

## 2007 Cleveland Indians Spring Training Preview: The Infield

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Monday, February 26 2007 7:00 PM -

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Last week, the starting pitching and the bullpen were previewed. This week, Tony's previews shift to the position players as we wrap up our sneak peek at the 2007 Cleveland Indians. The infielders kick things off this week down in Winterhaven, and it's a young group. Garko, Barfield, Peralta, Marte, Victor, and Casey. With a utility spot up for grabs.



Last week, the [starting pitching](#) and the [bullpen](#) were previewed. This week, the previews shift to the position players as we wrap up the previews for the 2007 Cleveland Indians. The infielders kick things off this week.

### 2006 Flashback: By the Numbers□ (Major league ranks in parentheses)□

Since there really is no way to breakdown the offense of the infield alone, the following numbers are for the Indians offense as a whole. Offense has definitely been one of the Indians strengths the past three years as they have consistently been in the top 5 in baseball in almost every category. In 2006, the Indians were 4<sup>th</sup> (4<sup>th</sup>) with a .280 batting average, 2<sup>nd</sup> (2<sup>nd</sup>) in runs scored with 870, 4

th

(4<sup>th</sup>)

) with an .806 OPS, 5

th

(9<sup>th</sup>)

th

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Monday, February 26 2007 7:00 PM -

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) with 196 home runs, 2  
nd

(2  
nd

) with 351 doubles, 4  
th

(11  
th

) with 556 walks, 14  
th

(28  
th

) with 1204 strikeouts (not good), and 12  
th

(27  
th

) with 55 stolen bases.

By contrast, in 2005 the Indians were 5<sup>th</sup> (6<sup>th</sup>) with a .271 batting average, 4<sup>th</sup> (7<sup>th</sup>) in runs scored with 790, 4  
th

(4  
th

) with a .787 OPS, 3  
rd

(4  
th

) with 207 home runs, 2  
nd

(2  
nd

) with 337 doubles, 4  
th

(14  
th

) with 503 walks, 13  
th

(24  
th

) with 1093 strikeouts, and 11  
th

(25  
th

) with 62 stolen bases.

### The 2007 Starting Infield

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Monday, February 26 2007 7:00 PM -

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□

After the bullpen, the Indians starting infield may be the next biggest concern for this team heading into 2007. While the infield is loaded with talent and potential, but there also is uncertainty everywhere. At each position there are question marks that will be answered as the season progresses, like can Marte do the job at 3B? Will Peralta rebound at SS? Is Barfield the real deal at 2B? Can a Blake/Garko combo at 1B work? Can Victor straighten out his throwing problems at catcher? The only non-question is DH - where the Indians have one of the best hitters in the game – but of course “DH” is only a position in the batting order.

There is very little room for error for the Indians in the infield, as poor performance or severe injuries to Marte, Peralta or Barfield could be devastating. Outside of Asdrubal Cabrera (SS) - who will be in Buffalo - there really is not much impact infield talent in the minors ready to be summoned if needed. There are decent stop-gap options like Joe Inglett or Hector Luna, but having to rely on any of these guys for long periods of time would only have a negative impact. Bottom line, with little depth and a lack of alternatives, the Indians really have a lot riding on the 3B-SS-2B combo of Marte, Peralta, and Barfield.

Barring injury, here is the Indians 2007 starting infield with a detailed profile of each below:

1B: Casey Blake  
2B: Josh Barfield  
SS: Jhonny Peralta  
3B: Andy Marte  
C: Victor Martinez  
DH: Travis Hafner

### **1B: Casey Blake** □

□

*2006 Key Stats:* .282 avg, 63 runs, 20 2Bs, 1 3B, 19 HRs, 68 RBIs, 6 SBs

*Advanced stats:* .356 OBP, .479 SLG, .835 OPS, 64 [RC](#) , 11 [WS](#) , 22.4 [VORP](#)

After two years in the outfield, Blake will return to primary infield duty this season. Over the course of the past four seasons Blake has played a handful of games at 1B, and since Blake is so versatile and athletic, the change to 1B on a mostly full-time basis should not be much of a problem for him.

