

Indians, A's are almost mirror images of each other

Masterson faces Gray, who will make first career Opening Day start

By Anthony Castrovence / MLB.com | 3/29/2014 4:00 PM ET

The art of doing more with less is one the Oakland A's have mastered to quite a bit of acclaim over the years and particularly the past two, when they overcame distinct payroll disadvantages to win back-to-back American League West titles.

It's an art the Cleveland Indians were also prompted to adopt years ago, when the Progressive Field sellout streak and a run of AL Central titles came to a close and market realities began to set in. And last year's claim of the AL's top Wild Card spot one year after losing 94 games was downright A's-like, in terms of the roster-maximization mind-set that went into the rise.

The A's and Indians are, therefore, properly paired at the outset of a 2014 season in which fiscally frugal contention is again the expectation.

Their Opening Night meeting at the O.co Coliseum on Monday will be a matchup of right-handed studs Sonny Gray and Justin Masterson, for sure. But it will also feature just the first of many lineups employed by managers Bob Melvin and Terry Francona, who have each, in their own way, created a clubhouse culture in which bench players are counted on as key contributors and versatility has enormous value.

"It's probably a manager's dream to have so much versatility," said Tribe first baseman Nick Swisher, an A's player from way back when. "We've got a lineup where we all feel confident in each other and know each other's ability. We've got average guys, power guys, speed guys, and one through nine, guys are going to give you a quality at-bat."

Cleveland, with three switch-hitters (Swisher, Carlos Santana and Asdrubal Cabrera), and Oakland, with a plethora of platoons, ranked first and second, respectively, last season in terms of number of plate appearances with the platoon advantage (left-handed hitters vs. right-handed pitchers, and vice versa).

That trend is likely to continue in 2014.

"We match up at the start of games," Melvin said. "We match up in-game. ... We have a few guys that play every day, and the other spots we try to match up and get our best lineup we can at the start of a game. But just because you don't start a game doesn't mean you might not be an impact player in a game."

And it's not just the lineups where these clubs try to put themselves in the best position to succeed, each and every plate appearance.

Barring a complete game from Sonny Boy or the Nasty Masty (and we don't put it past them), the opener will be the first test of the A's and Indians' reconstructed bullpens.

In the wake of releasing closer Chris Perez and losing key bullpen pieces Joe Smith and Matt Albers to free agency, the Tribe traded for Josh Outman to join Marc Rzepczynski, last year's Trade Deadline acquisition, as a late-inning lefty, and John Axford was acquired to close. The A's also have a new closer after letting Grant Balfour walk and taking on Jim Johnson's rising arbitration salary from the Orioles, and they supported Johnson by trading for setup man Luke Gregerson.

"The bullpen," Johnson said, "is the separator between playoff teams and winning playoff teams."

That's an important distinction that both these ballclubs have in mind as 2014 begins. The A's have become the kings of an increasingly complicated AL West, but they've come up empty in successive AL Division Series Game 5s against Justin Verlander and the Tigers.

The Indians were also vexed by the Tigers last year, winning just four of their 19 meetings and, ergo, finishing second to Detroit by just a single game. That put them in the uncomfortable position of a Wild Card Game, which they lost to the Rays.

You could say, then, that both parties have something to prove, as they have an eye not just on getting back to the October stage but advancing within it. The "Unfinished Business" T-shirt Swisher passed around in Cleveland's clubhouse this spring applies to both sides.

What also applies to both sides is the mind-set that a ballclub in today's game -- given the greater reliance on youth, the decline of offense and the increase of parity -- doesn't necessarily need superstars to survive but does need to avoid having any holes. With that in mind, the A's and Indians both, with a payroll in the lower third among Major League Baseball's 30 teams, will try to make the most of what they've got.

In Monday's opener, we'll begin anew in seeing what they have.

Indians: Masterson motivated in contract year

Cleveland had the opportunity to lock up its ace on what can only be described as a team-friendly length of terms, given that Masterson, entering his walk year, was willing to do a three-year deal.

So why didn't the Indians do it?

Well, a variety of factors went into the breakdown of talks, but first and foremost was the acceptance that Masterson has had uneven output in the course of his career. Per Baseball-Reference.com, his ballpark-adjusted ERA for both his career and over the past three seasons is exactly league average.

Masterson did, however, have a strong 2013 season (a 3.45 ERA and a career-best 1.202 WHIP) before a September left oblique injury. And now that he's fully healthy and entering a contract year, he has all the incentive in the world to build on those numbers in 2014, and he has said he's not completely closing the door on the Indians just because things didn't work out this spring.

"If we go win a World Series," Masterson said, "I think things could work out pretty good."

A's: Hot corner, hot bat

The Indians have a catcher transitioning to third base in Santana, and they can only hope the experiment goes half as well as it went for Josh Donaldson, who finished fourth in the AL MVP Award voting last year.

Donaldson has not only proven himself as a capable defender at the hot corner, but the move freed his body from the grind of catching and allowed him to maximize his potential at the plate.

"It's just the whole comfort factor," he said. "Moving from catcher to third base, I'm going to be in the lineup more, so I'm able to ride those good feelings longer. When you're catching, you're not able to play every day, and when you do, you get beat down. It's more demanding on your body."

Donaldson broke out in a big way in 2013, batting .301 with an .883 OPS, 24 homers and 93 RBIs.

Worth noting:

- This will be Gray's first appearance against the Indians.
- Masterson, meanwhile, has a 1-1 record with a 3.68 ERA in two previous starts against the A's. He is the first Tribe pitcher to start three consecutive Opening Days since Oakland-area native CC Sabathia (2006-08).
- This will mark the first season-opening meeting between these two clubs since 1997. The Indians won that game, 9-7, at the Coliseum, with Charles Nagy starting opposite Ariel Prieto. Nagy is now a pitching instructor in Cleveland's system, while Prieto is a coach on Melvin's staff.

Indians sign Kottaras to add catching depth

By Jordan Bastian / MLB.com | 3/31/2014 12:22 A.M. ET

SAN FRANCISCO -- The Indians took a step toward strengthening their depth behind the plate on Sunday, signing catcher George Kottaras to a Minor League contract, industry sources told MLB.com. The deal, which has not been reported by the club, is pending the completion of a physical.

Cleveland will open the season Monday with two catchers -- Yan Gomes and Carlos Santana -- on the Opening Day roster. Santana will not only serve as the Tribe's backup catcher, but he also projects to garner a significant amount of at-bats as a third baseman this season.

The situation with Gomes and Santana means that Cleveland's two catchers will both be in the starting lineup more often than not. That alone has the potential to create depth and lineup issues in the event of an injury. Complicating matters for the Tribe is the fact that Triple-A catcher Matt Treanor is currently sidelined with a left hamstring injury.

By adding Kottaras, who played for Indians manager Terry Francona in 2008-09 with the Red Sox, the Indians have implemented a contingency plan. The 30-year-old Kottaras could also be an option as a big league backup if the Indians determine that Santana should remain primarily in the infield.

For now, Cleveland plans on using Santana as a cleanup hitter, third baseman, reserve catcher and part-timer at first base and designated hitter.

Kottaras was released by the Cubs on Wednesday after Chicago opted to open the season with John Baker as the backup to starting catcher Wellington Castillo. The Cubs acquired Kottaras in exchange for cash from the Royals in November.

Kottaras has played in 295 games for four teams -- Boston, Milwaukee, Oakland and Kansas City -- in parts of six seasons in the Majors, serving mostly in a reserve role. He has posted a .214/.324/.406 slash line in his big league career, but hit just .180/.349/.370 with five homers and 12 RBIs in 46 games for the Royals last season.

CBS Sports first reported that the Indians signed Kottaras on Sunday.

Bourn, Giambi placed on disabled list

Indians set to open season with 13 pitchers and 12 position players

By Andrew Simon / MLB.com | 3/30/2014 1:06 P.M. ET

The Indians made several moves on Sunday to set their 25-man roster for Monday night's season opener against the A's in Oakland.

Cleveland purchased the contracts of right-hander **Scott Atchison**, designated hitter **Jason Giambi** and outfielder **Nyjer Morgan** from Triple-A Columbus, placing Giambi on the 15-day disabled list with a rib fracture, retroactive to March 21. Outfielder **Michael Bourn** also went on the DL with a left hamstring strain.

The Tribe designated for assignment right-handers Preston Guilmet and Frank Herrmann and lefty Colt Hynes, while reassigning outfielder **Matt Carson** and infielder **Ryan Rohlinger** to Minor League camp.

