Healthy dose of optimism after Brantley debut
LF homers, contributes OF assist, still targets Opening Day
By Jordan Bastian / MLB.com | @MLBastian | March 19, 2016 + 1 COMMENT

GOODYEAR, Ariz. -- Corey Kluber did not see the swing. After hearing the familiar crack of Michael Brantley's bat on Saturday night, the Indians pitcher saw the baseball soaring into the air. And, really, Kluber did not need to see the smooth blur of Brantley's bat slicing through the strike zone.

If you have seen one of Brantley's swings, you have seemingly seen them all.
• Indians Spring Training info
  "I'm sure it was the same swing he takes on every ball," Kluber said. "He's got the same swing no matter what. He's got a really short, simple swing. I think that's why he's able to repeat it so easily. I'm not a hitting coach, but if I could teach somebody a swing, I'd say swing like that."

In a 10-5 victory over the Cubs in a packed Goodyear Ballpark, Brantley made his much-anticipated Spring Training debut and displayed the same swing that has turned him into a star for Cleveland. Brantley had three at-bats, belted a two-run home run and even contributed an outfield assist in his first Cactus League action of the preseason.

Brantley plays in Minors game
Brantley getting closer, plays in Minor League game
Brantley's first official stroke of 2016 sent a pitch to the warning track in center field in the opening inning. In the fifth, the noise of Brantley's swing got Kluber's attention, and the baseball that rocketed off his bat landed in the bleacher seats beyond the right-field wall. The crowd roared as Brantley rounded the bases to cap a memorable return to the field.

"I'm very excited," Brantley said. "I woke up at the normal time, even though we had a late [game] time, at 5:45 this morning. I was excited and ready to go. It was a good day."

Brantley underwent labral surgery on his right (non-throwing) shoulder on Nov. 9, and the initial timetable for return projected that the outfielder might be ready by April or May, or even later in the summer. During the Winter Meetings, there were even rumblings that Brantley could be out until August. This spring, Brantley has made it crystal clear that he has his own ideas.

Brantley wants to be in the Opening Day lineup on April 4 against the Red Sox.
"They told me I was going to be ready when I told them I was ready," Brantley said. "I did everything I could this offseason. I didn't take a day off. I did everything the training staff asked me to, the doctors asked me to. I stuck to the program and I feel good. I've had another surgery before. I know what I have to do to get back."

Indians manager Terry Francona has gone to great lengths to curb expectations, noting repeatedly that the team will not hesitate to put Brantley on the disabled list to start the year, if that is what the medical staff believes is necessary. Brantley is too important to Cleveland's roster, and postseason chances, to risk any setbacks.

"I guess I trust him so much that I haven't really been that concerned," Francona said. "Believe me, I know how important he is. But, I know what he's doing and when he's able to be ready, he's going to be ready. And it won't be a moment later."

In the third inning, when Kluber was in a bases-loaded jam with one out, Cubs slugger Kris Bryant yanked a pitch just beyond the reach of shortstop Francisco Lindor and into left field for an RBI single. Ben Zobrist tried to score from second base on the play, but Brantley put a stop to that. The left fielder sprinted in, plucked the ball from the grass and rifled Zobrist out at the plate.

Kluber allowed only the one run in the inning.
"He's one of the better left fielders in baseball," Kluber said. "That was a big play in that inning right there."

It was the second outfield assist through two games played this spring for Brantley. During a Minor League game appearance on Thursday, Brantley threw out Minor Leaguer Mike Papi at second base when the prospect tried to stretch a single to left into a double.

The next step for Brantley is simply to see how his body reacts come Sunday morning.
Following that assessment, the Indians will map out his next game appearance.
"I've still got some bumps in the road to get over," Brantley said. "Tonight was just another step."

Velocity an issue for Bauer, but not team
By Jordan Bastian / MLB.com | @MLBastian | March 19, 2016 + 1 COMMENT

GOODYEAR, Ariz. -- Unsatisfied with his average pitch speed last year, Indians starter Trevor Bauer spent much of his offseason focused on velocity training. The work over the winter has carried over into the spring, but Cleveland does not think the issue is of great importance at the moment.

During a four-inning Minor League appearance on Friday, Bauer showed improvement with his cutter and curveball, according to Indians pitching coach Mickey Callaway. Discussing the outing on Saturday afternoon, Callaway was also quick to note that the pitcher was still trying to reach back for more velocity on his fastball.
• Indians Spring Training info
  Callaway said Bauer's pitch speed is already at an acceptable level.
  "He's [one of the hardest] throwers in the big leagues right now, and he's trying to throw harder," Callaway said. "He's been at 95-96 [mph], but he's not happy with that. He's still a little focused on velocity, but that's where his focus was over the offseason."
  "Not for me," said the manager.

According to PITCHf/x data compiled by brooksbaseball.net, Bauer averaged 93.7 mph on his four-seam fastball and 93.6 mph on his two-seamer last season. Those marks were down from 94.9 mph and 91.5 mph, respectively, in the 2014 season.

After focusing on command two offseasons ago, Bauer wanted to dedicate this past winter to improving the speed of his fastball.
"Mostly it was just become a more efficient thrower and work on my velocity development," Bauer said earlier this spring. "My velocity was too low last year. I actually felt like I commanded the ball fine, even though my walk numbers don't support that. I don't feel like that's necessarily a problem. I worked on it. I work on everything."
Last season, Bauer led the American League with 79 walks in his 176 innings, averaging four walks per nine innings, compared to 3.5 in '14.

Callaway noted that he has seen the right-hander alter his approach with his fastball this spring in an effort to work on that issue. The pitching coach said Bauer has tried to focus more on locating his fastball down and away -- something the Indians wanted to see more last year.

In Friday's outing against the Dodgers' Triple-A affiliate, Bauer walked two and struck out two, allowing one run on one hit in his four innings. In the Minor League setting, the starter was able to concentrate a lot on his cutter and curve, and Callaway was impressed with both of those pitches.

"He was able to throw his curveball for strikes," Callaway said. "It seems like he's got a little bit more of a feel to throw it in the zone this year, instead of just bunting it. So, he did a really good job with that. And he threw some really good cutters. And I do see an approach that's different than last year. All in all, it's been better. That's encouraging."

