

Michael Brantley and Consistency

Written by {ga=papabearjere}

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I was watching the Tribe game the other night with a buddy when Michael Brantley came up to bat. We both agreed that Brantley was a very valuable player for the Indians, noting how he's a well-rounded player who does a little bit of everything to help his team win. My buddy went a little further to note that Brantley's "timely hitting" has been a huge boon to the Tribe's success this season.

This is undoubtedly true. Brantley is slashing a robust .360/.400/.447 with runners in scoring position, and those numbers are roughly the same with RISP and two outs (.349/.423/.492). Those numbers are a significant improvement on his overall slash line of .280/.329/.389. Not only that, but if Michael Brantley were to hit like he has with RISP all the time, he would be in the conversation for MVP*.

**This isn't to say Brantley would be on the level of Mike Trout or Andrew McCutchen, but Brantley's numbers with RISP compare favorably to those of the St. Louis Cardinals' Matt Carpenter, who is [generating his own MVP buzz](#).*

So clearly Michael Brantley has been significantly better this season with runners on base than with the bases empty (.262/.308/.369). But to simply attribute the gap in performance to "timely hitting" begs the question: If Michael Brantley can somehow increase his level of performance with men on base, why doesn't he do it all the time?

If you're a more sabermetrically inclined fan, then you know all about the [fallacy of clutch hitting](#). The idea is that there is no discernable difference in player performance in clutch versus non-clutch

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situations, and any perceived difference is simply the product of random variance. Basically, there's no such thing as a player heightening his performance when it matters most.

However, just because there's no statistical proof of clutch hitting doesn't mean that a player like Michael Brantley can't still have an advantage in clutch situations (triple negative!). It just means that there may be an alternative explanation other than saying that Michael Brantley is good at "timely hitting".

When you watch a team play over 100 times during the course of a season, it affords a lot of opportunity to gauge the tendencies of a player. Just looking purely at Michael Brantley's numbers show a guy who is a third outfielder, a solid regular who does a little bit of everything and is having some luck when it comes to "clutch" hitting. All of that is true, but it doesn't tell the whole story. It's obviously important to note the statistics when evaluating a player, but there's still value in considering *how* said player achieved those statistics.

When it comes to Michael Brantley, the most staggering thing about his performance at the plate is his consistency, and not just the consistency of his numbers, but also the consistency of his at-bats. Michael Brantley's at-bats look the same regardless of who's pitching, what inning it is, how many men are on base, how many outs there are, and what the score is.

This is Michael Brantley's defining characteristic as a ball player. When Brantley is at the plate, he never tries to go outside his skill set. If he wanted to, Brantley could hit about 20 homers a season, but he is not willing to sacrifice batting average and quality at-bats just to hit a few more long balls. Brantley makes a ton of contact; he has struck out on just 11.8% of his plate appearances compared to the league average of 18.9%. He is willing to work counts, but when he gets a pitch he's looking for, he always takes a smooth swing that produces a boatload of line drives (LD% of 25%, league average 20%). It's this consistent approach to hitting that has allowed Brantley to post such gaudy numbers with runners on base.

In a lineup with a lot of strikeout-prone hitters (Swisher, Santana, Cabrera, Kipnis, even Bourn), Michael Brantley's contact-driven approach is a breathe of fresh air. As the Indians prepare to (hopefully) play October baseball, Brantley's consistency at the plate will be a key factor in whether this team makes any noise in the postseason.

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Come playoff time, teams shorten their rotations and bullpens, so the Indians are going to be facing the oppositions' best starters and toughest relievers. On a team that has been prone to prolonged slumps, it will be critically to have guys that are capable of putting the ball in play late in games, regardless of who is pitching. In this respect, the steady approach of Michael Brantley could be the difference between October glory and a quick trip home.

Jeremy Klein is an unabashed Cleveland Sports fan who really should be studying for his Finance exam right now. You can follow him on Twitter [@PapaBearJere](#).

(All stats current as of 9/23/2013)

(Statistics via [Baseballreference.com](#) and [Fangraphs.com](#))

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