Both Bourn and Giambi will be eligible to return on Saturday, although manager Terry Francona said on Friday that Bourn likely will need longer. The speedy center fielder tweaked his hamstring on March 16 and just recently resumed running the bases.

Atchison and Morgan both were signed to Minor League contracts this winter and were able to earn spots on the club.

The Indians will begin the season carrying 13 pitchers and 12 position players, with the roster breakdown as follows:

Pitchers: **Cody Allen**, Atchison, **John Axford**, **Carlos Carrasco**, **Corey Kluber**, **Justin Masterson**, **Zach McAllister**, **Josh Outman**, **Vinnie Pestano**, **Marc Rzepczynski**, **Danny Salazar**, **Bryan Shaw**, **Blake Wood**.

Catchers: **Yan Gomes**.

Infielders: **Mike Aviles**, **Asdrubal Cabrera**, **Lonnie Chisenhall**, **Elliot Johnson**, **Jason Kipnis**, **Carlos Santana**, **Nick Swisher**, Giambi (DL).

Outfielders: **Michael Brantley**, Morgan, **David Murphy**, **Ryan Raburn**, Bourn (DL).

Indians preview and predictions

Joe Reedy FOX Sports Ohio

OAKLAND -- The theme throughout spring training for the Indians has been "unfinished business". It's short, snappy and catchy. It's also great for t-shirts because the real theme doesn't fit as well -- "we're not just one-year wonders".

In a division where most look at Detroit as the prohibitive favorite and Kansas City as the team on the rise, the Indians are stuck in the middle. They are good enough to be considered contenders (even though few have picked them to reach the playoffs) but not as bad as Chicago or Minnesota.

The consensus is that the Tribe will win 85-88 games, but if prior history is any guide, they will need 90 to make back-to-back playoff appearances for the first time since 1999. Like last year, when they won 30 games by one run and 10 in extra innings, they will need a lot to go right.

One of the Indians biggest strengths is that they have one of the more versatile rosters in the game. Elliot Johnson can play six positions and could don a catcher's mask if necessary. Mike Aviles can also play every outfield spot along with second, short and third.

Terry Francona has been on both sides of the salary neighborhood. With the Indians, he knows that a roster of 25 with a couple players that can play multiple positions almost makes it into 28 or 29.

Said Francona of versatility: "It's important for every team but those who are in that different neighborhood it's a priority. It's a way we can catch up. You've seen Tampa Bay do it for years. They don't have a big payroll but I've marveled at Ben Zobrist for years in how many different positions he can play. That makes everyone better. They've done it better more than anyone."

The biggest test of versatility though will be with Carlos Santana, who will play third, back up at catcher, play some designated hitter and beat cleanup. There are few cases where that has been done before but Santana is willing to try it out. With Yan Gomes being signed to a contract extension over the weekend, having Santana a third or designated hitter and Gomes at catcher makes the lineup better.

Besides roster versatility being one of the themes of the season, here are some other things that have to go right:

Will Nick Swisher and Michael Bourn bounce back? Swisher hit well the last two weeks of Cactus League play while Michael Bourn will be out for at least the first week due to a hamstring injury. Swisher is more comfortable, especially knowing that he will be primarily in the second spot. The jury on Bourn though remains undetermined. After not being on the disabled list for five-plus seasons, this is his second stint in 11 months.

Is this a breakout year for Danny Salazar? The right-hander showed great stuff last year in his 10 starts that he has the potential to be a number one starter down the line. The Indians have done a good job bringing him along during spring training but can he go the entire season? Justin Masterson will be his usual solid self but one or two other starters will have to pick up.

Can John Axford be an effective closer? We won't know that until the first month of the season since it is hard to practice late-game situations during spring training. Cody Allen and Bryan Shaw showed their mettle last September but it will be interesting to see how Blake Wood does. With a 100 mile per hour fastball, he could have one of the strongest arms on the team.

Does Francona keep his streak of 86-plus win seasons alive? It is currently at nine. I think the Tribe will go 87-75 but miss the playoffs. I see the Royals winning the Central with the Indians in second and Tigers in third followed by the Twins and White Sox. The other AL division winners will be Orioles (East) and Angels (West) with the Rays and Athletics as the two wild cards.

In the World Series, look for the Dodgers to defeat the Angels in six.

Indians pitcher Danny Salazar hopes going slowly will leave him with plenty of gas in his tank for long season

By Stephanie Storm

There's a pattern emerging with the Indians' pitching staff, and it's no coincidence.

Rookie right-hander Danny Salazar was handed the ball for the Indians last "big game" — a 4-0 loss to the Tampa Bay Rays in October's American League wild-card game at Progressive Field.

It was the Indians' first postseason game since 2007.

Six months later, Salazar, a hard-throwing Dominican phenom, will again be the center of attention when he pitches in front of another sellout crowd at Progressive Field in Friday's home opener against the Minnesota Twins.

Salazar, 24, whose fastball can reach triple digits, showed as a rookie last year that he's not awed by the magnitude of the moment. No one affiliated with the Indians believes he will be this season, either.

"Every time there's been a challenge in front of Danny, he's risen to the occasion," Tribe general manager Chris Antonetti said.

Treating challenges with the same calm and smiling demeanor that he displays with just about everything else in life is a trait Salazar honed in 2010 when his lengthy recovery from Tommy John elbow ligament reconstruction surgery began.

"The way he's explained it to us is that all he went through with his arm, when's he's on the mound — regardless of where that mound is — he's at home," Indians manager Terry Francona said.

"That's exactly what it looks like to me. Whether there's 42,000 people waving white flags or he's over on Field 4 in Goodyear, he looks the same. Some young kids you see out there are scared to death. I just think Danny's a very mature kid on the mound. Some guys have that in them, and that makes them have a chance to be special."

Salazar's veteranlike demeanor, combined with a nasty arsenal of pitches that has become markedly better since surgery, helped him carry a no-hitter into the sixth inning and strike out seven Toronto Blue Jays in his major-league debut in July and make him a key member of the Indians' rotation moving forward.

But there remains one lingering concern that was increasingly hard to ignore this spring. Despite the Indians' trust in big-game situations, they continue to heavily guard his innings.

Even after reveling in an offseason that finally consisted of more rest than rehab, Salazar was brought along slowly during spring training.

When a majority of his teammates began pitching in Cactus League games to hone their command in anticipation of the upcoming regular season, Salazar remained at the team's Goodyear, Ariz., complex, throwing bullpen sessions for an audience of a few team officials.

It was two weeks into games before he was even permitted to pitch to live hitters, and that came in 1⅓ innings against minor leaguers in an intrasquad game.

There were no health concerns, but the Indians were careful in monitoring Salazar in anticipation of the long season ahead of him.

As he rose from the Double-A Aeros to Triple-A Columbus and finally onto the Indians last year, he pitched just 145 innings, but it was a career high for Salazar.

"It's a slow process," Salazar said. "Sometimes I just want to say, 'Just let me get out there. Just let me pitch already.' But I know why we're doing things this way. I want to have a long career."

Salazar went 2-3 with a 3.12 ERA in 10 starts for the Tribe. He struck out 65 in 52 innings, the highest strikeout ratio by an Indians rookie since Herb Score struck out 92 in 81 innings in 1955.

The Indians hope it's just the beginning for Salazar.

"We're trying to get his gas tank to the fullest because this will be more than likely some uncharted water for him," Francona said. "There's not going to be an innings limit and he hasn't done that for a while. It's based on trying to have him out there every five or six days for the whole year."

If there was frustration on Salazar's part due to the snail's pace of his spring camp, he didn't show it.

"You put in so much work to come back, of course you want to get out there and show it," he said. "But I respect what they're doing. I believe it will make me better in the long run."

There's truth to that already. Being limited to 45 to 50 pitches through a majority of his minor-league rehab outings helped Salazar be more effective. It taught him that every pitch should have a purpose, that each toss was too precious to waste.

"When you pitch under that kind of restriction, you learn quickly," he said. "It really helped me."

Still, one thing Salazar is looking forward to this year is not having to look over his shoulder at the video board to see how many pitches he's thrown and how many he has left.

"Now if I sneak a peek," he said with a mischievous grin, "it will be to see how hard I'm throwing."

Akron Beacon Journal LOADED: 03.31.2014

Cleveland Indians add Jason Giambi, Scott Atchison, Nyjer Morgan to 40-man roster

Paul Hoynes, Northeast Ohio Media Group By Paul Hoynes, Northeast Ohio Media Group

SAN FRANCISCO – The Indians made a series of moves Sunday to complete their opening day roster.

