four, but even then, that isn't horrible. Fourth can happen easily in a jumbled division, but last?

Hey, only one guy on the internet (aside from you and I in Cleveland) thought the Indians could finish above fourth place.

One guy thinks the Indians can finish below fourth place. Are we screwed?

God I hope not...

[THE INDIANS CAN WIN THE AL CENTRAL IF...]

After telling you how the Indians were only picked above fourth place once, I proceeded to give you a lot of If statements about the Indians shocking the world. We talked a little bit about how the standings never turn out how everyone thinks they're going to be and then proceed to have a little fun.

Last year? Cleveland was certainly the surprise in the AL, the Red Sox made 33 ESPN experts look bad as their pick to win the World Series missed the playoffs, the Brewers won the NL Central and shocker, the Arizona Diamondbacks climbed up atop the NL West.

I picked Oakland to win the AL West, the Diamondbacks to finish last, the Tigers to finish fourth

and Toronto to win the AL Wild Card. The Rockies would beat the Twins in the World Series.

Don't I look like a fool? So does everyone else in a way.

I'm willing to see possibilities in the Indians being able to win the AL Central. Last year and any year before that proves that anything can really happen, especially when all we are discussing is the possibility of one team winning a division that is headlined by a team that is destined to out-slug everyone because they have a very potent 1-2 punch.

The Indians can win the AL Central...

If Ubaldo Jimenez is 2010 Ubaldo Jimenez who almost won 20 games and a Cy Young award. This is a standard for anyone out there to say because if it comes true, the Indians are going to win a lot of games behind a 1-2 of Jimenez and Masterson.

If Shin-Soo Choo rebounds from a down year. This seems like a given and an all-too probable. Choo looks healthy and sounds in better spirits than when we saw him last year. Injuries, a case with driving drunk, and just some overall bad karma got to him. He was supposed to take a huge step last year, but it may come this year and if it does, the Indians stand to gain.

If Jason Kipnis and Lonnie Chisenhall ring in a new era. Of course it may be some time before we see Chiz get his chance, but if he can at some point team up with Kipnis and start producing, the future is now for the Indians lineup and they're going to do some damage, especially if the "if" from above comes to fruition to join Asdrubal Cabrera and Carlos Santana.

If "The Mafia" does it again. This was the lynchpin of that team last year and in order to win a division, they need to do it all again, and improve (which they can and are set up to do).

If Derek Lowe, Justin Masterson, and Josh Tomlin take to this infield defense. See last year we talked about the potential of the defense and it was everything we thought it could be with Orlando Cabrera settling things down at second and Jack Hannahan's vacuum glove at third. Super Mannahan is back at third, Kipnis provides a reasonable upgrade in terms of range at second (and an ever-improving glove as he learns the position), and now Casey Kotchman is more defensive than offensive at first.

If the Tigers defense is everything we think it is. Seriously that defense is nowhere near good and if it turns out to be as bad as I think it can be, the Indians have an opening and more than you would think. A bad defense can cost you some games, regardless of how many good hitters you have. Your starting rotation will suffer and so will your bullpen. You won't out-slug everyone because good pitching will sometimes settle that good offense down and then, you're not winning the division. This if anything, is the opening the Indians, the Royals, any other team in the AL Central really has.

[PICKS FROM THIS JERK]

Again, if I'm going to destroy everyone else, I might as well put my horrible picks out there. I can't get any worse than picking the Twins (who finished last, ugh) to go to the World Series,

can I?

AL East: Boston, Toronto*, New York, Tampa Bay, Baltimore

AL Central: Detroit, Cleveland, Kansas City, Chicago, Minnesota

AL West: Los Angeles, Texas*, Oakland, Seattle

My AL East pick is identical from last year's, with New York gaining that extra wild card spot. I figure if I keep going with the same thing, I'm bound to get it right once, right? I really like Toronto so maybe I was a year early. I'm a fan of what the Angels have going and yeah, I'm just going to pick the Tigers even though we all know what I really think can happen.

NL East: Atlanta, Philadelphia*, Washington, Miami, New York

NL Central: St. Louis, Cincinnati*, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Houston

NL West: San Francisco, Arizona, Los Angeles, San Diego, Colorado

I'm an idiot and my NL East picks will show you that. Everyone seems to love Miami, but I'm not buying that after they've burned me one too many times the past few seasons. Philadelphia would be the safe pick and while I do like Washington, I'm not ready to give them that much credit. My pick is the Braves and I know a lot of people are down on them after their collapse last season, but I like what they have. I'm taking the Cardinals to return to the postseason and the Reds to also get back after a year out and hey look, the Pirates might push for a .500 record, and certainly for fourth place. I'm not on the Diamondbacks like most, but rather jumping back on San Francisco's bandwagon with their trio of aces (Madison Bumgarner is going to rip it up.

World Series: Los Angeles Angels over Philadelphia Phillies

You know everyone is forgetting about the Phillies now that they don't have that Quad-Ace rotation, so I'm going to jump back on that bandwagon and by the time they do get Utley and Howard back, they'll be hitting their stride and make a serious run, only to be stopped by the Angels and their deep squad (and good pitching, yup).

AL MVP: Adrian Gonzalez, Red Sox

-My pick last year returns, watch him have a mega year as he is actually now fully healthy.

NL MVP: Giancarlo Stanton, Miami

- Welcome to the world Giancarlo.

AL Cy Young: Jered Weaver. Los Angeles

-Last year I was an idiot and picked John Danks, I'll be a little more safe.

NL Cy Young: Madison Bumgarner, San Francisco

- Didn't say I was going to go safe here.

AL Rookie: Yoenis Cespedes, Oakland

-Cheap win.

NL Rookie: Yonder Alonso, San Diego

-Wins with doubles.

AL Comeback: Colby Rasmus, Toronto

- Colby Rasmus Fire Burning in the Outfield , Whooaaaa!

NL Comeback: Adam Wainright, St. Louis

-Cheap win.

Bonus - Indians Picks

Shin-Soo Choo will lead the team in batting average, on-base percentage and stolen bases, while Carlos Santana will lead in home runs.

Travis Hafner will hit 20 home runs in his final season as an Indian.

Grady Sizemore will play no more than 20 games this season, ehk.

Justin Masterson leads the team in wins and ERA, while Ubaldo Jimenez leads the team in

strikeouts.

Nick Hagadone replaces someone in the bullpen and eventually leads the relievers in strikeouts.

Jose Lopez doesn't make it past April.

Aaron Cunningham makes it past April, but not May.

Derek Lowe will make 30 starts.

Josh Tomlin will have two starts in which he doesn't go five innings, but lead the team in quality starts.

Asdrubal Cabrera will commit no more than 6 errors.

Lou Marson will hit more home runs than Jack Hannahan.

Someone that started the year in Triple-A will hit more home runs than Lou Marson.

Joe Smith will not pitch more than 60 innings.

David Huff doesn't make a start for Cleveland.

Scott Barnes does.

The Indians will win 85 games.

I will get 80% of this stuff wrong. At least.

-

Nino has a blog and it's so entertaining it should be nominated for most entertaining blog competitions. Give it a vist at The Tribe Daily .

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