



A byproduct of the baseball season lasting six months is that we often forget how old and how experienced certain players are. Jason Kipnis is this season's example. Kipnis is clearly struggling at the plate this season, but he's only entering the prime of his career at age 26 and has just 906 plate appearances under his belt. He's still growing and learning as a baseball player.

Kipnis had success at every level in the minors, even while converting from an outfielder to a second baseman, which is no small task. He hit .297/.378/.486/.863 over 254 minor league games. Because he was a four-year college player with a couple years at Kentucky and a couple years at Arizona State, he was on the fast track, rising from Single-A Mahoning Valley in 2009 to Double-A Akron by June of 2010. He played just three-and-a-half months in Columbus before being called up to Major Leagues to make his debut on July 22, 2011 .

Things started out great for Kipnis, minus an oblique injury that ate up almost a month of his first big league season. He showed surprising power and good speed over his first 150 plate appearances, posting an .851 OPS with five steals and 17 extra base hits. The true eye opener was Kipnis's first half of the 2012 season. Picking up right where he left off, Kipnis posted a .765 first half OPS with 11 home runs in 370 plate appearances. He also showed more confidence on the basepaths, racking up 20 steals by the All-Star Break. By WAR, wins above replacement player, Kipnis was the team's best player in the first half of 2012.

From there, and since, the offensive numbers have gone downhill for Kipnis. He hit just three home runs in the second half and batted a measly .233, including a .180 month of August. For the month of April 2013, Kipnis batted just .200 with a .555 OPS and struck out 21 times in his 79 plate appearances.

Should we worry about Kipnis? Is this just a rough stretch for him? After all, he batted .274 in September and the three games in October last season to salvage what was a brutal second half. He has always been a max effort player, who is no doubt working as hard as he can to get out of this funk. Nevertheless, baseball is a results game where a player's statistics are broadcast for all to see and the ones for Kipnis have not been good over his last 400 plate appearances.

One of the best resources on the internet for dissecting hitter struggles is the PITCHf/x hitter tool, a collaboration between Baseball Prospectus and BrooksBaseball.net, which is the online home of PITCHf/x data. Here is the player profile for Jason Kipnis: [http://www.baseballprospectus.com/pitchfx/hitter\\_cards/hitter\\_card.php?player=543401](http://www.baseballprospectus.com/pitchfx/hitter_cards/hitter_card.php?player=543401)

Rather than adding a bunch of confusing images with explanations, here are some of the takeaways from the data. The biggest problems for Kipnis stem from the fastball, and fastball means either four-seamer or two-seamer. Cutters, sinkers, and splitters have separate categories. In the first half of 2012, Kipnis swung at 172 out of 370 fastballs he saw. He swung and missed at just 18 of them, which is a really good contact rate of 89.5 percent. In the second half of 2012, Kipnis swung at 173 out of 366 fastballs he saw. He swung and missed at 33 of them, a contact rate of 80.9 percent. So far this season, Kipnis has seen 78 fastballs and has swung at 42 of them. He has swung and missed 14 times, for a contact rate of 66.7 percent.

Kipnis had 28 hits off of fastballs in the first half last season, 19 in the second half, and has just three so far this season. His batting average on balls in play on fastballs last season was .309 (42-for-136 – home runs do not count towards BABIP). This season, Kipnis has put just 13 fastballs in play with three hits (.230 BABIP). We have to keep in mind that this season's numbers are a small sample size and could change very quickly.

It's hard to tell what, exactly, Kipnis's problem is with the fastball. There are a couple of speculative guesses that can be made. The first is simply that Kipnis is not confident right now. Quality pitches get to hit get fouled back or simply swung through. If the PITCHf/x classifications are right, there is no evidence that Kipnis is being pitched differently. The frequency of pitch type and location has not changed a whole lot from last season. Keep in mind that Kipnis has dealt with pain in both of his elbows dating back to Spring Training.

I spent this afternoon breaking down video of Kipnis from last season and this season from MLB.com highlights, which, unfortunately, don't tell a whole lot of the story, in part because there aren't many to look at from 2013. There is one particularly telling highlight from last season, this home run off of Yu Darvish: [http://cleveland.indians.mlb.com/video/play.jsp?content\\_id=21204493&c\\_id=mlb](http://cleveland.indians.mlb.com/video/play.jsp?content_id=21204493&c_id=mlb)

I've tried to compare it to this season's home run off of Wade Davis: [http://cleveland.indians.mlb.com/video/play.jsp?content\\_id=26696451&c\\_id=mlb](http://cleveland.indians.mlb.com/video/play.jsp?content_id=26696451&c_id=mlb)

Ultimately, to my untrained eye, I don't see a whole lot here. The one thing you do notice, though, and the PITCHf/x data backs it up, is Kipnis's ability in the first video to pull his hands in and turn on the baseball. That's something he has not shown yet this season. Of the 24 fastballs thrown to Kipnis on the inner third of the strike zone this season, he has swung at 11 of them. He's fouled off seven of them and swung and missed on three of them. Hitters have successfully tied Kipnis up with fastballs on the inner half and then have gone to sliders away. As a result, Kipnis is batting just .250 when pulling the ball. The American League average so far this season is .348 on balls pulled in play.

The Indians have to be looking for some sort of adjustment to make with Kipnis. His distribution of types of batted balls – line drives, fly balls, and ground balls – is not much different from last season and he's walking around the same amount as he did last season. Kipnis is swinging at fewer pitches out of the zone than he did last season and fewer pitches overall.

The swings and misses are what is hurting Kipnis and those tend to be mechanical adjustments. That could be any number of things and I'm certainly not in a position to determine what it is. Perhaps Kipnis's biggest problem is mental, experiencing prolonged failure for the first time in his impressive baseball career.

Either way, he's a guy that the Indians need to get going. Manager Terry Francona seems reluctant to drop Kipnis in the order because he's the only guy in the middle of the order with the speed to regularly go first to home on a double and second to home on a single. Also, dropping him down in the order may give him more opportunities with runners in scoring position, which won't exactly cut down on the pressure of batting high in the order.

This is something that Kipnis needs to hit his way out of. Benching him is not and should not be an option.