

Painted Into A Corner

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
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Much has been made as of late about the lack of production coming from the corner outfielders, most notably David Dellucci and Trot Nixon. Many fans are clamoring for the release of one of the aforementioned vets in favor of a promotion of Shin Shoo-Choo, or potentially even a deal for a big outfield bat at the trade deadline. In Paul Cousineau's latest, he takes a closer look at the numbers being produced from the corner outfield spots and advocates staying the course in left and right field.



Much has been made recently about the lack of production coming from the corner OF positions on the Indians. While Dellucci and Nixon have become the whipping boys du jour (as Casey Blake and Jason Michaels are unsure what to do with their newfound popularity), it's time to look at the actual numbers being produced by those two positions in the Indians lineup.

The cumulative season statistics follow the position, and then are shown how they rank against the same position production among the 30 MLB teams:

Left Field

.769 OPS (19th of 30)

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40 R (10th of 30)

9 HR (13th of 30)

38 RBI (14th of 30)

Right Field

.715 OPS (22nd of 30)

37 R (13th of 30)

5 HR (24th of 30)

34 RBI (22nd of 30)

Not setting the world on fire, but not necessarily as bad as it looks from day to day on the field. Essentially, Delichaels in LF has performed around the middle of the pack while RF falls further down the list, partially due to a full-time job being given to Nixon after Blake moved to 3B to take over for the injured (and struggling) Marte.

The individual players' numbers currently filling those spots in LF break down like this:

Michaels

.800 OPS - 19 R - 5 HR - 19 RBI

Dellucci

.697 OPS - 25 R - 4 HR - 19 RBI

While some would argue that Michaels has earned more playing time, I would counter that he's being used exactly as he should – exclusively against LHP. Last year, we saw how Michaels performed against all pitchers and his splits this year (.854 OPS vs. LHP, .638 OPS vs. RHP) validate the use of him as a platoon player who struggles once he is forced to be in the lineup everyday and go up against RHP regularly.

His platoon partner, Dellucci, has also proven that he is best served in the role of only playing against RHP, though his numbers against both RHP and LHP are drastically below his career averages:

.501 OPS vs. LHP in 2007, .605 OPS vs. LHP from 2004-2006

.727 OPS vs. RHP in 2007, .875 OPS vs. RHP from 2004-2006

As long as Dellucci trends back towards his career averages against RHP in the platoon with Michaels, the LF platoon will do the trick.

Not tremendously, but effectively.

The prevailing notion that Big League Choo should be in Cleveland, taking Dellucci's spot in the LF platoon, is undermined by the fact that Choo is struggling in Buffalo, particularly against RHP (.771 OPS vs. LHP, .672 OPS vs. RHP) whom he would face.

While Choo would certainly bring more athleticism to the platoon in the field than Dellucci does, his numbers in Buffalo don't merit a promotion. If he were crushing AAA pitchers, he could certainly represent an upgrade.

But right now, the BLC doesn't.

The situation in LF is one that bears watching if Dellucci is unable to trend towards his career numbers vs. RHP, but Delichaels in LF does not pose

the biggest problem on this team, or even in the outfield.

The much bigger problem exists in RF, where Trot Nixon has seen his OPS drop from .894 on May 7th to its current .664 over a period of 32 games, with just six extra base hits in that stretch. If that was an aberration or just a prolonged slump, the alarm wouldn't go off.

But, here are Nixon's OPS

numbers from the past five years:

2003 - .975

2004 - .887

2005 - .804

2006 - .767

2007 - .664

And, here we find the problem. Nixon, who has been playing RF against LHP and RHP until just recently with Gutierrez coming into the picture, has either been playing injured (off-season back surgery) or is simply on the downside of his career. The fact that his defense has been substandard only builds the case against Nixon as an everyday, or even platoon, player.

Consider Nixon's numbers for 2007:

.664 OPS - 22 R - 2 HR - 23 RBI

Even with the excellent production from C and SS (two positions that historically don't produce a lot of runs), Nixon in the lineup every day has become a liability.

But before throwing all sorts of RF possibilities out there not currently in the organization, let's make another consideration – give Franklin Gutierrez the full-time gig in RF on a 6-week trial basis (until July 31st) to see what we have in Frank the Tank.

With Gutierrez out of options at the end of the year, the team needs to find out if Gutierrez has the potential to become an

everyday player to line up beside Grady Sizemore for the next few years, or if he is simply a 4th OF that can be used for trade bait to a team in need of a CF (his natural position) like the team did with Coco Crisp a few years ago.

In his short time with the parent club, Gutierrez has posted this line:

.635 OPS - 7 R - 2 HR - 5 RBI

Notice that Gutierrez, who is by no means a HR hitter with his new shorter stroke, has as many HR as Nixon does in 174 fewer plate appearances.

While the Atomic Wedgie seems to working Nixon and

Gutierrez into a platoon in recent games, a better approach would be to give Gutierrez a spot in the lineup every day. In Buffalo, Gutierrez performed equally well vs. all pitchers, posting a .938 OPS vs. LHP and a .847 OPS vs. RHP (notice the marked difference to Choo's lesser numbers in Buffalo); so it may be time to give Gutierrez a long look in RF.

While some may clamor for the release of Nixon to bring another player in, he still does offer a LH bat off of the bench and veteran leadership. That “veteran leadership” is not a quantifiable quality, but there is something to be said for a team’s chemistry that is sitting on top of the toughest division in baseball, having overcome numerous roadblocks already in the young season. Whether Nixon’s presence is a factor or not is debatable, but the

performance and attitude that the team conveys is not.

For now, Nixon keeps his spot on the team, just not in the everyday lineup.

Another option to solve the problem in RF would be to bring Andy Marte up to face

LHP (he's sitting on a 1.024 OPS vs. LHP in Buffalo since he returned from injury in an admittedly small number of plate appearances) and move Blake back into the platoon situation where he would play 3B against RHP and RF against LHP.

But, with Blake going the way he is as the everyday 3B – if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Many fans are vocal about upgrading one (or both) of the corner OF spots as the season moves closer to the halfway point. For now, the team should allow the LF platoon (which has been serviceable, but not spectacular) play out as it was designed for Delichaels, and give Gutierrez a shot in the everyday lineup in RF. If a change becomes necessary from either Dellucci's continued struggles or Gutierrez's failure as an everyday player, so be it.

But for now, with the trading deadline five weeks away from today, the Indians would be best served to put those plans into motion (or keep them in motion) to fully determine if an in-house solution exists before jumping the gun on bringing a corner OF in from the outside at the expense of prospects when the answer may already be in the Indians' clubhouse.