Blake will never come close to beating down the doors at Cooperstown, but he is a useful player and probably just a tick above average. Having lived through the “All Star at every position” days with the Tribe in the late 90s, I understand the backlash he gets from the fans, but as the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> option in our lineup he is not that bad. Yes, it is painful to watch him struggle at times, but the struggles you see from Blake are nothing compared to most other team’s 7-9 hitters. Look, the Cardinals won a World Series last year with a lineup that Blake would arguably have been the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> best hitter in.

Blake probably had his best season as an Indian last year. Had he not been plagued with a few injury setbacks that limited him to only 109 games he might have easily eclipsed his career

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Monday, February 26 2007 7:00 PM -

---

best numbers in 2004 for home runs (28) and RBIs (88). Last year, Blake hit .272 with a .927 OPS against lefties and hit .286 with a .798 OPS against righties, and over the last three seasons Blake has hit .250/.836 against lefties and .269/.794 against righties.

The noticeable thing is Blake has some distinctive trends in his odd year versus even year numbers. With 2007 being an odd year, will this trend continue where you get odd-year performance (.723 OPS in 2003, .746 OPS in 2005), or will he break out of the mold and we get even year performance (.840 OPS in 2004, .835 OPS in 2006)? Given his odd/even year performance trend, plate discipline seems to be the key. While his strikeout rate over the last four seasons has stayed within one every 4.3 to 5.1 at bats, his walk rate in his even years (1 every 8.7 ABs) has been over 50% better than his odd years (1 every 13.3). It should be noted that 2003 was his first year as a full-time player, and in 2005 he struggled with personal problems all season and was making a big change from 3B to the outfield. Knowing that, Blake may have been pressing more those years, so we may have to give the even year performances a little more weight than the odd year ones.

Situationally, Blake appeared to shake whatever it was that plagued him in tough situations in 2005 when he hit .192/.558 (AVG/OPS) with runners on base, .171/.491 with RISP, and .085/.245 with RISP and two outs. While not great, compared to his putrid numbers in those situations in 2005, his 2006 numbers look incredible. In 2006, Blake hit .242/.708 with runners on base, .261/.810 with RISP, and .281/.957 OPS with RISP and two outs. It should also be noted that for whatever reason, Blake has not played well at Jacob's Field the last two years. Last year, he put up a .796 OPS at Jacob's Field, but an .876 OPS on the road. In his disastrous 2005 campaign, he put up a .673 OPS at Jacob's Field and an .817 OPS on the road.

For now, minus a brain cramp from Shapiro or an injury cropping up, it appears a virtual certainty that against right-handed starting pitchers Blake will start at 1B while Ryan Garko (more on him in the Outfield & Bench installment Thursday) will serve as a key right-handed pinch hitting option late in games, and against left-handed starters Garko will start at 1B and Blake will start in RF while Trot Nixon sits. By mid-season, it is very possible that Garko and Blake could switch roles, with Garko taking on full-time 1B duties and Blake becoming the right-handed bat off the bench when right-handed starting pitchers start and starting in RF against lefties.

Contrary to some beliefs, Blake is not a free agent at season's end. While Blake's current multi-year pact expires this year, at the end of this season Blake will not have the full six years of service time required for free agency. As a result, he will only be arbitration eligible and the Indians will control him for one more season (2008). Down the road Blake would make a useful super-utility player, but for now he is your 2007 Opening Day 1B.