They purchased the contracts of Jason Giambi, Scott Atchison and Nyjer Morgan from Class AAA Columbus. Then they placed Giambi and center fielder Michael Bourn on the 15-day disabled list. Giambi is recovering from a broken rib and Bourn is rehabbing a strained left hamstring.

To create room on the 40-man roster for Giambi, Atchison and Morgan, relievers Preston Guilmet, Frank Herrmann and Colt Hynes were designated for assignment. The Indians have 10 days to trade, release or put them on waivers.

The Indians also reassigned Matt Carson and Ryan Rohlinger to minor league camp. They accompanied the Indians to San Diego to play the Padres on Friday and Saturday at the University of San Diego in the final two exhibition games of the spring.

Carson and Rohlinger will open the year at Columbus.

Giambi, Atchison and Morgan made the Indians as spring-training invitees. Giambi could be activated sometime this weekend when the Indians open the home portion of their schedule Friday against the Twins at Progressive Field.

Atchison will be in the bullpen. Morgan is expected to replace Bourn in center field when the Indians open the season Monday night against Oakland's Sonny Gray at O.co Coliseum at 10:05 p.m.

Justin Masterson, Corey Kluber and Zach McAllister will be the starting pitchers against Oakland in the three-game series. Danny Salazar will pitch the home opener on Friday followed by Carlos Carrasco on Saturday.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 03.31.2014

Cleveland Indians sign RHP Mark Lowe, catcher George Kottaras to minor league deals

Paul Hoynes, Northeast Ohio Media Group By Paul Hoynes, Northeast Ohio Media Group

SAN FRANCISCO – The Indians spent all winter signing veteran players to minor league deals. The regular season is about to open Monday night, but they keep signing the same kind of players.

They reached agreement Saturday with right-hander Mark Lowe on a minor league deal. Lowe asked for and was given his release from Tampa Bay last week.

On Saturday, they agreed to terms with veteran catcher George Kottaras on a minor league deal. There has been no official word from the Indians because Lowe and Kottaras must pass physicals

Lowe, 30 had a good spring with the Rays. He allowed one earned run in 10 1/3 innings with 12 strikeouts.

Last year was a struggle for Lowe, as he posted a 9.26 ERA in 11 appearances with the Angels. He walked 11, while striking out only seven in 11 2/3 innings.

Lowe has pitched with Seattle, Texas and the Angels in a big league career that covers parts of eight seasons.

Kottaras, 30, was in camp with the Cubs, but was released Wednesday. He has played for Boston, Milwaukee, Oakland and Kansas City. Kottaras, a left-handed hitter, batted .180 (18-for-100) with four doubles, five homers and 12 RBI for the Royals last year.

Tribe manager Terry Francona was in Boston when Kottaras played for the Red Sox in 2008 and 2009.

If Kottaras passes his physical, it probably means Matt Treanor's days with the Tribe are over. Treanor is currently rehabbing a strained left hamstring in Goodyear. Like Kottaras, Treanor, 38, signed a minor league deal with the Tribe, but he went through camp with th team.

It's unclear if the Kottas' signing means the Indians have changed their mind and will carry three catchers in the near future. They open the season Monday night with Yan Gomes and Carlos Santana handling the catching. Santana will also see a lot of time at third base.

Finally: The Indians finished their Cactus League season with a 20-9-2 record. They hit .288 as a team with 192 runs and 29 homers. Tribe pitchers posted a 4.28 ERA.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 03.31.2014

Cleveland Indians opening day lineup? Terry Francona still wrestling with it

Paul Hoynes, Northeast Ohio Media Group By Paul Hoynes, Northeast Ohio Media Group

SAN FRANCISCO – Manager Terry Francona was reluctant to release for public consumption on Sunday just exactly what his opening day lineup would be for Monday night against right-hander Sonny Gray Oakland at O.co Coliseum. It sounded as if he was still wrestling with it as of Sunday afternoon and it may have been getting the best of him.

Could it be a little managerial paranoia at work? Perhaps.

What about a touch of gamesmanship? It's a possibility.

Still, Michael Bourn's strained left hamstring has turned what should be a fairly routine assignment into a difficult crossword puzzle. Who plays center field for Bourn, who was officially placed on the 15-day disabled list on Sunday? Can the same guy hit leadoff or is another adjustment needed?

Then again Francona could be a victim of his own creation. GM Chris Antonetti has turned him on to the value of versatility. Francona has always liked players who can do more than one thing, but lets face it, when he managed in Boston that was never an overwhelming concern. Not with an unrestricted payroll and a lineup of All-Stars.

It's not like Manny Ramirez, Francona's most dangerous hitter, was going to play left field in front of the Green Monster one night and catch the next. But on the Indians, such a move will take place on a fairly regular basis when cleanup hitter Carlos Santana moves from third base to behind the plate to give Yan Gomes a rest.

Indians lineup

CF: Nyjer Morgan (L)

1B: Nick Swisher (S)

2B: Jason Kipnis (L)

3B: Carlos Santana (S)

LF: Michael Brantley (L)

SS: Asdrubal Cabrera (S)

DH: Ryan Raburn (R)

LF: David Murphy (L)

C: Yan Gomes (R)

RHP: Justin Masterson

Athletics lineup

CF: Coco Crisp (S)

3B: Josh Donaldson (R)

SS: Jed Lowrie (S)

LF: Yoenis Cespedas (R)

DH: Brandon Moss (L)

RF: Josh Reddick (L)

C: John Jaso (L)

2B: Eric Sogard (L)

1B: Darcic Barton (L)

RHP: Sonny Gray

So maybe Francona just had too many balls in the air Sunday to put a final lineup down on paper.

For instance, shortstop Asdrubal Cabrera could move into the leadoff spot without a worry. He's done it a lot in his career, and was semi-regular at the top of the lineup this spring as Francona tried to get him as many at bats as possible to get his bat going. It worked, too, as Cabrera left spring training hitting .357 (20-for-56) with six doubles, one homer and 10 RBI.

Michael Brantley is another option. He came up as a leadoff hitter. He could easily slide over from left to center field to replace Bourne in both positions. In fact, Brantley has done both jobs for the Indians.

There were even rumblings late in camp that Nick Swisher might bat leadoff. Swisher has a good career on base percentage (.358) and over the last eight years has drawn the third most walks in the big leagues with 683.

"If he needed to me to catch, I'd catch," said Swisher. "We've got guys who can play all over the field. As a manager, that gives you so much flexibility and gives you so much depth.

With all those options available, the job is expected to go to Nyjer Morgan, who played in Japan last year and made the Indians as a non-roster spring-training invitee. Morgan is a left-handed hitter and plays a good center field.

On Tuesday night, the shuffling starts again because Oakland is starting left-hander Scott Kazmir, who won 10 games for the Tribe last year. Cabrera might move into the leadoff spot against Kazmir.

Or perhaps it will be Brantley. Despite hitting left-handed, Brantley batted .304 (48-for-158) against left-handed starters last year. This spring, he hit everybody, batting .500 (25-for-50) with eight doubles, two triples and 14 RBI.

Last year Francona leaned hard on his bench, especially the versatile Mike Aviles, founder of the Goon Squad. This year he has two guys like that with the addition of switch-hitting Elliot Johnson.

"To have one guy like that eases your mind as a manager," said Francona. "To have two is unbelievable."

Last year Aviles played 56 games at third, 46 at shortstop, 12 at second base, 12 in left field, one in right field and two at DH. This spring Aviles added center field to his resume.

Johnson, who made the club as a spring training invitee, last year played 74 at second, 10 at shortstop, eight at third, eight in left field and three in right field for Kansas City and Atlanta. This spring he played center field as well.

It's one thing to be versatile; it's another to be versatile and proficient enough at all those positions to earn a manager's trust.

"My goal coming into spring training was to earn Tito's trust to where he can play me at any position any time," said Johnson.

Johnson certainly didn't hurt his chances of making the team by hitting .345 (20-for-58) with four doubles, two triples, two homers and nine RBI this spring, but Francona made it clear he was more interested in Johnson's defensive abilities. It's safe to say he passed the test as well.

The idea of having a versatile roster is to get more bang for the buck.

"It makes your 25-man roster play like a 27 or 28 man roster," said Francona.