And Bauer's velocity, as far as Francona and Callaway are concerned, is not a problem.

"He's still kind of caught up in the velocity," Francona said. "I think the ball's coming out of his hand just fine."

**Brantley HRs in debut as Tribe tops Cubs**

By Jordan Bastian / MLB.com | @MLBastian | March 19th, 2016 + 0 COMMENTS

GOODYEAR, Ariz. -- Indians starter Corey Kluber knows he will be taking the mound on Opening Day. Left fielder Michael Brantley is doing everything in his power to join him. On Saturday night, that duo led the way in a 10-5 Cactus League victory over the Cubs.

Kluber continued his stellar spring showing with five innings, continuing to build toward his second Opening Day assignment for Cleveland. Brantley, who underwent surgery on his right shoulder in November and is aiming to be ready in time for the Indians' April 4 season opener, launched a two-run home run and chalked up an outfield assist in his Cactus League debut.

"I'm very excited, yeah," Brantley said of being back in games. "I woke up at the normal time, even though we had a late [game] time, at 5:45 this morning. I was excited and ready to go. It was a good day."

The run was the first allowed this spring by Kluber, who has 16 strikeouts and three walks in his 14 Cactus League innings. Against the Cubs, the right-hander struck out five, walked one and dodged the potential damage of six hits allowed.

"That was a big play in that inning right there," Kluber said of Brantley's assist. "Bases loaded, nobody out, all of a sudden you can kind of sneak one out right there with him making a great throw and getting the guy at the plate. That kind of changes the dynamic of the inning, and luckily enough, we were able to hold them to just one run."

Indians manager Terry Francona praised his right-hander after the game.

"It's unbelievable how much he pays attention to detail," Francona said. "It's been steadily almost like one mile an hour higher each outing. It just continues to creep up to where he'll be during the season. He had to throw out of the stretch a little bit there and, with Brantley making the play, he limited damage like he does. It was a really good outing."

Francona also was thrilled for Brantley.

"Good for him," Francona said. "Besides the fact that he took some good swings, you saw the way that everybody reacted to him. [It was] good. I think it's pretty obviously that he's been working pretty hard."

Johnson was sent down to the Minor League camp on Friday, and Saturday might have been his last Cactus League start of the year. It also was his best outing, as he spun four shutout innings with a pair of strikeouts. He was pumped about getting a hit to lead off the third, too.

"I got my first hit, too. Wow -- a base hit off Corey Kluber. That was fun," Johnson said.

He has been working on fine-tuning his mechanics with pitching coach Chris Bosio, and felt the lessons finally paid off.

"For me, it's minimizing the mistakes and pinpointing the pitches," Johnson said. "The more consistent I can be throwing strikes and keeping the ball down, I think that will translate to success."

Following Johnson's exit, the Indians struck for nine runs across the fifth and sixth.

In the fifth, Cubs reliever Justin Grimm issued a pair of walks before allowing a run-scoring groundout to Francisco Lindor and an RBI single to Jason Kipnis. That set the stage for Brantley, who pulled a 2-0 pitch over the right-field wall for a two-run homer in his third and final at-bat of the night. In a five-run sixth, Lindor added an RBI single and Kipnis knocked in a run with a fielder's choice.

Jason Vosler connected for a three-run homer in the eighth inning for the Cubs. Robbie Grossman added a solo shot in the Cleveland eighth.

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Up next for Cubs: Jon Lester will make his second Cactus League start on Sunday when the Cubs play host to the Royals at Sloan Park. Lester gave up three earned runs on seven hits over two innings in his first outing, on March 10, then made his next start in an intrasquad game and a more controlled setting. The game will be broadcast on MLB.TV and Gameday Audio starting at 3:05 p.m. CT.

Up next for Indians: Outfielder Marlon Byrd, who signed a Minor League contract with the Tribe on Friday, is scheduled to make his Indians debut as a designated hitter on Sunday, when Cleveland heads to Peoria, Ariz., for a 4:10 p.m. ET tilt against the Mariners. Lefty T.J. House is slated to start and log five innings, with Tom Gorzelanny, Ross Detwiler, Joba Chamberlain, Austin Adams and Joe Thatcher also penciled in to pitch. The game will be available on MLB.TV and Gameday Audio.

**Armstrong sent to Triple-A Columbus**

By Jordan Bastian / MLB.com | @MLBastian | March 19th, 2016 + 0 COMMENTS

GOODYEAR, Ariz. -- The Indians believe that hard-throwing Shawn Armstrong will play a role in their bullpen at some point this season. Cleveland just was not confident the reliever would have enough time to be at full strength by Opening Day.

On Saturday, the Indians optioned Armstrong to Triple-A Columbus, following a spring showing that was hindered by right lat tightness.

Armstrong appeared in only two Cactus League games and slipped behind other bullpen candidates as Cleveland maps out its Opening Day plans.
Indians Spring Training info

"We tried to explain that to him today, 'Try to look at the big picture,'” Indians manager Terry Francona said. "We needed to slow him down this spring and, with a young pitcher or player, sometimes when they get called up, you want them to be on a roll. He wasn't going to be able to do that in the next 10 days or two weeks."

Armstrong, 25, spent eight games with the Indians down the stretch last season, posting a 2.25 ERA with 11 strikeouts and two walks in eight innings. The righty averaged 94.5 mph on his fastball and topped out at 98.5, according to brooksbaseball.net. Between Triple-A and Cleveland, Armstrong had 91 strikeouts in 57 2/3 innings combined in ’15.

"I think he will help us at some point," Francona said. "He's got a really good arm and he's kind of growing up and growing into who he is. Last year he made huge steps, and I don't see that being any different this year."

Other items of note from Saturday:

• One of the reasons the Indians targeted veteran outfielder Rajai Davis was his ability to handle a variety of roles. He can play left or center field. He has experience as a leadoff hitter and hits lefties well. And, Cleveland thinks he can be an everyday player or a role player, depending on need at any given time.

"When he doesn't [play every day], I don't think it hurts his production," Francona said. "Sometimes, that's rare. He has the ability to certainly play every day, but he also has the ability to not have to have everyday at-bats and still be a really good player."