### 2B: Josh Barfield

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## 2007 Cleveland Indians Spring Training Preview: The Infield

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Monday, February 26 2007 7:00 PM -

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*2006 Key Stats:* .280 avg, 72 runs, 32 2Bs, 3 3B, 13 HRs, 58 RBIs, 21 SBs

*Advanced stats:* .318 OBP, .423 SLG, .741 OPS, 76 RC, 18 WS, 21.8 VORP

Barfield was the first move the Indians made this past off-season, and they obtained him from the San Diego Padres for 3B Kevin Kouzmanoff and RHP Andrew Brown. The addition of Barfield adds a much needed speed and defensive dynamic the team lacked last year after they traded Coco Crisp. While he will not blow anyone away with his speed, Barfield is an intelligent runner who runs the bases exceptionally well. Barfield is also an above average defender at 2B, which should have the Indians pitching staff jumping for joy.

While there will be an adjustment going from the National League to the American League, this may be negated by him getting out of the hitting graveyard in San Diego known as Petco Park. Amazingly, Barfield hit a hair-raising .241 with 6 HRs and 22 RBIs with a .640 OPS at Petco, but on the road he hit .319 with 7 HRs and 36 RBIs with a .839 OPS. A shift to the bandboxes in the American League and to Jacob's Field could cause his production to increase significantly, and he is no longer hitting 8th in front of the pitcher every night. While Jacob's Field plays more like a pitcher's park,

Barfield's bat speed and ability to drive the ball the opposite way to right-center are his hallmarks offensively, which fits right in at Jacob's Field.

Barfield also had significant lefty/righty splits last season, as against lefties he hit .331 with 7 HRs and 20 RBIs with a .965 OPS, and against righties he only hit .266 with 6 HRs and 38 RBIs with a .675 OPS. Situationally, Barfield was okay as he hit .306/.815 with runners on base, .274/.743 with RISP, and .261/.737 with RISP with two outs. Something of concern is that Barfield had one sensational month last year (July 1.025 OPS) which inflated his overall numbers. In four of the other five months he did not even manage an OPS over .700 (April .662, May .675, June .640, August .647). The other month, September, he put up a .764 OPS.

Barfield always had some problems striking out in the minors (1 K every 4.7 ABs), and while his 539 at bats in San Diego last year were right on par with the 536 at bats he has averaged over his last four minor league seasons, surprisingly Barfield showed good plate discipline last year as a rookie by only striking out 81 times (1 K every 6.7 at bats). On the flip-side, Barfield does not take a lot of walks or work counts. When he develops this part of his game, he will likely hit in the 2-hole in the lineup. But, for at least the start of 2007, he could hit 8<sup>th</sup> but more than likely will hit 9<sup>th</sup>

as a bridge to Sizemore.

In addition, Barfield should be a good fit for the team not only on the field, but off it as well. Barfield has a reputation for being a great teammate, and his work ethic is second to none (well, to Sizemore, heh). Scouts rave about his makeup. And, Barfield comes from major league bloodlines as his father Jesse Barfield was one of the game's best power hitters in the American League in the 80s and early 90s, and had what many people considered the best outfield arm in baseball during that time.

In time hindsight may prove otherwise, but the Indians have obtained a player who could

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Monday, February 26 2007 7:00 PM -

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potentially lock up the second base position for at least the next five years. Barfield provides a nice blend of speed, defense, offense, and hustle that should make him an instant fan favorite. Since Barfield only has one year of service time, he is under the Indians control through at least the 2011 season, so unless he crashes and burns he is your Indians 2B for the next several years.

### **SS: Jhonny Peralta**

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*2006 Key Stats:* .257 avg, 84 runs, 28 2Bs, 3 3B, 13 HRs, 68 RBIs, 0 SBs

*Advanced stats:* .323 OBP, .385 SLG, .708 OPS, 68 RC, 14 WS, 10.5 VORP

It goes without saying that Peralta was probably the most disappointing Indians player last year. Most teams would be elated to get a .257 avg, 13 HRs and 68 RBIs from their starting shortstop, but after his 2005 breakout campaign when he hit .292 with 24 HRs and 78 RBIs in barely 500 at bats, the Indians and their fans felt they had one of the premier offensive shortstops in baseball. Peralta took huge steps back offensively in 2006 and that label as a top offensive shortstop took a serious hit.

