

## Out of Bounds: Conventional Baseball Wisdom

Written by {ga=larshancock}

Wednesday, August 07 2013 3:05 PM - Last Updated Wednesday, August 07 2013 9:48 PM

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A few months ago, I'm at the wedding of one of my wife's cousins. I'm next to the dance floor enjoying a few cocktails made from this bizarre tequila-cognac mixed booze the groom is selling when Bob, the father of the bride, comes up to me.

"I hear you box," he offers.

Not knowing where this is going, I apprehensively confirm the rumor he has picked up from an unknown Snowden in the room.

"Punch me."

"Excuse me?"

"Punch me."

At this point, I'm confused. I've already lost whatever game we were playing, even though I didn't know we were playing it. There doesn't seem to be any animosity, and there is no reason

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there should be. But he's clearly not letting this go until I throw a punch at him. I do the math and the scenarios aren't good:

Scenario 1: I throw a punch at him, connect, and knock out a sixty plus year old man at his daughter's wedding. This is the type of thing that goes viral, and my name is mud worldwide until the next scandal hits the airwaves.

Scenario 2: I throw a punch at him and he does some Steven Segal ninja like shit which propels my fist somewhere else in the room, most likely (in order) to the nose area of the bride, my mother-in-law, my wife, some child, or one of the more elderly ladies in the room. And then the whole viral lynching thing.

Scenario 3: Actually, I can't really get past Scenario 1 and 2, mainly because I have no idea why I'm actually throwing a punch at this man.

The net of it is I am now in the extremely uncomfortable position of needing to throw a punch at a sexagenarian at his daughter's wedding. I decide my best course of action is to throw a halfhearted punch at the man and trust that God himself directs my slack fist into a neutral area of the crowd where it neither connects with Bob nor any of the other guests in the party. So after four times confirming he is ready, I telegraph a left jab slowly and deliberately toward him.

I remember every frame from the next half a second in vivid detail. I'll cut to the highlights.

Frame four: the left is just about half extended. Bob's face transforms from his usual "mellow dude" to "you just fucked with Bruce Lee at the wrong time son."

Frame five: Out of nowhere both of his hands appear and they are chopping my hands away from me.

Frame seven: The punch has been blocked! Contact is not going to be made! Ah, this was a

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karate exhibition, that's cool, I guess.

Frame nine: I'm a little off balance but things are good. Wait, why is Bob dropping to his knee?

Frame twelve: Hey, from that position, he could really pop me in the nuts if he wanted to...

Frame thirteen: Holy shit, he's about to punch me in the nuts, isn't he?

Frame sixteen: HE JUST PUNCHED ME IN THE NUTS!

And thus ends the story of how I got punched in the nuts by the father of the bride at a wedding.

But dude, this column is about baseball – it says so in the title – what gives? Well, let's use this story as a metaphor between what I call "conventional baseball wisdom" and "actual best strategy." Because if you're a boxer, you can beat other boxers when you are only allowed to punch and you're not allowed to hit the other guy in the nuts. But if you shed the artificial rules and fight in the best possible way, a boxer is always going to wind up with an ice pack on his frank and beans and the karate fighter is going to come out on top. Let's go further.

## LINEUP MYTHOLOGY

The typical baseball lineup is constructed as follows:

- ·Leadoff: guy who has the best speed on the time. OBP a plus.
- ·Second: guy who always makes contact to move the runner along
- ·Third: best hitter on the team
- ·Fourth: best RBI guy on the team
- ·Fifth: best power on the team of the guys remaining
- ·6-9: The other guys in decreasing order of OPS

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Tito Francona usually follows this pretty precisely and his lineup of late is Bourn, Swisher, Kipnis, Cabrera, Santana, Brantley, Gomes, Chisenhall, and Stubbs. Note I'm assuming Gomes is catching because he should be catching 80% of the time, because he's producing offensively, he calls a good game, he's good defensively, and because Santana is a miserable catcher.

A lot of people want to tweak the lineup thinking it will make all the difference in the world. Santana fourth, Cabrera sixth... Everyone has their well-embedded opinion on the best lineup they could deploy and they all think Francona is an idiot for not doing it their way. The problem is that Francona and the average fans are using flawed reasoning to determine the best lineup (or is it flawed... we'll get back to that).

[Baseball Musings has created a lineup simulator](#) where you can take a player's actual productivity in terms of OBP and slugging percentage and it derives mathematically the optimal lineup. Tito's usual gives the Tribe 4.713 runs a game, and subtle tweaks to it don't move that number much. Their best lineup could muster an extra .1 runs a game, not much, but a run a week could really help this team especially when their pitching has been as good as it has been lately. But what manager would have the balls to trot out this lineup which would generate 4.828 runs a game?

Santana, Kipnis, Cabrera, Swisher, Gomes, Stubbs, Brantley, Chisenhall, Bourn.