• Indians shortstop Francisco Lindor headed into Saturday's action with a .214 average through 28 Cactus League at-bats. Francona said he is not worried one bit about the young switch-hitter’s results at this point in camp.

Francona on Lindor's approach

Francona discusses Lindor's approach at the plate

"I don't even know what it is," Francona said of Lindor's batting average. "He's getting ready for a long season. He's in a different place than he was last year. There's other things on his plate during the day. There might be something that happens over here in the morning that [convinces me that] his day's already been productive."

• Third baseman Juan Uribe was scheduled to arrive in Arizona at some point on Sunday, barring any travel issues on his return trip from the Dominican Republic. Once he is back in camp, Francona said, the team will meet with the veteran to plan his return-to-games schedule.

• Outfielder Marlon Byrd, who signed a Minor League contract with the Indians on Friday, is slated to serve as the designated hitter for Sunday’s game against the Mariners. The Indians want him to get a few at-bats before playing him in the field.

• Right fielder Lonnie Chisenhall, who dealt with right forearm tightness in recent days, is now symptom-free, according to Francona. The manager said Chisenhall will likely return to Cactus League action on either Sunday or Monday.

Goodyear Ballpark went over the one million mark for attendance. It opened in the spring of 2009 when the Indians relocated from Winter Haven, Florida. The Cincinnati Reds joined them the following spring, moving from Sarasota, Florida.

Jean Wilson from Las Vegas was the one millionth fan. She was given a chance to win several prizes in a draw of envelopes. Prizes included various expense paid trips, $10,000 and a million dollars. Ms. Wilson won a trip to Las Vegas.

Haven, Florida. The Cincinnati Reds joined them the following spring, moving from Sarasota, Florida.

Jason Vosler hit a three-run home run for the Cubs off Jeff Manship.

GOODYEAR, Ariz. (AP) -- Michael Brantley homered and threw out Ben Zobrist at home in his first game of spring training and the Cleveland Indians beat the Chicago Cubs 10-5 Saturday night.

Brantley homered in 1st spring game, Indians beat Cubs 10-5

By GARY SCHATZ (Associated Press)8 hours ago AP - Sports

Brantley flied to the warning track in center his first at-bat but cleared the right-field wall with a man on in the fourth against Justin Grimm. "Good for him, besides the fact he took some good swings, you saw how everyone reacted," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "He put in a lot of hard work."

Brantley homered in 1st spring game, Indians beat Cubs 10-5

Brantley threw out Zobrist at the plate from left field after Corey Kluber allowed his first run of the spring. Brantley's non-throwing shoulder was surgically repaired in November.

"It felt good to out there with my teammates," Brantley said. "I was so excited. It was a night game but I woke up the normal time, 5:05 am. I was ready to go. I still have some bumps in the road to get over. I need to play full games, in back-to-back games. Tonight was another step. We'll see how I respond in the morning and be ready to work."

Kluber allowed a run on six hits over five innings and struck out five. He pitched nine scoreless innings coming into the game.

"He (Brantley) plays a great left field, one of the best in baseball," Kluber said. "It was a big play in the inning, bases loaded nobody out. All of the sudden he makes a great throw and it changes the dynamic of the inning. They only get one run."

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ONE IN A MILLION

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LET 'EM HIT

The Cubs allowed their pitcher to hit even though the home team was from the American League and by rule could have used the designated hitter. Johnson singled to open the third off Kluber. Carlos Santana was the designated hitter for the Indians.

STARTING TIME

Cubs: Johnson was optioned to Triple-A Iowa on Friday. He allowed a two-out triple to Francisco Lindor and a two-out double to Mike Napoli. Indians: Kluber, the opening day starter, went to the bullpen to throw more pitches after his longest outing of the spring. "Any time he has to go to the bullpen and throw more pitches, it means he did pretty well," Francona said. "He pays such attention to detail. Every outing, it's been steadily like one mile an hour higher. He continues to creep up to where he will be in the season."

TRAINER'S ROOM

Cubs: Javier Baez was in the lineup in center field. Baez was injured when he slid head first and jammed his left thumb on Wednesday. ... Zobrist was in the lineup. He missed a day with an ingrown toe nail.
Baseball by the new numbers: What are those statistics?

By Ryan Lewis

In addition to the traditional batting average, RBI, ERA and OBP (on-base percentage), baseball has, for the past several years, been including new statistical measurements to place value on players. Here is a quick tutorial on some of these stats that are quickly becoming more commonplace among baseball’s decision makers, media and fans.

WAR (Wins Above Replacement) — A way to take into account all facets of the game (hitting, defense, etc.) and measure a player’s total value in how many wins he means to his team in a season compared to an average replacement player, such as a minor leaguer.

FIP (Fielding Independent Pitching) — Along the lines of ERA, this takes a team’s fielding out of the equation and measures a pitcher’s run prevention if he had a league average defense behind him by valuing outcomes that don’t rely on defense, like strikeouts, walks and home runs. It is essentially what a pitcher’s ERA would be with an average defense.

BABIP (Batting Average on Balls In Play) — This is a player’s batting average on only the balls he puts into play that can be fielded. It is often used to predict future performance based on this number being above or below the league average which is right around .300.

WRC+ (Weighted Runs Created Plus) — Strictly an offensive metric that puts a percentile value on a player with 100 being considered league average. Each point above or below 100 represents one percentage point better or worse than league average. This also factors in a player’s home ballpark and how it plays relative to offensive production and league-wide hitting trends so as to keep hitters on an even playing field.

DRS (Defensive Runs Saved) — A metric that measures a player’s total defensive value and figures how many runs that player saves or gives up (if it’s a negative number) on defense in a season with zero considered league average.

UZR (Ultimate Zone Rating) — A metric that incorporates a player’s range, arm strength and plays made into a number with zero considered league average.

Understanding the advanced baseball statistics is a must, even if you’re late to the game

By Ryan Lewis

The train started to leave the station a couple of years ago, but you can still catch it. If you’re a baseball fan who has avoided baseball’s statistical renaissance in the past decade-plus, it’s time to finally get on board.