In addition, Peralta was continually knocked by the fans and media for his uninspired defensive play in the infield last year, and the Indians even did a study in the off-season where they concluded that Peralta was the worst fielding shortstop in the AL last year. While the observations of the Indians and the fans have merit, his actual defensive numbers state otherwise.

While there is no perfect tool to measure defense, all the numbers available show he was BETTER defensively in 2006 than in 2005. If you look at the traditional fielding stats, from 2005 to 2006 he improved in fielding percentage (.970 to .977) and range factor (4.53 to 4.90), but his zone rating did decrease (.854 to .817). If you look at some of the advanced (sabermetric) fielding stats, his numbers also improved across the board defensively from 2005 to 2006 in Rate (109 to 117), fielding runs above replacement (FRAR) (34 to 46), and fielding runs above average (RAA) (12 to 24). The "numbers" show he was actually quite good, but as Shapiro alluded to in a recent radio interview, the "eyes" showed that the problems were not physical at all, but more a lack of focus and toughness.

Offensively, Peralta just seemed to get away from his game, which in 2005 was hitting the ball the other way to the right-centerfield gap with power. He also appeared completely lost at the plate, and his power was virtually muted most of the year. While Peralta's strikeouts did increase from 128 in 2005 to 152 last year, his K/AB ration actually remained consistent as in 2005 it was 1 strikeout in every 3.9 at bats and in 2006 it was 1 strikeout in every 3.7 at bats. Strikeouts have always been part of his offensive game (1 every 4.0 ABs in his minor league career). No, his biggest issue offensively from 2005 to 2006 was the sudden evaporation of his power. Peralta put up a .520 SLG in 2005, but that number tumbled to .385 last year. And, the drop in power probably also affected his batting average to where some of those balls that turned into 2Bs and HRs in 2005 ended up being routine fly balls last year and easy outs.

Peralta recently underwent Lasik eye surgery to correct a near-sightedness issue with his eyes, so it will be interesting to see if this has any effect on his overall defensive and offensive performance (I think it will). Bottom line, when Peralta is in position to field a ball he is as reliable as anyone to field it and throw it. Defensively, his problems last year seemed to stem from poor positioning and reading the ball off the bat. Offensively, his problems appeared to center around an inability to get a read on the rotation of the ball and pick up pitches which resulted in some weak swings or swings at pitches way out of the zone. From this corner, the Lasik surgery could very well help correct those defensive and offensive issues from last year. We'll see.

Bottom line, Peralta's much maligned defense from last year was a byproduct of his poor play offensively, his vision problems, recent growth spurt, and the rest of the infield's defensive struggles. The defensive issues were there in 2005, but were covered up by such an excellent offensive season. If Peralta's hitting returns in 2007, fans will be enamored with that once again and the defensive issues will fall by the wayside much like they did in 2005. Either way, Peralta is one of the Indians biggest keys to the team's success this year.

### **3B: Andy Marte**

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*2006 Key Stats:* .226 avg, 20 runs, 15 2Bs, 1 3B, 5 HRs, 23 RBIs, 0 SBs

*Advanced stats:* .287 OBP, .421 SLG, .708 OPS, 22 RC, 4 WS, -2.5 VORP

Marte had a rough first go-around with the Indians in 2006. After an off-season deal highlighted by the Indians sending Coco Crisp to Boston in exchange for Marte, the Indians appeared to find their 3B of the future. But, he put up a very so-so season in his first year in the Indians organization hitting .249 with 20 HRs and 69 RBIs in 522 combined at bats in Buffalo and Cleveland. Marte's star still shines bright, but it has lost some of its luster.

Marte is a very good defensive 3B, so even if he continues to struggle offensively the addition of his glove should help enormously at the hot corner this year. He really can't be any worse than Aaron Boone offensively, and he can field better than him with his eyes closed. Prior to last season, Marte was voted as the top defensive third baseman in the minors for each league

he played in for four years running.

