

Cooper relishing return from spinal-cord scare

First baseman sees first action after freakish injury threatens ability to walk



By Jordan Bastian / MLB.com | February 26th, 2014

GOODYEAR, Ariz. -- The first lineup of the spring typically carries little significance. Veterans are often held out and the players who are among the first nine usually only play a few innings at most. It is also far too early on the calendar to know where those fighting for jobs truly stand.

Cleveland's first lineup sheet this spring meant the world to **David Cooper** (<http://m.mlb.com/player/476036/david-cooper>) .

This was not a normal game for Cooper. When the first baseman saw his name listed eighth in the Indians' order for Wednesday's Cactus League

opener against the Reds, it was the completion of a long and grueling journey. One year ago, Cooper was still fighting the reality that his future might include being confined to a wheelchair.

Now, his future includes competing for a spot with the Indians.

It took an innovative and rare spinal-cord surgery to not only save Cooper's career but rescue his quality of life. No, this was not an ordinary spring lineup for Cooper. It was the opening scene to Act III of an incredible comeback story.

"It's a big step for me," Cooper said. "Throughout this whole process, it's one of those dates I've kind of been honed in on. Now, it's finally here."

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Watching the replay does not reveal much to the untrained eye. It is Aug. 22, 2012, and there is Cooper, playing for the Blue Jays and lacing a pitch from Detroit's **Anibal Sanchez** (<http://m.mlb.com/player/434671/anibal-sanchez>) into the right-field corner. Outfielder **Jeff Baker** (<http://m.mlb.com/player/425557/jeff-baker>) retrieves the ball and snaps it back to second baseman **Omar Infante** (<http://m.mlb.com/player/408299/omar-infante>) , who quickly fires it to first baseman **Prince Fielder** (<http://m.mlb.com/player/425902/prince-fielder>) .

Cooper rounds first base, stumbles, and dives head-first back into the bag. When he shifts to his feet, Cooper is gritting his teeth and breathing heavily, but to the naked eye, it looks like a normal adrenaline-fueled base hit. To Dr. Curtis Dickman, who performed Cooper's endoscopic thoracotomy last April, the footage was a breakthrough moment for the medical industry.

"The video of David's injury was very compelling," Dickman said. "I actually plan on publishing the mechanism of injury in medical journals because it's the first time that we've been able to clearly understand how this type of injury occurs, and it's beautifully demonstrated on the video."

What Dickman sees when he studies the film is Cooper suffering a devastating blow to his chest that caused a ripple effect leading to a severe spinal-cord injury. Cooper developed a herniated disk that was compressing and deforming the front of his thoracic spine (located in the upper back, directly behind the chest). One more wrong move could have led to paralysis for the young ballplayer.

Cooper -- a 2008 first-round Draft pick finally getting his shot in the bigs after having nothing left to prove in the Minors -- stayed in the game for two more innings. Dickman said Cooper risked paralysis the moment he struck the dirt at Comerica Park, but the first baseman was months away from that realization. What Cooper knew was he wanted to stay on the field.

"I felt the pain almost immediately," Cooper said. "It was pretty debilitating. I lost any ability to twist and move. I was having trouble breathing. At the same time, I was finally kind of at that point in the big leagues where I was playing every day and hitting in the middle of the lineup.

"I was like, 'You're going to have to drag me off that field,' which pretty much ended up happening."

Neither Toronto nor Cooper understood the full extent of the damage.

The injury was initially described as a jammed neck with upper-back spasms, but normal rehab was not working. The Blue Jays sent Cooper to their complex in Florida, and the persistent discomfort was becoming increasingly disconcerting. The first baseman was trying to have a normal

offseason, but the inability to even slightly twist his torso without pain limited his activity.

Cooper saw several specialists. He visited one doctor in Texas, another in St. Petersburg and met with renowned back specialist Dr. Robert Watkins in Los Angeles. The overwhelming feeling was that Cooper needed to head to Arizona to see Dickman at St. Joseph's Barrow Neurological Institute.

"It was becoming more and more evident how severe of an injury it was," Cooper said. "[Watkins] immediately told me, 'You've got to get on a plane and go to Phoenix.'"