It’s been going on for much longer than that thanks to baseball information pioneer Bill James. But it wasn’t until Billy Beane and the Moneyball Oakland Athletics in the early 2000s that people really began to take notice. And in the past three to four years especially, baseball’s sabermetric statistics have taken over the game and ushered in a new era.

The important aspect, if you’re still on the fence or don’t want to bother with the new-age view, is that it isn’t just a different way some fans like to analyze the game. These numbers have altered the way that teams make decisions and how they value players. It is now a key aspect in the decision-making process throughout the leagues. In this way, not understanding these numbers is willingly leaving yourself out in the cold to what’s going on with the game. Teams have analytical departments, entire offices dedicated to analyzing the mountains of information that are now available. So, that is how the game must be covered as well.

Many fans have viewed the game the same way for decades, and there’s nothing really wrong with that. All of the traditional stats are still valued, but there’s a new frontier of information available to offer a more complete picture on a player’s performance. Those statistics are not going away and will continue to be prominent in the way the Indians and the rest of the major leagues are covered.

There are six measurements that will be used here most often: Wins Above Replacement (WAR), Field Independent Pitching (FIP), Batting Average On Balls In Play (BABIP), Weighted Runs Created Plus (wRC+), Defensive Runs Saved (DRS) and Ultimate Zone Rating (UZR).

In an effort to make sure these numbers — or what they really mean — aren’t lost, and to make sure everything is clear to those who are new to it all, here’s a quick primer with context using examples from the Indians’ 2015 season. Once you know what each number means and what it actually is saying, everything is much more easily digested.

Below are quick definitions as a starter. All of the following numbers are according to analytical baseball website FanGraphs.com.

WAR

The number that aims to encompass all facets of the game and say how many wins a player gave his team over a replacement level player is also the one that sparked debates over recent American League Most Valuable Player races when Detroit Tigers first baseman Miguel Cabrera — a great hitter — and Los Angeles’ Mike Trout — a superb all-around player — were the top candidates.

In terms of the Indians, Jason Kipnis led the Indians with 5.2 WAR, much behind his torrid first half of the season. Francisco Lindor was second on the team with 4.6 WAR despite playing only 99 games. Michael Brantley’s 3.8, Carlos Santana’s 2.4 and Lonnie Chisenhall’s 2.1 were next among position players. Going the other way, the departed Michael Bourn had a -0.1 in his 95 games for the Indians, indicating he was below the average minor-league replacement player in his time with the Indians.

Kipnis’ 5.2 means he added 5.2 wins to the Indians’ 2015 season above what a replacement player would have. It also led all second basemen in 2015, meaning he was the most valuable. Lindor’s 4.6 led the AL among shortstops and was second in the game behind the San Francisco Giants’ Brandon Crawford at 4.7.

Indians: 3B Juan Uribe has solved his visa problems and is en route to Goodyear. ... OF Marlon Byrd, who signed a minor league contract on Friday, will be placed in the lineup as a designated hitter on Sunday. ... OF Lonnie Chisenhall returns Monday from tightness in his right forearm.

UP NEXT

Cubs: LHP Jon Lester is the scheduled starter against the Royals on Sunday.

Indians: LHP T.J. House is slated to start Sunday against the Mariners.

Akron Beacon Journal LOADED: 03.20.2016
On the pitching side, Corey Kluber's 5.5 led the team and was eighth in the majors. Carlos Carrasco's 4.8 WAR was tied for 14th.

A WAR of more than 3 is pretty good. Once a player’s WAR climbs above 7 or 8, he’s likely in the MVP conversation. Babe Ruth is the only player to reach 13 WAR in a season, an astronomical number, and he did it four times.

FIP

The number that is essentially ERA but with defensive variables taken out is also the one that says Kluber wasn’t much different in 2015 than he was in his Cy Young 2014 season, despite his win-loss record taking a major hit. Kluber’s record was among the worst in the game and his ERA grew to 3.49, but his 2.97 FIP was 14th in baseball (he had a 2.35 in 2014). Carrasco’s 2.84 FIP was ninth in the league. If a pitcher’s ERA is much higher than his FIP, it pretty much means he was unlucky when it comes to defense behind him.

BABIP

This is a good tool for fantasy baseball players. If a hitter’s BABIP was well below .300, it might have meant he was unlucky last year, i.e., he hit line drives that were caught or had great plays made against him. A rule in these stats is that things regress back to their norms. So, if a hitter has a BABIP of .300 five straight years and then one year it dips or increases by 50 points, it was probably an anomaly. Line-drive rates can also be a factor, as some hitters drive the ball more, so their BABIP actually should be above .300.

Kipnis and Lindor both had high BABIPs at .356 and .348, respectively. Kipnis, though, also had a .345 BABIP in 2013, so that is probably closer to the norm for him. On the other hand, Santana had a BABIP of .261, but with a career .271 mark, he should be a little luckier in 2016, though not by much.

wRC+

This is a number to evenly evaluate hitters and their value in a lineup. In terms of the Indians, this is where Santana makes his money.

Santana last season had a .231 batting average, a paltry figure for a needed hitter in the lineup. In fact, his batting average has never been above .268, and it’s been stuck at .231 for two seasons. A lot of people have written him off because of it. But in part because he gets on base at such a high rate, Santana has been an above-average hitter in the league every season since 2010.

Last season, Santana had a wRC+ of 110, meaning he was 10 percent better than league average. That was actually still well below his career average of 124. In the past three seasons, Santana’s 123 wRC+ would be 38th in the game, one spot better than the Milwaukee Brewers’ Ryan Braun.

DRS/UZR

Basically, how many runs did this player save or give up compared to league averages in the course of a season? Both numbers aim to show roughly that, though they are slightly different. These defensive numbers are still a little flaky because the formulas are still being developed. Be cautious when looking at these numbers with sample sizes smaller than two or three full seasons.

In terms of the Indians, the interesting cases are Chisenhall and Lindor. Chisenhall, after moving to right field, turned his career around and had 11 defensive runs saved and a 9.3 UZR. With zero being considered league average in both categories, that made him, statistically, one of the top three right fielders in baseball last season despite being new to the position. Lindor, of course, brought great defensive value (the reason his WAR was higher than that of the Houston Astros’ Carlos Correa, the AL Rookie of the Year) with 10 defensive runs saved and a UZR of 10.5. Those marks were both in the top-five in the league.