In the Indians case, every bit of talent helps.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 03.31.2014

Unfinished business: A 3-hour playoff experience wasn't satisfying enough for the Indians, who yearn for more in 2014

Print Zack Meisel, Northeast Ohio Media Group By Zack Meisel, Northeast Ohio Media Group

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- A hefty stack of red T-shirts rested on Nick Swisher's left arm. The spirited outfielder raced around the Indians' clubhouse, hastily doling out the gear.

"You passing those out to everyone, or only people you like?" yelled reliever Scott Atchison, who patiently sat at his locker and smiled as he waited for his shirt.

The shirts read "Unfinished Business" in capital letters beneath a Block C. By the time Swisher supplied each player with his own, most teammates had, without instruction, donned the outerwear.

Atchison wasn't part of the organization last season, but even the 38-year-old knew the deal.

For a 92-win campaign and a 10-game winning streak to cap the regular season, the Indians were rewarded with an electric atmosphere at Progressive Field on Oct. 2. The ballpark buzzed, Danny Salazar's heater sizzled and for the first time in six pain-staking years, Cleveland experienced the stress and splendor of October baseball.

The adventure, though, lasted only three hours, as the Rays dispensed of the Tribe in the American League Wild Card game. To the players, the scene and the experience were unforgettable, but short-lived. It was a tease, a brief taste, another means of motivation. As such, the team derived the "Unfinished Business" slogan.

"We've built a different attitude around here," Swisher said. "From where we are and with the guys we have coming back from last year, the camaraderie that we already started ... We're ready. We're excited. We're ready for the challenge."

That confidence stems from the reformation commenced by the front office more than a year ago. In October 2012, the team hired Terry Francona and signaled that 94-loss seasons wouldn't fly. A year later, the same team -- with a sprinkling of new faces -- had learned what it requires to survive a 162-game slate and earn an opportunity to play a 163rd and beyond. That trial set the table for 2014.

We're going to be good. We're going to win some games.

"I think you're already seeing it carry over for us from last year," Swisher said, "The way we ended the season, maybe on a sour note -- I don't think it was a lost season. It was a great season for the organization. We had some standout guys really jump in and put themselves on the map. Things just have to keep growing. Just keep working and keep grinding."

Seasons, however, are separate entities. Chemistry is nice, but it usually requires winning to exist. When the Indians take the field in Oakland, they will do so with empty win and loss columns. So how can last year's turnaround influence the on-field product?

"I think it can help when we get punched in the stomach this year," Francona said. "It'll happen. Our guys will know that we can still get where we want to go. There were times last year, maybe at the beginning of the year, where when we got beat, you could sense, 'Oh, here we go again.' We lost [six] games in [a row in] August; that's hard to do. We came back from that. That part will definitely help."

So, the Indians will carry a quiet -- the ever-exuberant Swisher aside -- confidence into the new season, one they hope ends, like last year, in October. Only this time, a three-hour cameo won't cut it.

"What's really jumped out to me is the way our guys go about what we ask them to do," Francona said. "It's an easy group to want to brag about. It doesn't guarantee you're going to win a game or win the Central, but we like showing up with our group of players and trying to find out how good we can be together."

The Indians have some idea.

"We're going to give 100 percent. We're going to be good," Salazar said. "We're going to win some games."

That path to finishing business begins now.

Said second baseman Jason Kipnis: "It's time for the games to count."

Terry Pluto's 20 predictions about the Cleveland Indians - good years for Kluber, Swisher, Brantley

Print Terry Pluto, The Plain Dealer By Terry Pluto, The Plain Dealer
CLEVELAND, Ohio -- By now, you'd think I'd learn.

For years, I have been predicting the Tribe's record -- and always been rather wrong.

This year, I'm at 85-77. In that story, you can read about my other swings and misses.

But last spring, I decided to make 20 individual predictions about the Tribe season.

Here are some highlights from those predictions:

- Mark Reynolds would "hit 30 homers ... it may take 185 strikeouts, he'll do it."
- Cody Allen could be one of the first pitchers sent to the minors, and Carlos Carrasco would be the first starter promoted from Class AAA "and he'll be an asset to the Tribe."
- Michael Brantley will hit at least 15 homers and "prove he's valuable to the Tribe." I actually will make that same prediction again.
- If Ryan Raburn flops (a real possibility), Cord Phelps will take his spot as a utility man.

CHIZ-1.JPG

I was very wrong about Lonnie Chisenhall last season, predicting he'd hit 15 homers with 70 RBI. This year, I see him back in the minors.
Chuck Crow / The Plain Dealer

- Lonnie Chisenhall will hit at least 15 homers with 70 RBI.

I'm stopping right there ...

At least I did have a few things right about Justin Masterson, Bryan Shaw and Danny Salazar.

Enough of life in the rear view mirror.

Here we go for 2014:

1. A year ago, I wrote Nick Swisher would hit 24 homers and 88 RBI. I'll stick with the 24 homers, and give him 80 RBI. He has learned to take better care of his shoulder. I expect a Swisher-type season.
2. Josh Tomlin will win at least 10 games and be in the rotation by the middle of May. Still not happy about him opening in Class AAA.
3. Asdrubal Cabrera has a contract-driven season, hitting above .270 with about 20 homers.

4. Carlos Carrasco in the rotation doesn't work; he does help in the bullpen.
 5. Carlos Santana is OK at third base a few times a week, but he has some rocky games early in the season.
 6. I'm going back to my prediction of 15 homers for Michael Brantley, another solid season.
 7. Jason Kipnis signs an extension -- probably just wishful thinking.
 8. Corey Kluber leads the staff in victories. He has the stuff to do it.
 9. Yan Gomes has another good year behind the plate, but his hitting drops off a bit. Gomes had a tremendous season, batting .294 (.826 OPS) with 11 homers and 38 RBI in only 322 plate appearances. But he walked only 18 times. Teams will pay more attention to him at the plate. But I'm thrilled the Tribe signed him.
 10. If John Axford gets through April as the closer, he will have a big season. I'm worried about a bad start, as he had last year. His first few save chances are key for him this season.
 11. I wish I felt better about David Murphy, but I don't. His bat looked slow in the spring. He batted .204 (.581 OPS) in hitter-friendly Arizona. Last season, he batted .176 in April. His career April batting average is .226. So if he struggles early, the Tribe will be wondering if it's his usual April agony, or if it's a continuation of the .220 that he hit last season.
 12. Lonnie Chisenhall ends up back in the minors and Jason Giambi has trouble staying healthy.
 13. C.C. Lee is up from Columbus and in the bullpen by June, and pitches well.
 14. Danny Salazar wins fewer than 12 games because the Indians continue to be very careful with his arm, innings, etc.
 15. Michael Bourn has trouble stealing bases because of his hamstring issues, and doesn't run as much as he'd like.
 16. Jason Kipnis breaks through with a strong performance all season, makes another All-Star team, drives in at least 90 runs.
 17. Trevor Bauer comes up from the minors, but he's still not ready to be a consistent big league starter.
 18. Cody Allen and Bryan Shaw take over nicely for Joe Smith in the eighth inning.
 19. One of the Tribe's two lefty relievers -- Josh Outman and Marc Rzepczynski -- has trouble and is replaced by the All-Star break.
 20. Justin Masterson makes the All-Star team again, but does not sign an extension with the Tribe.
- BONUS PREDICTION: At least 10 of these will be really, really wrong.

Masterson set to start Indians' opener

Joe Reedy FOX Sports Ohio

OAKLAND -- After having one of the best springs for a pitcher, Justin Masterson is hoping that carries into the regular season. For the third straight year, the right-hander will take the hill in the Indians' opener.

The past two years Masterson's foe has been Toronto. Tonight it is Oakland in an opening series that matches two teams that made the postseason last year.

"I love being able to open up the season. Just the fact that the records are zero, everyone has got excitement so being able to go set the tone is fun," Masterson said. "It's been a great time trying to lead this staff as we go. In the end for me it's always about having some fun."

Despite the storyline being negotiations about an extension that broke off, Masterson didn't let it affect him. In six Cactus League starts, he was 4-0 with a 1.09 ERA. Opponents had a .171 average against him and he gave up just three earned runs in 24 2/3 innings while striking out 25 and walking six.

With Ubaldo Jimenez and Scott Kazmir off to other teams, Masterson will be counted on to be even more of a mentor to a young starting rotation. Corey Kluber will go on Tuesday against Kazmir and Zach McAllister will take the hill on Wednesday.