While some offensive improvement should be expected this year, a big bonus would be if his power numbers surface at the major league level. Not only does Marte bring gold glove caliber defense, but he also brings a power bat from the right-side of the plate that the Indians lack in their lineup. With Sizemore and Hafner such outstanding hitters from the left-hand side of the plate, the Indians need a player or two to come to the forefront from the right-side. Many thought it would be Peralta (still might happen), but while Marte's star has dulled some, he still is viewed as a potential 30-homer a year player. Whether or not he achieves that this year or ever is unknown, but the potential is there.

Marte had only 164 at bats last year, so not a lot can be taken from his peripheral numbers. But, one thing that Marte could plausibly improve upon in 2007 is certainly his plate discipline. After working on it so hard in the Braves organization to where he had a 71:96 walk/strikeout ratio in 2005, Marte regressed last year to a 47:119 ratio if you combine his Buffalo and Cleveland numbers. That significant drop is very alarming, although a lot of it could be due to the change in organizations and him putting too much pressure on himself.

Not only did it show that Marte was pressing last year with his poor BB/K ratio, but if you look at his home and away splits you can see a player who played uptight at Jacob's Field (.160 avg, .560 OPS) but very relaxed on the road (.281/.830). Situation-wise, for as bad as Marte hit as a whole on the season, he was actually very good in key situations where he hit .268/.868 with runners on base, .273/.983 with RISP, and .235/.937 with RISP and two outs. Also, he hit .227 with a .769 OPS against lefties, and hit .225/.685 against righties.

Marte has often been compared to the likes of Mike Schmidt, David Wright, and Adrian Beltre at 3B, and even has been tabbed by some scouts as a young Manny Ramirez. But comparisons only go so far, as you have to produce on the field and prove those comparisons right (or, gulp, wrong). Shapiro has invested a lot into Marte. Not only did he give up fan favorite Coco Crisp in a trade for him last off-season, but he also traded away prized 3B hitting juggernaut Kevin Kouzmanoff this past off-season to fill a need at 2B and get Josh Barfield.

Right now, Marte is it at 3B as the Indians system is barren in the upper levels as far as 3B prospects go. Players like Wes Hodges and Kelvin Diaz are promising 3B prospects in the system, but both will be in Single-A this year and are at least two years from the big leagues. The Indians are going to sink or swim with Marte, so Marte's star needs to start shining this season.

### **C: Victor Martinez**

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*2006 Key Stats:* .316 avg, 82 runs, 37 2Bs, 0 3Bs, 16 HRs, 93 RBIs, 0 SBs

*Advanced stats:* .391 OBP, .465 SLG, .856 OPS, 99 RC, 19 WS, 47.8 VORP

Martinez has proven to be one of baseball's most elite offensive catchers. Ranked against all the catchers in baseball with 400 or more at bats last year, Martinez was 4<sup>th</sup> in batting average, 4<sup>th</sup> in SLG, 3<sup>rd</sup> in



OPS, 4

th

in HRs, and 1

st

in RBIs. Over the last three seasons, he has been 1

st

through 4

th

in all of those categories. From an offensive standpoint, there is little doubt how much of an advantage the Indians have over most teams with Victor at catcher.

Martinez has also proven to be extremely durable in his three year stint as the Indians starting catcher as he has yet to go on the disabled list with an injury. He has played in 140 or more games each year, and last year he was 3<sup>rd</sup> among ML catchers in games started at catcher (127) and 5<sup>th</sup> in innings logged (1110.0).

Considering Eric Wedge practically runs him into the ground every year, it is a testament to Martinez's durability, especially at the catching position where players can break down so much faster. Of note, for those that subscribe to the belief that Victor wears down in the second half from Wedge's overuse, over the last three seasons he has hit a combined .282/.813 before the All Star break, and has hit .325/.900 after it.