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Cooper vividly remembers the moment just prior to his four-hour surgery on April 3. As he prepared for the operation, his parents and wife, Tamara, were at his side. They all understood the risks, but seeing the pain in their eyes now stands out more than the pain in his body.

"That was one of the toughest things I've ever been through," Cooper said.

They all knew that Cooper had little choice but to put his faith in the hands of Dickman.

Two decades ago, Dickman pioneered the use of an endoscope, which consists of a long tube that contains a light and high-resolution camera. The images are relayed to a television screen, helping doctors perform complicated yet minimally invasive surgeries. Dickman not only developed the tools and technology, but he became a leading neurosurgeon for thoracic spinal injuries.

Traditional surgery, which includes an 18-inch incision, widely opening up the chest cavity and removing a rib, would have included more long-term risks and complications, including potential lung problems, long-lasting pain and, certainly, no more baseball for Cooper. Dickman was offering an alternative operation.

"We were hoping for the best," Dickman said. "But I counseled David before the surgery that it's possible you could have chronic pain and may not be able to perform at the same level as you did previously, and it's possible you may not be able to return to professional sports. But this was really his only hope."

Cooper, who miraculously sidestepped a life-changing setback in the five months prior to the surgery, said the decision was an easy one.

"It was a lot to take in," Cooper said. "I looked at it as I really didn't have a choice. At the time, I was 25 years old essentially, and I was going to live with not being able to do anything for the rest of my life, and there was a good chance I was going to end up in a wheelchair for the rest of my life. I felt there was no other choice to make."

Dickman's endoscopic procedure involves temporarily deflating one lung to create an empty space inside the chest cavity. Then, very small incisions are made in order to insert the endoscope for use as a kind of microscope. Tools are then inserted through other small incisions. In Cooper's case, the herniated disk was removed to decompress the spinal cord, and then bone grafts, a titanium plate and two titanium screws were used for stabilization.

"I designed the screws and plates that were put in David's spine," Dickman said, "to reinforce his spine to allow him to return to professional sports after the surgery was done. Those plates and screws locked everything in position so that any weakening that would have occurred by

removing the bone and the disk material from the surgery would be stronger than it ever was by fusing the spine."

Or, as Dickman phrased it, "It's kind of like building a ship in a bottle."

The first days of rehab included walking on a treadmill. In July, Cooper underwent a CT scan that led to very good news.

"And then it was, 'Do whatever you want. You can't hurt yourself anymore,'" Cooper said with a smile.

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When the Indians look at Cooper, they see the smooth left-handed swing that convinced the Blue Jays to take him with the 17th overall pick in the 2008 First-Year Player Draft. They see the consistent track record in the Minor Leagues and a first baseman who appeared to be on the cusp of turning a corner at the time of his injury.

"He's got a nice swing," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "He's not just a power hitter, but he understands the strike zone and he uses the whole field, and he's a pretty professional hitter."

Cleveland, which had Cooper in its system briefly last August, re-signed Cooper to a Minor League deal in December and brought him into camp this spring as a non-roster invitee, giving him a stage to continue his comeback. The team's message in its meeting with him at the start of Spring Training was a simple one.

"It's, 'Come in and compete for a job,'" Cooper said.

Nothing about this spring is simple or ordinary for Cooper, though.

He now sees many things through a different lens.

"The cliché in whatever sport it is, they say, 'Play every game like it's your last,'" Cooper said. "I kind of got to experience that first hand. Something as simple as diving into a bag can really take everything away."

Cooper has a new lease on life and baseball.

That brings a smile to Dickman's face.

"It's incredibly satisfying to see David out here," Dickman said. "David knew I couldn't guarantee that he could return to professional sports when he got into it. It's turned out to be a miracle."

Jordan Bastian (mailto:jordan.bastian@mlb.com) is a reporter for MLB.com. Read his blog, ***Major League Bastian (http://bastian.mlblogs.com/)***, and follow him on Twitter ***@MLBastian (http://twitter.com/mlbastian)***. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.