Akron Beacon Journal LOADED: 03.20.2016

A triumphant return: Michael Brantley socks a two-run HR in Cactus League debut

Zack Meisel

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- In his first Cactus League at-bat of 2016, Michael Brantley clubbed a pitch to deep center field, which resulted in one, loud out.

Two innings later, Brantley recorded an outfield assist, as he nabbed Chicago's Ben Zobrist, who attempted to score from second on Kris Bryant's RBI single.

Those two plays suggested that Brantley's surgically repaired right shoulder was healthy.

Apparently, the Indians' left fielder didn't want to leave any doubt.

Brantley belted a two-run home run to right field in the fifth inning of the Tribe's 10-5 victory against the Cubs in front of a record crowd at Goodyear Ballpark on Saturday night.

Brantley exited the game after the fifth frame. He finished 1-for-3. He also grounded out in the third. The outfield assist was his second in a span of three days; he registered one in a minor league contest on Thursday.

Michael Brantley hits two-run HR in Cactus League debut. Indians up, 4-1.

— paul hynes (@hoynsie) March 20, 2016

The Indians weren't so concerned with Brantley's fielding, since his torn labrum -- which was corrected in a November operation -- resided in his non-throwing shoulder. At the plate, it's his lead shoulder that is in question. Or, was in question.

Brantley has maintained a target of Opening Day for his return, despite initial team projections of late April or early May. Tribe manager Terry Francona seems to finally have come around to Brantley's ambitious aim. Either way, the club is pleased with his rapid recovery.

Corey Kluber tossed five innings, as the right-hander limited Chicago to one run on six hits and one walk. He struck out five. He owns a 0.64 ERA this spring, with 16 strikeouts in 14 innings. Kyle Crockett and Dan Otero logged a scoreless inning apiece, but Jeff Manship ran into trouble in the eighth. The righty served up a three-run homer to A-ball infielder Jason Vosler.
In addition to Brantley's blast, the Indians received plenty of offensive contributions, as they scored four times in the fifth and five times in the sixth.
* Francisco Lindor singled and tripled and drove in a pair of runs.
* Will Venable singled twice and stole a pair of bases.
* Tyler Naquin walked twice and scored twice. He's batting .438 with a 1.174 OPS
* Jason Kipnis singled and plated a pair of runs.
* A clean-shaven Mike Napoli singled and doubled. The first baseman is hitting .467 with a 1.341 OPS this spring.
* Robbie Grossman tacked on a solo home run in the eighth.
* Bradley Zimmer and Clint Frazier, the organization's top two prospects, each walked once and struck out once. Zimmer stole a base as well.

A ballpark-record crowd of 11,616 watched the game.

Yan Gomes draws strength from MMA fighters in comeback season for Cleveland Indians

Paul Hoynes

CLEVELAND, Ohio – Catchers are supposed to be tough guys and Yan Gomes is. But there are degrees of toughness and Gomes knows what they are.

He is a Mixed Martial Arts fan and a friend of UFC heavyweight contender Stipe Miocic, who went to high school at Eastlake North and played baseball in college. He's watched Miocic train; he's even climbed into the Octagon and sparred with him.

"If I get into the ring, I'm the only one throwing punches, not him," said Gomes with a smile. "I've seen him training before a fight. It's pretty incredible."

Some of MMA's roots can be traced to Brazil, where Gomes was born. He has adopted some of the MMA fighters' training techniques to help with his core strength, quickness and power.

"Just think of it this way," said Gomes. "When we get hit by a pitch, we get mad and we don't even want to look at the pitcher. These guys are going at it and fighting each other. Then after the fight ends they're hugging each other. It's just a different world, man."

MMA is a combat sport, dangerous and violent. Gomes knows that, but sees something deeper in it.

"As gruesome and barbaric as that sport seems, the fighters are actually really, really respectful and their discipline is unbelievable," said Gomes. "You learn how to deal with failure. Some ups and downs in their careers. They sure know how to do that."

Last season Gomes walked his own rolling path. When Detroit's Rajai Davis clipped his right heel sliding home in the ninth inning at Progressive Field on April 11, he was just 20 at-bats into the season. Gomes missed the next six weeks with a sprained medial collateral ligament in his right knee.

The year before he was the AL's Silver Slugger winner for catchers with a .278 average, 21 homers and 74 RBI. Last year he could never find that same swing.

"It's one of those things in life where God challenges you," said Gomes. "I didn't let it sink in that I'd been away for six weeks. That's a long time. When I came back, I think I had 15 to 20 at-bats and the guys who had been playing regularly had 100 to 200 at-bats already."

Gomes said he tried to hit the ground running. He skidded instead.

"I think I forced it a little bit," he said. "It was a learning experience."

Gomes hit .231 (84-for-363) with 12 homers, 45 RBI and a .659 OPS for the season. Just when he started to feel comfortable at the plate again – he hit .297 (19-for-64) in his last 16 games – the season ended.

He returned home to Knoxville, took a couple of days off, and started swinging the bat again. He called Mike Barnett, who was later hired by the Indians as their replay coordinator. Barnett is a hitting coach, with ties to manager Terry Francona and Ty Van Burkleo, the Tribe's hitting coach. When Francona managed Class AA Birmingham from 1993 through 1995 for the White Sox, Barnett was on his coaching staff.

"I called Mike and said, "Let's get back to hitting,"" said Gomes.

Tribe hires Atchison, Barnett

After a season of rehab and 104 strikeouts in 363 at-bats, Gomes didn't want to let the good feeling he'd finally recaptured at the plate disappear.

"I just wanted to try and keep that feeling going," said Gomes. "I wanted to keep the repetition going."

This spring the work Gomes and Barrett did has turned into positive results. Gomes is hitting .320 (8-for-25) with three homers and four RBI.

"Gomer had gotten into some habits last year because he really wasn't fully healthy," said Francona. "You can tell right now he feels pretty good about himself. His path to the ball is shorter. He's such a strong kid to begin with that when he commits to a pitch, he's really doing some damage."

