



There were more naysayers than supporters when the Indians signed Mark Reynolds in December to kick off their winter spending spree. Despite the team's obvious need for a right handed power hitter, Tribe fans voiced their displeasure with that slugger's strikeout totals and low average. Not only has Reynolds hit .250 or higher at the conclusion of every game since April 12, but he has not struck out more than twice in a game to date.

Some might scoff at these numbers and call them an aberration, citing the old-fashioned baseball cliché of a small sample size or attributing it to luck. The small sample size argument may have some credence, but a look at the numbers tells us that Mark Reynolds is just continuing a series trends that have been building over the last four seasons.

Reynolds proved that batters can overcome their strikeouts in 2009. Despite striking out a career high 223 times, which was 33.7 percent of his plate appearances, Reynolds drew 76 walks, hit 44 bombs, and drove in 102 runs. Reynolds finished 20th in the MVP voting, had a 4.4 oWAR (offensive wins above replacement player), and posted an .892 OPS. The batting average he posted of .260 was a bit of a mirage, as he posted a batting average on balls in play (BABIP) of .338. The reason this number is a red flag is because home runs do not count towards BABIP, which meant that Reynolds's true batting average on non-strikeouts was .423. That's just an aberration.

In 2010, Reynolds regressed, as was to be expected. But, Reynolds regressed beyond expectations. He batted just .198. He hit 32 more home runs, but he struck out 211 more times and his BABIP plummeted to .257. There was something else that happened to Reynolds that season. He walked 83 times in 596 plate appearances.

The 2010 season marked Reynolds's fourth full year in the Major Leagues. He was becoming more familiar with the pitchers and, though he still had major holes in his swing, his pitch recognition skills were improving. In spite of the good power numbers, the Arizona Diamondbacks felt Reynolds was going to get too expensive and struck out too much for their liking. They traded Reynolds to the Baltimore Orioles for relievers David Hernandez and Kameron Mickolio.

Although Reynolds hit just .221 in both of his seasons with the Orioles, something positive was happening. He was still walking at a much higher rate than he previously had and he was making more contact. In 2011, Reynolds hit 37 more long balls and struck out less than 200 times for the first time in three seasons while drawing a similar number of walks.

Reynolds was hurt early during the 2012 season and didn't really get on track from a power perspective. He hit just 23 home runs in 135 games. He did, however, make up for the lower home run total by walking in 13.6 percent of his at bats and striking out in a career low 29.6 percent of his at bats.

At 29 years old, with six Major League seasons under his belt, Mark Reynolds is still developing as a hitter. This is one of the many reasons that the Indians signed Reynolds. He's trending upward. Nobody knows how long it will continue, but the Indians just need it to continue for one season since that's how long they signed him for.

There are a couple other stats to mention and one, specifically, that has had a direct effect on Reynolds and the Indians this season. A stat that sabrists look at a lot is IFFB%, which stands for infield fly ball percentage, which is essentially a fancy way of saying "pop up". Most stat-minded people look at pop ups as strikeouts, and rightfully so. Occasionally a pop up will get lost in the sun or a miscommunication between fielders will happen, but those instances are so incredibly rare that pop ups are effectively strikeouts.

Here are Mark Reynolds's strikeout and infield fly ball percentages from 2007-2012:

Year

K%

IFFB%

2007

31.2

14.3

2008

33.3

11.0

2009

33.7

9.5

2010

35.4

15.5

2011

31.6

11.0

2012

29.6

9.4

See the trend? As Reynolds has cut down on his strikeouts since 2010, he has also cut down on his pop ups. This season, Reynolds has struck out in 23.6 percent of his at bats and has hit just 8.8 percent of his fly balls on the infield. Pop ups occur for any number of reasons, but timing and swing plane are probably the two biggest. Steadily dropping pop up numbers would indicate that Reynolds is squaring the ball up more often. As he has shown this season, he can

be a very productive hitter when he squares up the baseball.

This, along with the increased walk rate, shows the maturation process of Reynolds as a hitter. These are not just one year deviations from the norm. These are things that Reynolds has been improving upon over time.

Reynolds is currently batting .296, which would seem unsustainable for a guy who strikes out as much as Reynolds does. What we've seen from Reynolds this season is that he's willing to use the whole field. Baseball-Reference lists Reynolds's as having 22 of his 29 hits to center or right field. Of the seven balls he has pulled for hits, three have been doubles and three have been home runs. That indicates a player who is picking out mistakes and hammering them and staying on the baseball and using the middle of the field. More signs of maturity at the plate.

The Indians front office recognized these things. It wasn't as simple as solving a need for a power right handed bat. It had a lot to do with finding value in a player who wasn't just what everybody saw on the surface. It's a reasonable assumption that Terry Francona and his staff have had something to do with Reynolds's continued improvement as well, and, ultimately, it is a manager's job to get the most out of his players. But, Chris Antonetti and his staff correctly read between the lines on Reynolds and made him a target very early in free agency before anybody else could swoop in. To date, it's been a brilliant signing and should continue to be one.

Of all of the expressions about not being able to teach an old dog new tricks or how a zebra cannot change his stripes, the one we'll have to use to describe Mark Reynolds is how you can't judge a book simply by its cover.