Masterson is the first Tribe pitcher since C.C. Sabathia to start three straight openers. In the past two, Masterson was 1-0 with a 1.29 ERA. He will oppose Sonny Grady, who is the fifth youngest starting pitcher in franchise history since moving there in 1968.

Masterson has not fared well against the Athletics in the past. In 12 games, with eight begins starts, he is 2-6 with a 6.84 ERA.

"I don't get caught up in the matchups. I just have to go and pitch my game. You need to elevate your game on your own. You can't rely on who or which team. Have to battle yourself," Masterson said.

Cleveland Indians ride wave of 2013 momentum into opening day

By Jim Ingraham, The News-Herald & The Morning Journal

Not a bad way to go into opening day — on a 10-game winning streak.

That, technically, is what the Indians will do on opening day at 10:05 p.m. on March 31 in Oakland. The Indians won their last 10 regular-season games in 2013, the first major-league team in 42 years and only the sixth major-league team since 1900 to finish a season with a winning streak of 10 or more games.

On March 31 in Oakland, Justin Masterson, will make his third consecutive, and possible last opening day start for the Tribe. Masterson can become a free agent at the end of this season, and talks between he and the club have been tabled.

Right-hander Sonny Gray will start for the A's, who won the American League West last year with a record of 96-66, the second-best record in the league.

The Indians last year were a surprise playoff participant, riding that 10-game winning streak and 21-6 month of September to a final mark of 92-70, before getting bounced out of the playoffs in a wildcard game vs. Tampa Bay.

The Indians haven't appeared in the playoffs in consecutive years since 1998-99, and the mountain they will have to climb this year to do so will be a steep one. For starters, there's the starters. The Indians lost their best two September pitchers from last year as Ubaldo Jimenez and Scott Kazmir left as free agents, signing with Baltimore and Oakland respectively. The Indians will face Kazmir on April 1, in the second game of the season.

Replacing Jimenez and Kazmir in the Indians' rotation will be Danny Salazar and Carlos Carrasco, who between them have a total of just 17 major-league starts.

But hope springs eternal in the spring, and especially on opening day.

"I don't care how long you've been doing this, opening day is always a big day," said Indians Manager Terry Francona. "Mostly you feel excitement, but also some anxiety, some nervousness, even a little fear. Mostly you want to get a lot of the firsts out of the way as quickly as you can."

First win, first hits, first appearance in a game — all the firsts of the season that matter for a team and its players, the clock begins ticking on all of them on opening day.

Last year, Masterson won his first game on opening day, pitching six strong innings in the Indians' 4-1 victory at Toronto. In his opening day start in 2012, also against Toronto, this time at Progressive Field, Masterson was even better, allowing one run on two hits over eight innings while striking out 10 and walking one in what became a 7-4 Indians loss to the Blue Jays in 16 innings.

"As a young player your first goal is to make the opening-day roster, then you want to be the guy who pitches on opening day. The guy who sets the tone for the year. It's neat," said Masterson.

It's also the only day of the season in which every team is tied for first place.

"Everyone is pumped up, everyone is excited, because on opening day everyone has a chance," Masterson said. "To be the guy who starts for us on opening day doesn't make me any better than the rest of the starters. But it's exciting to be able to do it."

The Indians go into this season with a lot of familiar faces in their lineup, albeit with two significant changes.

Catcher Yan Gomes, who wasn't even on the Indians' opening day roster a year ago, when he started the season at Triple-A Columbus, will not only be in the opening day lineup this year, he'll also have his newly-agreed upon six-year, \$23 million contract extension in his back pocket. Gomes' breakout year last season, when he emerged as one of the top offensive and defensive catchers in the league, sent former starter Carlos Santana scurrying for another position, which he found — third base.

How many games Santana starts at third base remains to be seen — he'll also pick up at-bats at designated hitter and backup catcher — but one hint about the how the organization views the switch-hitting Santana is that he is now officially listed on the major-league roster as an "infielder."

Gomes wasn't the only Indian to cash in on a superb individual season in 2013. A few weeks before Gomes agreed to this new contract, left fielder Michael Brantley signed a four-year, \$25 million extension.

However the two biggest fish in the Indians' pool of extension-worthy players are Masterson and second baseman Jason Kipnis. The team was unable to reach an agreement with either. The difference is Masterson is in his walk year, while Kipnis, with or without an extension, is under the Indians' control for the next four years.

"Opening day is always one of the best days of the year," Kipnis said. "One of the biggest crowds, one of the noisiest crowds. People haven't had baseball in a long time and this is their first chance."

The only major position player addition made by the Indians over the winter was signing free agent outfielder David Murphy to a two-year, \$12 million contract. The left-handed hitting Murphy will share playing time in right field with the right-handed hitting Ryan Raburn, who last year was one of the leaders of the strongest platoon of bench players the Indians have had since the organization's last golden era in the 1990s.

Raburn, infielders Mike Aviles and Elliot Johnson and the man they call "G" — which could stand for "grizzled" as well as for his last name — 43-year-old Jason Giambi, will form the bench bunch that Francona so adroitly employed last season.

Giambi (fractured rib) and Michael Bourn (hamstring) will start the season on the disabled list, but indications are that we won't get too deep into April before both players are activated.

As usual, however, the Indians will likely go as far as their rebuilt pitching staff will take them. In addition to two new starters, they've added four new relievers: closer John Axford, Scott Atchison, lefty Josh Outman and high octane fastballer Blake Wood.

For now, though, it's opening day. Another opening, another show. The Big Show. The boys of summer are back, and so is their manager, the reigning American League Manager of the Year, who in many ways is still the biggest celebrity in the Tribe's dugout.

"Opening day never gets old. I'd quit if it ever did," Francona said. "If you don't have a pulse on opening day it's probably time for you to get another job."

#baseball247: Cleveland Indians' lost season of 1994 had it all — except a World Series

By Jim Ingraham, The News-Herald & The Morning Journal

Los Angeles Dodger pitcher Orel Hershiser, right, walks around Major League Baseball Acting Commissioner Bud Selig after testifying on Capitol Hill in Washington on Thursday, Sept. 22, 1994, before the House subcommittee on Economic and Commercial Law. The subcommittee was holding hearings on baseball's antitrust exemption. (AP Photo/Joe Marquette)

It began with the opening of a brand-new glittery state-of-the-art ballpark for a city desperately in need of one, a visit from the President — not of the team, but of the United States — who threw out the ceremonial first pitch, and a near-opening-day-no-hitter tossed at the hometown team.

It included the first incarnation of the most powerful lineup in franchise history, which would go on to win five consecutive division titles and two American League pennants before the decade was out.

That summer featured, in the new ballpark, an astonishing array of spectacular baseball feats from a swaggering, cocky cast of characters who were very good at what they did — and knew it.

The summer also included an explosive night in Chicago, when a confiscated corked bat led to a pitcher crawling through the ceiling tiles to retrieve it from the umpires' room.

It included winning streaks of six, eight and 10 games, an overall record of 66-47 — and an exhilarating ride on a bullet train inexorably bound, or so it seemed, for the franchise's first trip to the postseason in 40 years.

But then came Black Thursday, Aug. 11. The day the games, the season, and the players all disappeared.

"I remember it like it was yesterday," said John Hart, the Indians' general manager at the time. "We found out through a conference call in the afternoon. When it was over I walked out into the ballpark. It was empty. A beautiful fall-like day, and I sat in one of the seats in the park. It was very disappointing. It made you shed a little tear."

It was the Indians' lost season of 1994.

Twenty years ago this year, the Indians opened Jacobs Field with a roster of swashbuckling hardball heroes. The new ballpark was breathtaking, the new team was terrific, and the new season was doomed.

This was at the height of the player-management labor rancor that traumatized that era. The new collective bargaining agreement had expired, and the quest for the new one was filled with bitterness. The players set Aug. 11 as the deadline for hammering out a new agreement.

On Aug. 10, the Indians beat the Blue Jays, 5-3, in Toronto. Third baseman Jim Thome (how weird does that sound?) had three hits and Jason Grimsley, three weeks after his crawl through the Comiskey Park ceiling tiles, pitched six innings to get the win.

The Indians flew home after the game with a record of 66-47. They were in second place, one game behind the division-leading White Sox. But the next day was Aug. 11. There was no new basic agreement, so there would be no more baseball. The players went on strike.

They were still on strike on Sept. 14, when Commissioner Bud Selig announced he was cancelling the remainder of the season and the postseason. It was a kick in the gut to the Indians, who were poised, they felt, for their first appearance in the postseason since 1954.