Gomes, who will be handling one of baseball's most talked about starting rotations this year, was one of the players who helped organize a December minicamp in Cleveland right before Tribe Fest.

"A little bit of everybody was involved," said Gomes. "Everyone sensed the excitement around the ballclub. We just wanted to start our chemistry and relationships a little bit earlier."
Gomes said the idea behind the mini-camp wasn't to help the Indians get off to a better start in 2016. Slow starts have hurt them the last two years. But if that's a byproduct of the camp, said Gomes, so much the better.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 03.20.2016

Cleveland Indians Scribbles from Goodyear as Francona talks Bauer, Brantley, Uribe and Urshela -- Terry Pluto

Terry Pluto

GOODYEAR, ARIZONA -- Some quick thoughts from listening to Manager Terry Francona's pre-game presser Saturday evening:

1. Trevor Bauer threw four scoreless innings in a Class AAA game on Friday. He walked two, gave up two hits. Francona mentioned how "Trevor is looking for more velocity." The manager doesn't seem that worried, "I look for how the ball is coming out of his hand."

2. But back to the velocity, is that an issue -- throwing harder for Bauer? "Not for me," said Francona.

3. The Indians want Bauer to improve his control. He led the American League in walks. Talking to writers earlier in the spring, Bauer mentioned that he worked on his control last spring and he led the league in walks. Now, he has decided to concentrate on throwing harder. It will be interesting to watch how all this works out. He apparently did throw well against the Dodgers Class AAA team.

4. Francona is very excited to see Michael Brantley take the field. Brantley was set to be in the lineup for Saturday night's game against the Cubs. The Tribe's star left fielder played in a minor league game earlier in the week. Brantley is making a terrific comeback from significant off-season shoulder surgery.

5. Francona on Brantley at the bat: "He has the lowest maintenance swing of anyone in camp." Brantley does have a short, compact, quick swing from the left side. He was batting third in the lineup.

6. The Tribe sent Shawn Armstrong to Columbus. The reliever has battled a lat injury this spring. He pitched only one inning in Goodyear. Armstrong's average fastball was 94.5 mph. He had a 2.36 ERA with 16 saves at Columbus last season. He also pitched eight innings for the Tribe in 2015. The injury is not considered serious and he is a real prospect for the bullpen. Armstrong had 91 strikeouts in 57 2/3 innings last season.

7. Francona is not concerned about Josh Tomlin (7.15 ERA), who has had a rough camp. The manager said Tomlin is healthy and simply needs to get his fastball down in the strike zone.

8. Marlon Byrd is expected to DH in Sunday's game, his first appearance since signing a minor league deal with the Tribe.

9. Juan Uribe is coming back from the Dominican, but his flight was delayed and he may be stuck in Atlanta. So it may be a few days before he plays.

10. Francona was praising Giovanny Urshela the other day. The third baseman is hitting .300 with 4 HR. Francona has really liked how Urshela's bat is quicker this season, he has pulled a couple of inside fastball to left field for homers. He didn't do that very often last year.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 03.20.2016

Cleveland Indians scribbles about a hot Carlos Santana, Joba Chamberlain and the outfield -- Terry Pluto

Terry Pluto

GOODYEAR, Ariz. -- Scribbles in my Tribe notebook after watching the team up close and personal in the last few days:

1. I hesitate to write this because there are more than a few mirages in the desert. But Carlos Santana is off to a strong start. I'm not just talking about his .375 batting average. He has 1 HR and 3 RBI, which is modest. So what's the big deal? His swing seems a bit shorter. Think about this: 1 strikeout in 32 at-bats.

2. Santana does have five doubles, so he's not just slapping the ball to the opposite field. He's a career .256 hitter in the spring, so it's not as if does this every year.

3. It would be such a boost to the Tribe if Santana starts reasonably strong. Here is what he hit in the first three months of last season: April (.239), May (.217), June (.189). For his career, Santana's two worst months are April (.240) and May (.215).

4. One of Terry Francona's goals for the team is to have a better start. They were 7-14 last April. In his three seasons as Tribe manager, the Indians have a 29-44 record in April. Santana hitting could help that change.

5. For some players, spring stats matter. They do to Tyler Naquin (.452), who is blowing out all the competition for center field. The stats matter to Collin Cowgill (2-of-29), Will Venable (2-of-23) and James Ramsey (2-of-21). All are competing for outfield spots. Friday, Ramsey was sent to Class AAA.

6. The fact that Jose Ramirez (having a super camp) has shown he can play a little center also makes it tougher on some of the guys trying to make the club. Venable is 33 and on a minor-league deal. Cowgill will be 30 on May 22. He is a career .236 hitter. They need big spring performances to be in discussion to come to Cleveland.

7. The Indians were very excited when they traded for Ramsey on July 30, 2014. He came from St. Louis in exchange for Justin Masterson. In 2014, he split the season between Class AA and Class AAA, hitting .295 (.890 OPS) with 16 HR and 52 RBI. He was ranked as the No. 6 prospect in the rich St. Louis farm system.

8. But Ramsey fell apart at Class AAA Columbus last year, batting .243 (.709 OPS) with 12 HR and 42 RBI. He's 26. It's time for the former 2012 first-round pick (by St. Louis) to pull himself together. His swing looks very long and slow this spring.

9. Another guy with a big, slow swing is Jesus Aguilar. He is batting .214 with 1 HR and 5 RBI. He has struck out 9 times in 28 at-bats. Aguilar's failure to develop as a right-handed hitter is why the Indians have brought in veteran free agents Marlon Byrd, Mike Napoli and others.
10. I watched Austin Adams throw 1 2/3 innings. His fastball is in the middle 90s. He has allowed three runs in 7 2/3 innings this spring, striking out seven. He was 2-0 with a 3.78 ERA for the Tribe last season, making five ... FIVE ... trips between Cleveland and Columbus. I like him as a middle reliever.

11. Stats that matter: Yan Gomes hitting .320 with 3 HR. He had a miserable time at the plate last year after suffering an April knee injury. Gomes can be a right-handed power bat. Gomes ripped 21 HR in 2014, but only 12 in 2015.