A switch-hitter, Martinez has always hit much better from the left-hand side of the plate. In 2006, Martinez hit .332 with an .888 OPS against righties, and hit .290/.803 against lefties. Over his three seasons as the Indians full-time catcher from 2004-2006, he has hit .312/.882 against righties, and .283/.798 against lefties. It should be noted that there is very little difference in his on-base percentage no matter what side of the plate he hits from, but when using his three year totals he has much more power as a left-handed hitter (.503 SLG) than as a right-handed hitter (.426 SLG).

Martinez also has very good plate discipline and is one of the few hitters in the Indians lineup not prone to huge strikeout totals. In 2004 he put up a 60:69 BB/K ratio, in 2005 63:78, and in 2006 71:78. Situationally, with runners on base last year he hit .315/.840, with RISP he hit .323/.847, and with RISP and two outs he hit .230/.684. And, over the last three years he has hit .315/.879 with runners on base, .302/.869 with RISP, and .257/.809 with RISP and two outs.

One concerning development in his offensive game is the drop in home runs where there has been a steady decline since 2004. After hitting 23 home runs in 520 at bats in 2004, they dipped to 20 in 547 at bats in 2005, and to 16 in 572 at bats last year. His at bats are increasing each year, but the home run totals are decreasing. It should be noted that this could be a shift in Martinez's approach at the plate to being more of a contact hitter. His doubles have remained virtually the same from 2004-2006 (38-33-37), but his batting average has steadily increased from .283 in 2004, to .305 in 2005, to .316 in 2006. Martinez appears to have focused more on making consistent contact, and as a result may be sacrificing some of his power potential.

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Monday, February 26 2007 7:00 PM -

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The big question mark with Martinez is defense, as his issues defensively last year were well documented. While he was third best in baseball with only four passed balls (Ivan Rodriguez and Brad Ausmus were the only ones better), Martinez struggled in just about every defensive category available. While catching defensive statistics are far from perfect, Martinez was dead last in zone rating (.800), was second to last in range factor (6.47), and was sixth worst with 8 errors. In addition to those problems, he gave up the most stolen bases (100) of any catcher in baseball, which was 10 more than the second worst (Pierzynski with 90), and he was last in baseball in caught stealing percentage at 18%, which was almost 4% below the second worst (Pierzynski at 21.7%). Even advanced fielding stats like Rate (87), FRAR (7) and RAA (-16) showed how bad he was behind the plate.

It should be noted, however, that 2006 was a sharp decline from his 2004 and 2005 defensive performance as his Rate, FRAR, and RAA declined rapidly last year. In 2004 his Rate, FRAR, and RAA were 94-15-(-8), in 2005 they were 98-22-(-3), but in 2006 they were 87-7-(-16). While he has never been a great defensive catcher, in 2004 and 2005 he was ranked in the middle of the pack for zone rating, range factor, errors, and caught stealing percentage those years. And, his advanced fielding stats were also okay those years.

As a catcher, offense is only part of the equation. Being able to call a good game behind the plate, perform well defensively, and control an opposing team's running game all factor in. Martinez has always done well calling games, and prior to last year was a reliable defensive catcher. Throwing out runners has always been an issue for him, although in 2004 and 2005 he was just a tick below league average. Considering how much offense Victor provides, just being average defensively would be very acceptable. The question is, was 2006 just a down year defensively for Martinez and he'll bounce back to his previous 2004/2005 performance level? Or, is this a sign of a catcher in decline and a need for a move to 1B full-time may be necessary after the season?

Martinez is under the Indians control through the 2010 season, and will be a fixture in this lineup for years to come. However, he must improve defensively this season and at least get back to his 2004/2005 form in order to remain as a producer for this team at the catching position. Otherwise, the Indians may be forced to move him to 1B sooner rather than later, or possibly trade him.