"That year, 1994, was the first year of the wildcard so we felt we at least had a chance for the wild-card spot, but we also knew we had a really talented team," said Tribe pitcher Charles Nagy. "The two previous years we took our lumps but everyone saw the talent we had in '94. Everything was coming together."

It actually began coming together the previous winter. On Dec. 2, 1993, the Indians, who traditionally never made any waves in the free-agent waters, stunned the baseball world and thrilled their fans by signing free agents Eddie Murray and Dennis Martinez. Two weeks later, Hart traded Felix Fermin and Reggie Jefferson to Seattle for a light-hitting shortstop named Omar Vizquel.

"In 1993 we felt we had a good young talented team, but the revenue from the old park wouldn't support us adding to it. So we waited until '94 and then jumped in pretty good, getting Martinez and Murray. They were like the finishing pieces," said Hart.

"That was all part of our plan, to ramp up for when we moved into the new ballpark. And our plan was to win," said Indians president Mark Shapiro, who in 1994 was the Tribe's farm director. "We intended to make some strategic free-agent signings, and those two guys were marquee players who were leaders and winners."

Indians manager Mike Hargrove said the winter of '93 was a seminal season for the franchise.

"John, Danny (O'Dowd, assistant general manager) and I decided we were going to let our young core of players get good before we went into the free-agent market," Hargrove said. "That winter we felt we were ready to turn the corner, and when we signed Martinez and Murray it sent a message to everyone that we are serious about this."

The signings of future Hall of Famer Murray, who would collect his 3,000th career hit with the Indians in 1995, and Martinez, who two years earlier had pitched a perfect game for Montreal, certainly got the attention of the Indians' players.

"That provided a great boost to our team because we were bringing in players who had a history of winning," said Sandy Alomar Jr., the catcher on those Indians teams. "Going into a new stadium and then adding veteran players like that, it was a huge turning point for our team."

* * *

The biggest star that year was Jacobs Field. Perhaps no team in history was in greater need of a new ballpark than the Indians, who moved from cavernous, cold, damp, and mostly-empty Municipal Stadium into a cozy new playpen in the heart of downtown.

"It was a cultural revolution for our organization," said Shapiro. "We were moving from an antiquated facility where we were a second-class citizen, with our weight room located in the laundry room of a hospital two miles away, to a state of the art facility. It elevated the morale of the franchise, and was the culmination of a vision Dick (Jacobs, Tribe owner) and John (Hart) had for the organization."

Hargrove played and managed the Indians in both venues. Don't get him started about the difference between the two.

"We really needed a new ballpark. I remember the old place, just walking into it, you immediately felt like you needed to take a shower," Hargrove said.

"There were not a lot of great memories there," said Hart.

Hargrove said the new ballpark played a big part in the Indians becoming winners.

"I've always thought if you have good surroundings when you're trying to do your job you have a much better chance of doing it well," he said.

"And that place was so nice, it had everything you'd ever want as a baseball team. Now it up to us to prove that everyone who had faith in us were right.

Said Nagy: "When we moved into the new place, first the people came out to see the new park, and there was a buzz, an energy in the air.

Then when the team started winning we had the biggest crowds in baseball. It was great."

It was hard to say which was more impressive or exciting, the ballpark or the team that played there. It began on opening day, when President Bill Clinton rolled into town and threw out the ceremonial first pitch. The opponent that day was the Seattle Mariners. That made Hart nervous.

"I remember when the schedule came out," said Hart. "I said to Dick Jacobs, 'I got some bad news' and he said, 'What could possibly be bad about opening day in a new ballpark?' And I said, 'We're facing Seattle, and Randy Johnson is going to be the pitcher. We could get no-hit on opening day!'"

It almost happened.

Before a sellout crowd in the first game in Jacobs Field history, Johnson held the Indians hitless through seven innings. Going into the bottom of the eighth the Indians were losing, 2-0, and they had no hits.

"The thing I remember most about that day was the absolute fear I had that Randy Johnson was going to no-hit us, especially after I saw how he was throwing that day. I thought to myself, 'This is not going to be a fun outcome.'" said Hargrove.

"What was funny about that was the day before when we took batting practice for the first time in the park we noticed that white bridge in center field, and we were worried that it was going to be hard to pick up Johnson's pitches," said Alomar. "Sure enough, the next day, his pitches were

coming right out of that bridge.”

Alomar finally broke Johnson’s no-hit bid with a single to right field with nobody out in the eighth inning. Manny Ramirez’s two-run single later in the inning tied the score, and the Indians won it in the bottom of the 11th inning on an RBI single by Wayne Kirby, sending everyone home happy.

* * *

The Indians spent 51 days in first place that season, and with good reason. Their lineup was loaded. How loaded? In many games, Thome, who would hit 612 home runs in his career, batted eighth and Ramirez (555 career homers) batted ninth.

“People forget that Kirby hit .300 in 1993, but we knew we had this great hitter coming up in Manny,” said Hart. “I almost had to force Manny on the staff in spring training, because everyone liked the way Kirby had played the previous year, and rightfully so. In fact, I ended up having to give Kirby a multi-year deal even though Manny was going to replace him in right field, because Kirby was still such a good fourth outfielder.”

“Coming out of spring training Manny made our club and I think a lot of people thought we were crazy about starting him in right field — until they saw him hit. Then they understood,” said Hargrove. “We had Manny and Jimmy, and Charlie Nagy and Sandy Alomar and Carlos Baerga, it was a really magical time.”

Hargrove has the keepsakes to prove it.

“I have two lineup cards hanging on the wall of my basement from that year,” he said. “One of them has Manny batting eighth and Thome ninth and the other Thome eighth and Manny ninth. That just shows you what kind of lineups we had. And everyone fit. Kenny was the ideal No. 1 hitter, Omar was the ideal No. 2 hitter, Albert was the ideal No. 4 hitter. We had guys up and down the lineup that could hit third or fourth for any other team in the league. I’ve talked to a lot of baseball people through the years who have told me that the 1927 Yankees, as potent as they were offensively, they had nothing on the lineup we had back in those years.”

Lofton and Belle both had multiple monster seasons in succeeding years, but the truncated 1994 season might have been the greatest for each had the season been allowed to play to its conclusion.

“Albert was doing damage beyond belief and Kenny was doing athletic things beyond belief,” said Shapiro.

Lofton hit .349 with a .412 on-base percentage and 60 stolen bases. Belle hit .357 with a .438 on-base percentage, a .714 slugging percentage, 36 home runs and 101 RBI.

All that in just 113 games. Imagine what those totals might have been had the Indians played the 49 games that were lost to the players’ strike. As a team, the Indians led the league in runs scored, hits, doubles, home runs, batting average, slugging percentage and total bases.

“The two previous years we took our lumps but everyone saw the talent we had. Everything was coming together. Then we signed Dennis Martinez and Eddie Murray and that added a lot of leadership to the roster, and we already had a lot of solid guys who were getting better and better,” said Nagy.

“We probably would have had a winning club had we stayed in the old stadium, but we never would have been able to do the things we did as a result of what the new stadium provided,” Hart said. “I remember when I did my exit interviews with each of the players at the end of the 1993 season, all of them, to a man, told me, ‘We’re ready to win.’”

Win, they did. They spent 64 days in first place in 1994, and on the day play was halted by the strike, their record was 66-47, the farthest they were over .500 all season.

Not even Belle’s corked bat fiasco could derail them. On July 15 in Chicago, White Sox manager Gene Lamont asked the umpires to check Belle’s bat. They did, and were sufficiently suspicious that they confiscated it, to be X-rayed later for cork.

Belle’s teammates immediately swung into action. While the game was still going on, Grimsley hoisted himself through the ceiling tiles in the Tribe clubhouse and wiggled through the crawlspace, into the adjacent umpires’ room. Grimsley dropped down into the umpires’ room, and replaced Belle’s bat with one of teammate Paul Sorrento’s.

Belle was eventually suspended for 10 games, but appealed the suspension, which was then reduced to seven games by American League president Dr. Bobby Brown.

* * *

Meanwhile, the Indians kept winning, and the Aug. 11 strike deadline kept getting closer.

“Very little that happened that year could dampen what we were experiencing in Cleveland. The threat of the strike kind of lingered in the background. It was one of those things you didn’t talk about, but it was always in the back of your mind,” said Shapiro.