12. I hope these stats don't matter: Josh Tomlin has been hit hard a few times. Tomlin was knocked around for 10 hits in 3-1/3 innings in Friday's game. Somehow, he allowed only three runs when surrounded by more runners than a starter at the Cleveland Marathon. For Tomlin this spring, it's 21 hits and 9 earned runs in 11-1/3 innings. Francona said Tomlin is healthy, and perhaps even "feeling too good."

13. Tomlin signed a 2-year, $5.5 million contract extension, and he'll make the team. He was superb coming off shoulder surgery last season with a 7-2 record and 3.02 ERA in 10 starts. He is battling Cody Anderson for the No. 5 starter's spot. If Anderson wins it, Tomlin goes to the bullpen. If Tomlin wins it, Anderson goes to Class AAA.

14. The Indians say Lonnie Chisenhall has a minor forearm problem and he has been taking a few days off. He's batting .048. Francona talked about getting Chisenhall healthy and having him hit well near the close of camp. He is on the team -- out of minor league options. The Tribe loves his glove in right field.

15. I thought Joba Chamberlain threw very well in his scoreless inning. He allowed three runs on March 7. Since then, he has thrown four scoreless innings in four outings. He has an excellent chance to make the team.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 03.20.2016

An Opening Day return no longer out of the question: A timeline of Michael Brantley's recovery timetable

By Zack Meisel

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- It all began with one, ill-fated, September dive.

Tuesday will mark exactly six months since Michael Brantley lunged for Aaron Hicks' fly ball to left-center at Target Field. Brantley nearly hauled in the baseball, but it scooted away and Hicks wound up on third base with an RBI triple.

Brantley proceeded to bat in the ensuing half-inning. Then, he was lifted for reserve Michael Martinez. Nearly a half-year later, he's still working his way back. Brantley will appear in his first big league spring training game on Saturday evening. He appeared in a minor league contest on Thursday.

He has not been ruled out for Opening Day, a drastic turn of events, considering the Indians' initial timetable following his November surgery to repair a torn labrum in his right shoulder. Of course, the Indians also hoped he could avoid an operation altogether at the end of last year's regular season. Instead, he is, ready to log as many spring at-bats as he can, following a winter of uncertainty.

Let's revisit Brantley's offseason timeline.

• Brantley missed four games after the Sept. 22 bout at Minnesota. He returned to play in a pair of contests on Sept. 27-28, but he sat out the Tribe's final week of action.

• The left fielder remained in Cleveland following the conclusion of the regular season. He received an injection and he completed a two-week rehab and hitting program. The Indians hoped the labrum would heal without surgery.

• It didn't. Brantley underwent surgery in early November. The Indians initially pegged his recovery at five to six months.

• At the Winter Meetings in early December, the Indians' front office stressed that nothing had changed with Brantley's timetable, despite reports that the 28-year-old could be sidelined until June, July or even August.

• With or without Brantley, the Indians' outfield lacked some thump. So, the front office proceeded to scoop up every inexpensive outfielder with a pulse during the off-season, from Joey Butler to Rajai Davis to Collin Cowgill to Shane Robinson and others.

• Brantley said at the Greater Cleveland Sports Awards in late January that he was targeting an Opening Day return, though he admitted it might be a bit ambitious. Manager Terry Francona preferred not to attach an artificial deadline to Brantley's recovery.

Brantley targeting an Opening Day return

• As spring training got under way, Brantley continued to declare that Opening Day was his goal. Francona admitted that while Brantley could still begin the season on the disabled list, the All-Star was "coming quickly" and could certainly beat the original timetable of late April or early May.

• Francona is coming around to the notion that Brantley could indeed be ready for the Indians' opener on April 4.

"If we knew going into (the season) that maybe he wasn't quite ready to play a day game after a night game," Francona said, "having Michael for three out of four games as opposed to not having him, we'll take it."

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 03.20.2016

Cleveland Indians have Terry Talkin' Jose Ramirez, the Francona family and how Marlon Byrd nearly made $8 million this season

Terry Pluto

ABOUT MARLON BYRD

Six more at bats. That's all Marlon Byrd needed last season to be guaranteed $8 million for 2016.

His contract with the Giants stated that if Byrd had 550 plate appearances, his $8 million option would kick in. Instead, he had 544 plate appearances. And then he couldn't even find a big league job for 2016, despite batting .247 with 23 HR and 73 RBI last season.
It happens that way when a player is 38.

So this player who has hit 72 homers in the last three seasons is in Goodyear on a minor-league contract. The Tribe has absolutely nothing to lose on this deal.

It was only on Wednesday that Byrd decided to come to a team on a minor-league basis, a "tryout" as he called it. The Tribe had been talking to his agent for a few weeks with the offer. The Indians have until March 29 to decide if they want to keep Byrd for a veteran's minimum of $1 million.

After March 29, Byrd is free to fly away to another team that may have an interest. He will be the designated hitter on Sunday.

**ANALYTICS GUYS SPEAK**

Baseball Prospectus on Byrd:

"The demand for right-handed power has outstripped the supply in recent years. That explains why Byrd has nabbed every day of playing time long past his productive regular shelf-life.

"A consummate journeyman who has appeared for six different National League teams in the last five years, Byrd now fits best with a junior circuit (American League) club that can deploy him on the short side of the DH/outfield timeshare. There's still a useful player here. Now that he's no longer strapped to a multi-year contract, perhaps Byrd will find a team that can properly use him."

That sounds like the Indians' plan, assuming he plays reasonably well in the next few weeks.

**FATHERS & SONS**

Terry Francona said his father, Tito, would take him to the ballpark when the Tribe manager was growing up. Francona often goes by "Tito," his father's name. He loves that people honor his dad by calling him that.

The elder Francona played in the majors from 1956-70, and was a career .272 hitter (.746 OPS). He played with the Tribe from 1959-64. With the Wahoos, he was a .284 hitter (.789 OPS).

Francona talked about being on a team bus with his father, and how some guys in the back were telling raunchy stories. His father kept talking to 12-year-old Terry about baseball and other things.

"My dad didn't want me to hear that stuff," said Francona.

