



The one spot unaccounted for in the everyday lineup for the Cleveland Indians is the designated hitter. With the other eight lineup spots filled, the bullpen pretty much decided, and the team reportedly out of the money it would take to add another starting pitcher, the Indians are casting lines to see which free agent hitter will bite. Two familiar faces appear to be at the top of the list, with Travis Hafner and Jim Thome both in the discussion.

It's hard to say exactly how much money the Indians have left to fill the designated hitter spot. The alternative would be to use that role to rotate position players to give them a day off from playing the field, thus relying on guys like Lou Marson and Mike Aviles to provide depth. The Indians, however, appear to want an everyday designated hitter and don't seem comfortable giving that gig to Yan Gomes, who they acquired in the Esmil Rogers trade with Toronto. Russ Canzler may have factored in that discussion, but he was recently designated for assignment a couple of times before winding up with the Yankees.

Hafner, as we all know, is bobbing in the free agent waters after his albatross contract expired with the Indians. Hafner made \$13M last season and the Indians declined his 2013 option, with a buyout cost of \$2.75M. There has been little interest in Pronk so far, both due to his health issues and the fact that he is exclusively a designated hitter.

Thome, who briefly returned to the Indians in 2011, hasn't gotten a lot of press this offseason either. Now 42 years old, Thome played with the Philadelphia Phillies and Baltimore Orioles last season, making four appearances in the field at first base. He signed in November 2011 with the Phillies for \$1.25M to, essentially, be a pinch hitter before being traded to Baltimore during the season.

Other names that could possibly be in the mix include Carlos Lee, Aubrey Huff, Jason Giambi, and Juan Rivera. With money being an issue, it's important to note that Lee is coming off the final year of a six-year, \$100M deal that saw him get paid \$19M in 2012. Huff finished a two-year, \$22M deal and was paid a \$2M buyout to void his 2013 club option. Giambi signed a one-year, \$1M deal with the Rockies, with a 2012 club option, which they picked up. Rivera signed a one-year, \$4.5M deal with the Dodgers for 2012, and they paid \$500,000 to get out of the 2013 club option. Generally speaking, when it comes to free agents during the offseason, if there's little discussion about them, it's because they want too much money.

The allure of Hafner and Thome, among that group of six DH candidates, is that they will take the "hometown discount" and have a nice rapport with the fans. Hafner, even with how much his contract hurt the Indians at times, was still a fan favorite, with a wife who was born in Cleveland, and has done a lot in the community. Thome, as seen by the response he received in 2011, is still a rock (no pun intended) star.

What about production? Filling the DH spot just to have a warm body there seems nonsensical, especially when the Indians could very easily use that spot to keep Asdrubal Cabrera, Jason Kipnis, and Carlos Santana from wearing down.

Here's a comparison of those six players ("OPS v. xHP" is OPS against opposite handed pitcher):

Hafner

Thome

Lee

Giambi

Huff

Rivera

PA

263

186

615

113

95

339

OPS

.784

.786

.697

.675

.608

.661

HR

12

8

9

1

1

9

BB

32

22

58

20

16

18

K

47

61

49

24

12

35

OPS v. xHP

.798

.795

.559

.599

.631

.745

Days on DL

85

92

15

42

94

26

GP in Field

0

4

144 (1B)

13

19

96

'12 Salary

13M

1.25M

19M

1M

11M

4.5M

The reason I included the stat about the OPS against the opposite-handed pitcher is because the Indians have three switch hitters, Cabrera, Santana, and Nick Swisher, who could be penciled in as the designated hitter against a tough pitcher to spell whoever the DH is and to give them a bit of a respite. The goal should always be to put the best lineup out there and with four of these candidates being left handed batters who struggle against lefties, it would only make sense to protect them against those bad matchups.

Hafner and Thome would definitely appear to be the frontrunners, despite having missed nearly half of the 2012 season. The amount of time they spent on the disabled list would be a concern, but the Indians should have the versatility to give Hafner or Thome enough days off to keep them as fresh as possible. Hafner missed time with a knee injury and a back issue, while Thome was shelved with two back problems. In 2011, Hafner missed 50 days while on the DL. Thome spent 66 days on the DL. (All [disabled list data](#) from Baseball Heat Maps)

About the only in-house option appears to be the aforementioned Yan Gomes. Gomes, 25, has just 111 plate appearances under his belt. His minor league numbers are fairly impressive, including an .828 OPS over 301 games. One thing Gomes would provide that Hafner or Thome cannot is youth and a body that works. In his 43 games with the Blue Jays last season, Gomes played first base, catcher, third base, and left field. Gomes was predominantly a catcher in the minors, catching in 172 of the 237 games he played in the field. Having another bench player capable of playing a position would help.

In terms of [wOBA](#), or weighted on-base average, a metric that assigns run values to ways of getting on base, designated hitters combined for a .339 wOBA, which was the highest of any position in the batting order. First basemen were second at .331. That signals the importance of a productive DH and shows why the Indians need to figure out some way to get a decent level of production from whoever is put in that spot.

It appears that the decision has narrowed down to between Travis Hafner and Jim Thome. The biggest negative for Hafner is probably going to be the amount of money he is looking for. While I assume Hafner to be a realist and know that he has missed 140+ games over the last two seasons, it's unlikely he would sign for below \$2M like Thome would. The biggest negative for Thome, besides his health, appears to be a drop in bat speed. It could have been a result of the injuries and sporadic playing time, but Thome had the second highest swinging strike percentage of his career, and, subsequently, second-lowest percentage of making contact in his career. Ground balls are also a good indicator of bat speed, with Thome posting the highest ground ball rate of his career by more than 10 percent. Sample sizes are in play for Thome with so many days lost to injury and time in the National League, but there are a lot of indicators of declining bat speed.

When in the lineup, their 2012 production was nearly identical, with Hafner performing slightly better than Thome, putting the ball in play more and hitting for more power. The stats also indicate that Hafner got a little bit unlucky, as the difference between his batting average on

balls in play and overall batting average had just a five-point disparity. The difference in BABip and BA tends to be closer to 20 points for players whose strikeout percentage is similar to Hafner's.

Nostalgia aside, the right pick for the Indians between Hafner and Thome would be Hafner. Hafner's financial demands could dictate the decision for the Indians, but it would appear that Hafner has more left in the tank than Thome and that he would be the better investment.