“It was tough not to think about it. I had been with the Indians since 1990, and now we were finally getting good, and we were in a nice new stadium, but you knew there was a chance that the season would be cut short,” said Alomar.

“I tried not to think about it because I was really confident that this was going to be our first playoff year. We were really hitting our stride, and we knew we were sitting on a great club,” said Hart.

Hargrove said he and his coaches decided to go for broke in however many games there might be left in the season.

“We realized that the season was in danger of being stopped in August, so I met with the coaches,” he said. “We decided that we were going to play the last two weeks leading up to the deadline like it was the last two weeks of the season, because I remember the last stoppage they had, the teams that were ahead at the time they stopped it — they were the teams that went into the postseason. So we made a concerted effort to try to get ahead of the White Sox by the time they pulled the plug on the season. We even explained it to the players that that was what we were going to do, and that was how we were going to treat it.”

When the players went on strike on Aug. 11, the Indians were in second place in the AL Central, one game behind Chicago.

“We felt we were going to win the division,” Shapiro said. “The White Sox were feeling us. We were playing great baseball and we were getting better.”

The Indians player most involved in those tumultuous days was Nagy, the team’s player representative. It was his job to meet with union leadership and keep his Indians’ teammates abreast of the looming strike.

“Everyone knew the deadline was approaching, and when the deadline came and there was no new deal, we all started packing our bags,” Nagy said. “Most of the guys hung around Cleveland for a few days in case they settled it. Most of us lived on the west side, so we would work out together. But once it became obvious that it was going to drag on guys started going home.”

The ever-vigilant Hart refused to throw in the towel.

“I really thought we would play again that year,” he said. “I wouldn’t allow myself to think it was over. In fact, I traded for Dave Winfield during the strike. That’s how sure I was that we were going to play again. I never lost hope that we would.”

On Aug. 31, three weeks into the players strike, Hart acquired future Hall of Famer Winfield in a cash deal with Minnesota. Winfield would not wear an Indians uniform in 1994.

On Sept. 14, Selig cancelled the remainder of the regular season, and all of the postseason, including the World Series.

“That was a shock to everyone. That’s something I never thought would happen,” said Nagy.

“I thought there was a chance we would play again that season,” Hargrove said. “I did hear some talk that they were going to shut it down for the rest of the season and that there might be no postseason, but I thought there was no way in the world they wouldn’t have a World Series. But that’s what happened, and that’s when I realized how serious it was because, now we were in uncharted waters. ... I don’t think any of us

knew what to do with ourselves because it was the middle of summer and we weren't playing baseball."

* * *

The strike that led to the cancellation of the season and the World Series put the Indians' players in an awkward situation. They obviously had to show solidarity with the Players Association, but by so doing it was leading to the end of their magical season in Cleveland.

"It was hard," Alomar said. "You want to do what's best for the players, but to see us finally having a winning season in Cleveland, and then having it wiped out. That was really hard. Who knows? We might have won the World Series that year."

Instead there was no World Series that year. Nowhere was the disappointment of the strike felt more acutely than in Cleveland, where the Indians, after decades of trying, had finally assembled a powerhouse team — only to have the season pulled out from under them.

"We really felt we wanted to build a winner, not for one year but for five or 10 years. And that's what we did," said Hargrove. "John, Danny and Mark positioned that club to do that, so we still felt really good about the team, even with the season being stopped."

Still, had there been no strike, the Indians theoretically could have brought the World Series to Jacobs Field in its first year of operation.

Does that make 1994, the first season at Jacobs Field, a lost season for the Tribe?

"Not a lost season but a lost opportunity. With the team we had, the attitude, the cockiness and the swagger we had developed, we knew we were going to be good for a few years. So the '94 season ended early, but we picked it right back up in '95," said Nagy.

"We were confident that we were headed into a unique stretch of our history," said Shapiro. "Our window of opportunity was not going to be a small one. At the time of the strike, we understood it from the business side of the game, but we just wanted to get that team out on the field and let them play."

Hargrove tried to see the big picture as well.

"Once they stopped the season it was really disappointing, because we were really excited about what that club could have done," he said.

"What did happen that year, though, is those guys proved to me that they could have just average years for them and it would still be good enough to give us a chance to win the World Series. The next spring, when they had the replacement players I got worried that this thing was going to drag on even longer and we had this great team ready to go. I heard talk that the owners might want to shut it down for two years. That really made me nervous. But what was really important for us about the '94 season is that it set the stage for all those great years that followed."

Hart, who had as much, if not more of a hand than anyone in building that 1994 Indians team and all the powerhouse ones that followed it, feels the sting of that early end to the '94 season to this day.

"It was a lost season in the sense that we felt we had a playoff club and it was very disappointing to have it end that way, when we felt we were headed for the playoffs," he said. "But it wasn't a lost season in the sense that we came back the next year and won 100 of 144 games. The 1994 team and that '94 season was the impetus that led to that because it was then that our young guys learned how to win.

"So that '94 season, although it was a disappointment because it denied us a trip to the playoffs, it ended up paying dividends for the next several years. But at the time we were bitterly disappointed."

Hart still remembers his emotions from that September day, 20 years ago this year, when he found out the baseball season was being halted for good and there would be no World Series — that the first season at Jacobs Field would not be played to a conclusion.

"It made you shed a little tear," he said, "but then it was, 'All right, there's nothing we can do about it now.' We were all sitting here saying we've got this great team and we may never be able to get it on the field again' ... We'll just have to come back with a vengeance next year."

Lake County Captains roster set; 2013 first-round draft pick Clint Frazier stays in Arizona

By David Glasier, The News-Herald

Spring training is over for the Lake County Captains, and the 2014 opening roster is official.

Settling into the home clubhouse at Classic Park are 16 newcomers and 10 holdovers who spent all or part of the 2013 season with the Indians' Single-A Midwest League affiliate.

Not on the roster is the Indians' first-round pick of the 2013 draft is outfielder Clint Frazier, drafted No. 5 overall last June.

The 19-year-old slugger was on track to break camp with the Captains before he was sidelined for more than a week in spring training with a tweaked hamstring.

As of March 29, Frazier had returned to action. He'll remain in Goodyear, Ariz., until summoned to the Captains.

By position group, there are 13 pitchers (10 right-handers, three left-handers), three catchers, five infielders and five outfielders.

To fulfill the requirement of a 25-man roster, one pitcher or position player will be dropped from the active roster by the time the Captains host the Lansing (Mich.) Lugnuts in the regular-season opener on April 4.

Prior to that, on April 1 at 5 p.m., the Captains will face the Double-A Akron RubberDucks in a seven-inning exhibition game at Classic Park.

The returnees include highly touted shortstop Dorssys Paulino, a 19-year-old native of the Dominican Republic who last season batted .246 with 46 RBI in 120 games.

Paulino, the youngest player on a roster with an average age of 21.23, will be expected to improve defensively after making a Midwest League-high 39 errors last season.

Catchers Eric Haase and Richard Stock are back for return engagements in Eastlake, too.

Haase, 21, batted .250 with 14 home runs and 47 RBI in 104 games last season. Stock, 23, batted .280 with eight home runs and 31 RBI in 55 games.

Nine of the pitchers are newcomers, including 22-year-old right-hander Adam Plutko.

The 6-foot-3, 195-pound right-hander from California was the Indians' 11th-round selection in the June 2013 draft out of UCLA.

Plutko was named Most Valuable Player in the 2013 College World Series for his contribution to the Bruins winning their first national title.

Another newcomer is 21-year-old outfielder Brian Ruiz, a Lincoln West High School graduate selected by the Indians in the 41st round of the June 2011 draft.

Also making their debuts in Lake County are Manager Mark Budzinski and pitching coach Rigo Beltran. Hitting coach Shaun Larkin was a player on the inaugural Captains squad in 2003.

A day like no other: Indians excited to start the season

Filed on March 31, 2014 by [Chris Assenheimer](#)

CLEVELAND — It's an event like no other for baseball players and fans: Opening Day.

For the Indians, it's actually Opening Night, with Cleveland beginning its quest to return to the postseason for the second straight year at 10:05 p.m. against the A's at O.co Coliseum in Oakland, Calif.

"It's one of the best days," Indians second baseman Jason Kipnis said of Major League Baseball's Opening Day. "It's probably the most fun day of the season. People haven't had baseball in a long time and it's their first chance to get back to the stadium. It's go time from there."

Going for the Indians for the third consecutive time on Opening Day is ace Justin Masterson, who looks to build on his first All-Star season last year, while getting his team off to a winning start.