About 30 years later at a family gathering, they were telling that story. Francona told his father, "You know, I heard every word those guys were saying in the back of the bus!"

Then Francona turned serious. "I never heard my father swear," he said. "Not at home. Not when I was with him and he was with the team."

He paused.

"My dad did a good job with me, and not just at the ball park," he said. "I could feel close to him even when he was 3,000 miles away."

Tito Francona is 82, and he now comes to the ballpark to hang out with his son/manager.

**ABOUT JOSE RAMIREZ**

The Indians believe Jose Ramirez was feeling the pressure last season from Francisco Lindor. Ramirez opened 2015 as the shortstop, but knew Lindor would eventually take the job. He was sent to the minors after two months of batting only .180. He returned for the final eight weeks of the season, hitting .259.

This spring, Ramirez is belting line drives all over Arizona, batting .361. He has three doubles and two homers in 35 at-bats. He has played a lot of second base, where he's outstanding. He's also playing some third base and even a little center field.

Ramirez is only 23, and won't be 24 until Sept. 17. The switch-hitter has a lifetime .306 average in the minors. He knows his roster spot is secure as the utility infielder, and he could become a very valuable player this season.

**Cleveland Indians all smiles with Michael Brantley's stunning return to action -- Terry Pluto**

Print Email Terry Pluto, The Plain Dealer By Terry Pluto, The Plain Dealer GOODYEAR, ARIZONA -- The smile.

That's what said so much about Michael Brantley's return to Cactus League action.

The All-Star left fielder had the kind of night that makes Tribe fans dream.

And dream big.

Very, very big.

What would you like to hear about first? The 2-run majestic home run to right field or his beautiful throw to home plate from left field?

But let's start with the smile.
"It was a very good day," said Brantley about the Tribe's 10-5 victory over the Cubs in front of a Goodyear Ballpark record crowd of 11,616 Saturday.

He is coming back from surgery to repair a labral tear in his right shoulder on November 9. The operation put a huge question mark about Brantley being ready for opening day.

There were even internet reports that he could be out until the middle of the summer.

Guess again.

"It was exciting being out there," Brantley said. "I got up at 5:45 (a.m.), ready to go."

I asked him about what kind of timetable was set for him after the surgery?

"I was told I was going to be ready when I told them I was going to be ready," he said. "I did everything the training staff asked me to do. And everything the doctors asked me to do. I didn't take a day off, I stuck to the program."

A SPECIAL NIGHT

The first pitch he saw, he unleashed that smooth left-handed swing. His wrists are quicker than a snake's tongue. He drilled a 390-foot liner to dead center, caught by the outfielder.

Why swing at the first pitch in his first game back?

"I got a good fastball over the plate and I put a good swing on it," he said. "I'm not going to just work the count, I'm going to (approach) it like I would in the season."

In the fifth inning, there was the home run. He clubbed a towering fly ball to right field that had to carry at least 400 feet deep into the Arizona night.

He hit it off Justin Grimm, who had 1.99 ERA for the Cubs last season.

Pitching out of the bullpen, Grimm allowed only four homers in 62 innings. So Brantley connected against a legitimate big league pitcher, not some scared kid from Class AA getting a chance to show his stuff in March.

I asked Brantley if he knew he'd hit a homer.

"I never think anything I hit is going out," he said.

He was being truthful. Brantley has 35 homers in the last two seasons. But he doesn't dwell on home runs.

As Corey Kluber said: "He's got the same swing, no matter what. He's got a really short, simple swing. I think that's why he's able to repeat it so easily. I'm not a hitting coach, but if I could teach somebody a swing, I'd say swing like that."

Last season, Brantley made contact on 93 percent of his swings. That's the most in the Majors.

He is one of only three players with more walks than strikeouts in 2015.

KLUBER & BRANTLEY

Kluber allowed only one run in five innings.

The Cubs loaded the bases in the third inning. Kris Bryant ripped a single to left. Brantley fielded it perfectly, came up throwing. One bounce to catcher Yan Gomes. He slapped the tag on the Cubs' Ben Zobrist, who was trying to score from second base.

OUT!

"He plays a great left field," said Kluber. "That was a big play in that inning right there. Bases loaded, nobody out, all of a sudden you can kind of sneak one out right there with him making a great throw and getting the guy at the plate."

Granted, the left-handed Brantley had surgery on the right shoulder. So his throwing arm is fine.

He played a few innings in a minor league game on Thursday and also threw out a runner at the plate.
"You can do the outfield defensive drills every day, but there is nothing like game speed," said Brantley. "You can practice all you want, but when the adrenaline is flowing, there is nothing like it.

ALL-AROUND PLAYER

In the last four years, he has thrown out an average of 10 runners per season. The career .292 batter is so much more than just a good hitter. Brantley is a good left-fielder. He's a clutch hitter, a career .329 batter with runners in scoring position.

In the last two years, he has stolen 38 bases and been thrown out only twice.

"He just wants to be with the team," said Kluber. "That's probably the most important thing for him, like it is for all of us. We don't want to be sitting in the dugout not able to play when the games matter. I think that's probably the most frustrating thing for any player."

That's why Brantley kept smiling, the warmth of it melting away some of the frustration he felt during the winter as he rehabilitated after surgery.

"From what I've gathered from talking to him, if he's ready on Opening Day, great," said Kluber. "If it's not, make it as little time as possible."

WORKING AT IT

Manager Terry Francona has been talking about all the defensive drills that Brantley has been doing to keep sharp.

"It's pretty obvious that he's been working hard," said Francona. "Besides the fact that he took some good swings, you could see how everyone reacted to him. He's done every drill they've asked and more."

The power was especially impressive because it's the right arm and shoulder that drives the bat during a swing for a lefty hitter. You'd never guess Brantley had surgery.

"I've had other surgeries before and I know what I have to do to come back," said Brantley. "That's been one of the most important things. . . I learned from experience."

Brantley had surgery to repair a broken hand in 2011. He had another surgery in 2012 for a sports hernia.

"I still have some bumps in the road to get over," he said. "Playing back-to-back games. . . Playing full games. . . Playing multiple games."

All of that is true, but Brantley's appearance on a Saturday night remind Tribe fans how they have a very special player in left field.