The reason that lineup works is math. The magical "speed – move him over – get him home – clean it up" lineup fails all kinds of logical tests, especially when the leadoff batter doesn't get on base. It presumes a scenario that seems to make sense, but statistically it doesn't prove out to be true the majority of the time. The key is that each position in the order has a different value to the result of the at-bat. The only thing important for the leadoff batter is getting on base, which is why Santana mathematically floats to the top. Carlos hits for good average and has a great eye for the ball. Imagine how much less the fans would be on him if they only expected him to do what he is exceptionally good at – getting on base. Cut down the swing, make contact, walk – that's your game Carlos. Both he and the team would be better.

And Kipnis in the two hole seems strange too, because that's the "contact, move them over guy" traditionally. But math says put the best hitter on the team there. What gives? Well, giving two quality guys a chance to get on base ahead of your power hitters increases your chances of

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scoring a lot more than having one guy on and trying to move him over. Wow, that makes sense. Why doesn't Francona do that?

Funny to see Cabrera, with the miserable season he is having in the three hole reserved for the best hitter on the team, right? Well, as it turns out, Cabrera's ability to hit the ball hard when he does hit it (4<sup>th</sup> highest slugging on the team behind Kipnis, Santana, and Gomes) shows he should be in that spot despite not getting on base as often as he should, because that is more valuable statistically in the three hole.

I could go on and on, but the net here is to point out the flaws in a traditional lineup construction, and how bitching about lineup slots really doesn't do you any favors, because you probably are doing that wrong if you're using conventional wisdom. Which you are. So stop.

### THE ROLE OF THE CLOSER

The Indians lead Detroit 2-0 in the top of the 9<sup>th</sup>. Tito Francona trots out Chris Perez to close the game, because he's the closer. The first batter is the left-handed hitting Prince Fielder.

We all know how this story goes. Fielder gets on base, Perez gets flustered, Perez gets shelled, Cleveland lights the torches and gets the pitchforks after Perez, Perez acts like a baby and doesn't talk to the media, and the chances of winning the division evaporate before our eyes.

So for the sake of argument, let's say Francona trots out Rich Hill to start the ninth instead of Perez. Lefties hit .246 off Perez, and only .183 off Hill. Yeah, Fielder hits lefties better by a little bit, but Hill (statistically) is downright nasty to lefties, where Perez is pretty pedestrian. It may have worked, but in the ninth inning you ALWAYS bring out the closer when the lead is three runs or less. That's the rule. Plus, you can't bring on Rich fucking Hill in the ninth, you just can't.

Victor Martinez is next. He's a much worse hitter against lefties, and has significantly less power. So don't go to Perez here – stick with Hill! Righties chew him up, but at worst you've got a runner on first one out. That's manageable. And then you have a lefty facing Andy Dirks, who is an easy out against a left-handed bat (or you get a pinch hitter and then you bring in Perez).

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The point is that role of the “closer” is inherently flawed in its construction. While, yes, you like the luxury of knowing your team only has to pitch 8 innings to win a game (since the lock-down guy will pitch the ninth), if you look at the pure math of the situation saving your best pitcher for the ninth is almost never the best strategy, as is using him exclusively in the ninth. Perez is fantastic with runners on and runners in scoring position, so why not use him in the sixth when you absolutely need to get out of the inning? By the ninth there may not be a lead to protect. Shouldn't you try to win every matchup right there and then with the player that gives you the highest chance of success? There have been countless leads blown in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> this year that Perez should have been called in to stop (the Tribe has blown 20 saves, only 3 by Perez). But the traditional logic of having a closer means you let Rich Hill work his way out of a jam and get shelled in the seventh.

When Perez blows a save, it isn't always his fault. It's Francona's for employing bad strategy. Yet Francona gets off the hook because he did what everyone else would have done, and Perez should close out every game, because that's his job. Even if it isn't the most likely outcome every time out.

### EGO, TRADITION, and COMFORT

The sad thing about the traditional roles in baseball is that a lot of them define the player. Michael Bourn was signed as the “leadoff hitter Cleveland needed”. You imagine the outcry from the fans and from Bourn if you drop him to ninth, where he mathematically belongs? And what of Perez? You tell your best pitcher to clean up the sixth inning, you're going to have a mutiny on your hands. Perez thinks he's the closer and dammit he deserves to be treated like it. Francona really can't manage the team in any other way than “the book” tells him to manage, because otherwise the players, the media, and the fans will throw “the book” at him.

The unwritten strategy of the game also generates comfort among the fans, which is important because a lot of the love of baseball is based on tradition. Every one of us knows the logic behind lineup construction and the role of the closer as it is in the book, and every single one of us would notice something wonky if it were violated. Does that comfort make the game more enjoyable for the fan? If a fan were asked to understand the complex mathematical principles as to why Bourn is hitting ninth and a struggling Cabrera is in the three hole, would he enjoy the game as much? And how little fun would it be to see Rich Hill trot out of the bullpen to close the game against a critical divisional opponent?

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The fact is, we as fans like boxing better than we like MMA because we understand the game, and love the traditions in the game. But we also shouldn't be as surprised when on occasion we get punched in the nuts, because it is bound to happen a little ore often than we like when we aren't fighting in the best possible way.