

Paging Pronk

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Friday, June 22 2007 7:00 PM -

What the heck is wrong with Pronk? The Indians mauler of a DH has just not been himself so far this season. Some fans blame his marriage in the off-season. Some blame the looming contract negotiations. Others cite his chronically sore elbow and the fact he's been playing the field more. In Paul Cous's latest, he delves deep into The Pronk Debacle, and makes some interesting observations.



Noticeably absent from the 2007 Cleveland Indians' team has been everyone's favorite alter ego – that of DH Travis Hafner – Pronk.

Pronk, that menacing presence in the on-deck circle and monster crouching over the plate, daring pitchers to make a mistake that will land in the outfield seats has been replaced by a rather pedestrian DH...goes by the name of Hafner.

Now, this Mr. Hafner's numbers so far this year are by no means terrible:

.257 Batting Average

.401 OBP

.432 SLG

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.833 OPS

10 HR

42 R

46 RBI

His RBI totals put him in the top 25 for MLB, tied with David Ortiz in RBI, so the production has not been completely absent; but he is far from the hitting machine that averaged 37 HR and 112 RBI in the past two years, while spending a good deal of time on the DL.

He looks like the same hitter and no glaring differences are obvious to the naked eye, so perhaps the statistics will tell the story. Don't worry, math makes my head hurt, so we'll keep it pretty basic.

One strength of Pronk has always been his plate discipline and his ability to discern a ball from a strike, work a count for a walk, and avoid strikeouts.

His walk and strikeout percentages for the last 3 seasons:

BB%

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2005 – 14.0%

2006 – 18.1%

2007 – 19.1%

K%

2005 – 25.3%

2006 – 24.4%

2007 – 23.2%

So his pitch selection seems to be unchanged as he is, in fact, walking more and striking out less than he has in years past. It's possible that he's not seeing the good pitches, but at least he's still identifying the good pitches to hit.

Pronk, much like Barry Bonds (warts and all) has a discriminate eye that is able to identify the pitch that he should drive and hit it hard. He may not see that many good pitches to hit in an at-bat, but he has always been able to identify the pitch to hit and make the pitcher pay for the mistake.

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However, despite this continued excellence in plate discipline, which has allowed his OBP to remain above .400, there has been a huge drop in Hafner's slugging percentage:

SLG

2005 - .595

2006 - .659

2007 - .432

This means that when Hafner is making contact with the ball, he's not driving the ball resulting in the extra base hits and HR that had become his hallmark. This becomes apparent by looking at his HR/FB % (or out of Fly Balls hit, how many were HR), it's apparent that he's not getting his normal power in the balls that he's driving.

HR/FB%

2005 – 24.4%

2006 – 30.2%

2007 – 16.1%

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While that's an awfully precipitous drop, the most concerning trend is his newfound frequency to hit grounders on the pitch he selects to put a meaningful swing into. Whereas in the past, Hafner would spray liners and fly balls into the gaps, he is now meekly grounding out to the middle infield with alarming regularity. His ground balls, by year:

GB

2005 – 158

2006 – 133

2007 – 91

Or, he's already hit about 70% of the amount of ground balls he hit all of last year. Through 71 games, that does not bode well for him as he's on pace for over 200 ground balls, which would smash his previous numbers.

So, essentially, it looks like his batting eye is still there, but Hafner is missing the ball that he used to crush. Whether he's not getting enough on it to hit it out of the park, or topping it into the ground, he's just not hitting the ball on the screws as he has done in the past two years.

Why would this be happening?

Perhaps it's his chronically sore right elbow and the fact that he's playing 1B

much more frequently than he ever has (9 games already this year, compared to 5 combined games the previous two years) that has rendered his swing weaker or altered the torque of his swing.

If that is the case, it's time for him to put the 1B glove in mothballs and let him go back to full-time DH.

Perhaps it's the contract negotiations that have started with the Indians, as Hafner becomes a FA at the end of the 2008 season. With the reports today that clarify Peter Gammons' report that Hafner turned down a 5-year, \$60M deal to [bring the reported offer to either a 5–year, \\$70M or a 4-year, \\$60M offer](#) (which is an eminently fair deal, in line with David Ortiz's extension and an offer that should quiet any talk that the Dolans are unwilling or unable to make fair and legitimate offers to existing Indians to prevent their Free Agency), it's very possible that Hafner is pressing to enhance his market value to the team.

If that's the case, somebody needs him to pull his head out of his...well, someone needs him to start playing baseball.

Whatever the reason for Hafner's difficulties and the disappearance of Pronk, let's hope the Travis didn't go into Wedge's office and pull a Scott Howard in "Teen Wolf", saying that he's going to go as himself and not his wildly successful inner animal. Because if he did, I have some news for Travis – people don't go to watch "The Incredible Hulk" to find out about Bruce Banner's inner demons, they go to see a

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monster rip a town apart.

Travis, unleash the fury.

Open the cage and let Pronk out.

Unleash the fury.