### **DH: Travis Hafner**

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*2006 Key Stats:* .308 avg, 100 runs, 31 2Bs, 1 3B, 42 HRs, 117 RBIs, 0 SBs

*Advanced stats:* .439 OBP, .659 SLG, 1.097 OPS, 121 RC, 25 WS, 79.7 VORP

What else can you say about Hafner? The numbers he put up last year even after missing the entire last month of the season are mind-boggling, and he has firmly established himself as one of the elite and most feared hitters in the game. He has a great personality, and while he is a big strong country boy like his predecessor Jim Thome, he is hardly the nitwit Thome was. Best of all, he is ours.

Hafner's numbers increased across the board from 2005 to 2006, as batting average (.305 to .308), OBP (.408 to .439), SLG (.595 to .659), OPS (1.003 to 1.098), HRs (33 to 42), and RBIs (108 to 117) all became his new career highs. But, probably the most notable change was his improved plate discipline. Hafner put up a 79:123 BB/K ratio in 2005, but put up a 100:111 BB/K ratio in 2006. Even though he missed a whole month he still ended up with only 14 less plate appearances than he had in 2005, and not only did he decrease his strikeouts from 123 to 111, but his walks jumped significantly from 79 to 100. Teams were a lot more careful with him (7 intentional walks in 2005, 16 in 2006) and often pitched around him, but Hafner did not let frustration settle in by expanding his zone and he took what the pitchers gave him. Combine that patience with the increase in power (.595 SLG to .659 SLG) and you have a dangerous hitter.

Overall, Hafner has very little weaknesses as a hitter. In the last three years, Hafner has destroyed righties (.323 avg, 1.093 OPS), and done very well against lefties (.280/.912). One of the big improvements for Hafner though in 2006 was his effectiveness against lefties. Against lefties, in 2004 he hit .244 with a .723 OPS, then improved on that mark in 2005 by hitting .268/.878, but in 2006 made a gigantic leap hitting .321/1.100.

The progression in his situational stats has been impressive as well. In 2004 with RISP he hit .294/.929 and with RISP and two out .238/.877, then in 2005 with RISP he hit .333/1.071 and with RISP and two out .328/1.045, and then last year with RISP he hit .305/1.190 and with RISP and two out .283/1.201. Plus, just as a reminder, he was unbelievable with the bases loaded in 2006, as in 14 at bats he had Playstation-like numbers in belting 6 grand slams, driving in 30 runs, and hitting .571/2.420. Hafner is no longer neutralized when he faces left-handed pitching, and he performs in the clutch, which is why he made the jump last year into super-elite hitter status.

One concern with Hafner is that he has missed good portions of each of the last three seasons to injury. He missed virtually all of September last year after he was hit with a pitch that broke his hand, missed over three weeks in mid-July to early August of 2005 after being hit in the face by a pitch that resulted in a concussion, and missed time at various points early in 2004 due to an ailing right elbow. These are not necessarily signs that Hafner is brittle, though, just that he may be a bit unlucky.

Hafner is under the Indians control for two more years as the Indians have an option on him for 2008 which they most definitely will pick up. The popular question over the next year and a half before he is free agent eligible in November 2008 is will the Indians resign him? Considering more than half the suitors are immediately eliminated since he cannot DH in the National League, and that big market teams like Boston (Ortiz) and Chicago (Thome) have expensive DH's already in place, the odds are in the Indians favor that they will be able to retain him since there will only be a handful of suitors they are competing against. Don't be surprised if a new long-term deal is announced sometime between now and the end of April.

Hafner continues to put up career numbers and besting his previous seasons. Amazingly, Hafner has not been an All-Star yet, though that should change this year. There is no telling

## 2007 Cleveland Indians Spring Training Preview: The Infield

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Monday, February 26 2007 7:00 PM -

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what we may be in store for in 2007 if he can stay healthy and remain in the lineup all year.

**Up Next:** The Outfield and Bench.

**Coming Soon:** In-depth previews of the Indians minor league affiliates Buffalo, Akron, Kinston and Lake County.