"You want to be that Opening Day guy, you want to go out and set the tone for the year," said Masterson, who pitched well in his first two Opening Day assignments for Cleveland. "It's just neat. It's the one day that everyone is just pumped up, no matter what team you are. It's a little bit of an honor to be able to go out there and set the tone."

It's a tough start to the season for the Indians, who not only have to travel across the country for a three-game series before returning to Cleveland for the home opener April 4, but also face an Oakland team that is bidding for its third straight American League West Division title. Still, the opponent hardly matters. It's all about pomp and circumstance on the regular-season's first day.

"Opening Day, man, you're like a little kid," first baseman Nick Swisher said. "You're floating on clouds all day. At that point right there, everybody starts out the same. Everybody's 0-0, and then we just grind out 162 from there. Opening Day, it's like no other."

"Opening Day for everybody, I don't care how many years you do it, it's mostly excitement," said manager Terry Francona, who embarks on his second season in Cleveland after winning American League Manager of the Year honors during his debut last year. "The idea is to get into the grind of the season, because then you can find out how good you can be."

Though the games didn't count, the Indians looked pretty good this spring in Arizona, where they posted the majors' second-best exhibition record (20-9). It's put them in the right frame of mind to begin the marathon schedule, according to Swisher.

"With exactly how the spring has gone, we've got to be super happy about that," Swisher said. "Whether it's spring training or not, I think winning baseball games is important, especially with where we're trying to take this organization."

That would be back to the postseason.

A's have confidence in Sonny Gray for opener

Susan Slusser

Asked what makes Sonny Gray so special, catcher John Jaso paused.

"His smile," Jaso joked.

Gray's young-DiCaprio looks and his small stature earn him plenty of grief in the A's clubhouse, but Gray's teammates are firm believers in his talent. And with Jarrod Parker out for the season after Tommy John surgery, the A's turn to Gray as their Opening Night starter on Monday against the Indians.

"He's the guy you want with the ball in his hand," catcher Stephen Vogt said last week. "Sonny is fearless. He has the ability to be an ace on any team in baseball right now."

He's listed at 5-foot-11, but is a good inch or two shorter than that, so Gray reminds many people of former Astros star Roy Oswalt. He has also drawn comparisons to a former A's starter, Tim Hudson, a smaller-stature right-hander who burst onto the scene in 1999. Like Gray, Hudson was an Oakland draft pick out of a Southern college program, Hudson from Auburn and Gray from Vanderbilt.

Hudson has seen Gray on TV, and he also watched him when Gray faced the Giants this spring.

"I can see it," Hudson said of the similarities between the two. "He's not a very tall guy and he's got good stuff - he throws a lot harder than I did, but I think our presence on the field is similar. I think there's something built in when you're constantly having to prove yourself."

"You can tell he has confidence. It's not an overwhelming swagger, but a quiet confidence - 'I'm going to show you. I might not look like a whole lot, but you're going to find out what I've got.'"

Then there is the stuff, including a four-seam fastball that registers in the mid-90s, and a superb curveball. Gray spent the spring working on his changeup and his two-seamer, and he also has a slider he'll use on occasion.

One scout who saw most of Gray's spring starts and several of his 12 regular-season appearances last year said that the rest of the league "is in trouble," though he used more colorful language. When the A's face his team, the scout said, he hopes Gray gets stuck in traffic.

"He's got a 96 mph fastball that moves - and it's a challenge to catch," Jaso said. "Therefore, he's not that fun to hit. With him, it's just getting strike one, because the ball moves so much, and he can take (velocity) off and get more movement or he can amp up and blow it by you for a strikeout."

"He's got a good sense of what he's capable of, and he's developing in the right direction."

Gray, 24, was drafted in 2011. Jaso said that considering that, he's well ahead of schedule.

"Usually, three years into pro ball, pitchers have no clue," Jaso said. "Sonny does. He's strong mentally, and that gives him a big advantage."

"Sonny is pitching like he's been here for five years," right fielder Josh Reddick said. "He's a bulldog. I'm sure he didn't picture being the Opening Day starter in his first full season, but he is, and he'll be fine. He goes out there with an 'I'm better than you' attitude - and then he shows he is better than anyone else."

Rain is in the forecast for Opening Night, but when asked about the weather for his start, Gray flashed that smile and said, "It'll be Sonny."

Susan Slusser is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer.

San Francisco Chronicle LOADED: 03.31.2014

A's pitching depth should shield blow of losing Parker, Griffin

By John Hickey

OAKLAND -- For the ninth consecutive season, the A's will have a different opening day starting pitcher. But the Oakland rotation is perhaps less reliant on an opening day starter than most in the big leagues.

Even after injuries have forced starters Jarrod Parker and A.J. Griffin to the sidelines -- Parker for the season -- and even with 18-game winner Bartolo Colon gone to the New York Mets, the A's begin the 2014 season Monday against the Cleveland Indians with a rotation rich in promise. The two-time defending American League West champs are still favored to win the division or finish close to the top.

Oakland Athletics starting pitcher Tommy Milone throws to the Cincinnati Reds during the first inning of a spring exhibition baseball game in Phoenix,

There is no Jered Weaver or Felix Hernandez at the top of the Oakland rotation, although 24-year-old Sonny Gray, who gets the opening day call, could one day that elite company in the future. But for now the A's strength is the depth they have in the rotation -- a starting staff so deep they can sell the belief that the dropoff will be minimal.

The two pitchers who will replace Parker and Griffin, and take the fourth and fifth positions in the rotation behind Gray, Scott Kazmir and Dan Straily -- lefty Tommy Milone and righty Jesse Chavez -- both had a chance to win jobs in the rotation even without the injuries.

Milone came into spring training having won a combined 25 games the last two seasons as a rotation member. Chavez worked his way into contention by throwing shutout baseball his first 122/3 innings of the spring. He then finished up with 51/3 shutout innings Friday against the Giants, good for a 2.22 spring ERA.

"I look at Tom Milone as having been in the rotation the last two years, and we know what he can do," pitching coach Curt Young said. "His teammates would take the field every fifth day knowing what he would bring, that he'd give them a chance to win, a good chance.

"And Jesse is at a stage in his career where it's time for him to step up. He's had success at Triple-A as a starter and success for us as a long man in the bullpen. The next natural move is for him to be a starter."

The rotation issue for the A's may not be the names as much as it might be the innings. Parker, who had Tommy John-style ligament replacement surgery in his right elbow, threw 197 innings last year. Griffin, currently nearing the end of a three-week hiatus during which he was under strict orders not to throw so as to rest his right elbow, threw a team-best 200 innings in 2013.

Milone did throw 190 innings two years ago, but Chavez has not thrown more than 126 1/3 innings in any season as a pro, and in most of his 10 seasons he has pitched fewer than 100 innings.

A's manager Bob Melvin, however, said, "it wouldn't be crazy at all to me" to think of Chavez pitching in the rotation all year long, even when Griffin is ready to come back, which probably won't be earlier than mid-May.

The A's showed their belief in Gray when they went with him over Colon in Game 5 of the AL Division Series against the Detroit Tigers last season. Gray can throw 97 mph, but his out pitch is a dynamic curve that explodes at the plate.

"And he's always been someone who has pitched in big games," Melvin said. "He's not scared of it. He enjoys it."

Kazmir was out of baseball a couple of years ago after his fastball flattened out in Anaheim. But he rebuilt himself in independent baseball and made it back to the majors last year with the Indians, throwing in the low-to-mid 90s. He's gone from power pitcher to using four different pitches. It worked for a 1.62 ERA in four starts this spring.

Straily made a seamless transition last year from the minors to the big leagues, winning 10 games. Straily, who for the first time in his career didn't have to spend the spring trying to win a position, said he sees the rotation as a major asset in the Oakland narrative heading forward.

"We will have guys step up," Straily said. "We always have. It's what we do here."

That's not just an internal feeling.

"The A's got pitching," Texas manager Ron Washington said. "Jarrod Parker going down, that gives one of the other phenoms a chance. They develop pitching. They're going to miss Parker, but they've got pitching. They always have and they always will. They develop pitching. They're going to be fine. Just because they lose one pitcher doesn't mean they're going to fall apart."

Gray takes the mound Monday night hoping to prove Washington right.

For more on the A's, see John Hickey's Inside the A's blog at ibabuzz.com/athletics. Follow him on Twitter at twitter.com/JHickey3.

Oakland Tribune LOADED: 03.31.2014