

## The Hole In The Middle

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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When you start to talk about all the variables that could either positively or negatively affect the 2008 Indians, a return to form for Travis Hafner is the first thing most of the optimists bring up. With no losses from last years lineup, if Hafner can get back up over .300 and hit 35 homers, this could be a very good offense this season. In his latest, Gary says that getting Pronk right again could be the key to this season. GO TRIBE!



Before the start of last season, Mark Shapiro, the Indians general manager, said that a key barometer of the Indians offensive success would be whether or not shortstop Jhonny Peralta regained his rookie season hitting stroke. It seemed like a stretch. This year, not so much.

It's not that Peralta himself holds the key's to the Indians offense. It's just that banner years from Peralta, Victor Martinez, Grady Sizemore and even Ryan Garko may be even more critical to the Indians returning to the post season than whether Fausto Carmona and C.C. Sabathia can apply the same kind of pitching one-two punch. With designated hitter Travis Hafner continuing to perform like Travis Bickle at the plate, the Indians can ill afford anything less from Peralta et al. than they got last season. They likely will need even more.

If the team that Shapiro has constructed is going to overtake the Boston Red Sox, the New York Yankees or any of the other pretenders/contenters in the American League, it can't afford another season with a hole in the middle of the lineup that Hafner was from May through the playoffs last season. That means that the

Indians either fix what's been ailing Hafner, they get even better production from the rest of the lineup or they find another answer. Likely, it will be a combination of all three.

By all accounts, Hafner is a good guy and he works hard. He seems to have an even demeanor with a player's perspective on his 2007 season, which is to say that his memory is short. That's all good. But what Indians fans want to know but don't is whether any of that will translate into a better 2008 season. Good luck getting an answer to that.

Shapiro thinks he's putting salve on the wound by downplaying Hafner's struggles, suggesting that Hafner had a decent 2007 season, just not a great one. Manager Eric Wedge probably thinks he has the back of his player and the respect of the rest of the team by proxy when he publicly claims he's not worried about Hafner. Hitting coach Derek Shelton probably thinks he's being helpful by minimizing Hafner's struggles, reducing them to a rather ubiquitous "he was just a little off." But these three sat through the same season everyone else did and know in their heart of hearts that Hafner didn't have a decent season, they should be worried, and they need to find some greater insight if this problem is going to get fixed.

For the most part, the Cleveland media seems to be buying the company line regarding Hafner, probably because Hafner is that aforementioned "good guy" that you really want to see succeed. But pitcher Cliff Lee is a good guy and that didn't stop the media from burying him early last season after taking their cue from Indians management even though Lee was essentially the pitching equivalent of Hafner last season. Maybe the answer really does lie in a little extra time in the batting cage for Hafner, but so far that doesn't seem to be working all that well either.

Just a cursory look at the spring training stats tells you that not much has changed

in Pronkville. His preseason has been pretty much a microcosm of his 2007 season. Hafner started off well enough in February only to trail so much that by the end of spring training he was back to swinging wildly at pitches in the dirt. In his last 10 spring games, Hafner hit .156 with one home run and three RBI. If you believe in trends, as Shapiro and his cadre of statistical wonks tend to, there aren't enough Roloids in the world to ease the queasy stomachs that Hafner currently is foisting upon them.

One of the more popular excuses that have been made for Hafner for his dismal 2007 is that he was just a slump. That's possible, but it was far longer and 10 times deeper than what most would otherwise consider a slump. Last April, Hafner hit .338 with 16 RBI, five home runs, and two doubles. His on-base percentage was .471, his slugging percentage was .550 and his On Base plus Slugging Percentage was a more than respectable 1.021. Those numbers compared favorably and, in most cases were better than his career numbers.

For the next four months, Hafner turned into Gorman Thomas, but with less power. In May, he hit .228, which actually was better by 10 points than his June. In July and August he averaged right around .251. But beyond just simple hitting, Hafner wasn't producing runs. His power numbers were down, way down, but that only tells part of the story. With runners in scoring position, where someone like Hafner really is supposed to earn his keep, he was an embarrassing .226. That's a full 50 points under his career average.

Even more telling is the so-called "clutch" statistics. With two outs and runners in scoring position, Hafner had 15 hits in 70 at bats for a .214 average. Though he had 15 walks that was confined mostly to the first half of the season when pitchers were more careful out of respect for his history. As the season wore on, careful wasn't even part of the equation. Hafner had 65 walks in the first half of the season, 37 in the second half.

Hafner was only marginally better last season when the game was late and close (defined as a plate appearance in the 7<sup>th</sup> inning or later with the Indians either tied, ahead by one run or with the tying run on deck). But only marginally, hitting .253. Pick a statistic that matters and across the board Hafner was 30 to 40 points below his career averages in each of those categories.

In a way, I feel like Owen Wilson's character in "The Wedding Crashers" when he was guessing the contents of wedding presents. I can go on all day like this. Hafner with the count 0-1 hit .238. With the count 0-2, he hit .176. In fact, the best Hafner hit with the count in the pitcher's favor was .244 when the count was 1-2. That may not be any great surprise for any hitter, but again in each case it was still lower than Hafner's career averages. In fact, it's hard to find a measure by which Hafner didn't significantly regress last season.

While this may seem like so much piling on, it's really meant to emphasize that what Hafner experienced wasn't any mere slump, the apologists notwithstanding. The fact that it has continued unabated during this spring only makes it more troubling. But beyond the impact on Hafner, it also deeply affected the rest of the lineup. There were lengthy stretches last season in which the Indians looked like the Tampa Bay Devil Rays at the plate. As Hafner so often went, so did the rest of the order.

The question then is what's really being done to fix what to this point is being written off as an anomaly. Again, to hear it from the Indians front office, not much. The party line is that there is nothing physically wrong with Hafner, but that same party does acknowledge that Hafner has a

gimpy right elbow, enough so that the Indians do not even consider him to be in the mix at first base, except during some inter-league games. You don't need to play a doctor or detective on TV to suggest that checking whether Hafner has changed his mechanics, even just a hair, to compensate for the lingering pain might be a good spot to start looking for some answers.

In a way, Hafner's situation is like the person suffering from a pain in his shoulder that a team of doctor's can't isolate. Eventually, someone figures it out. Likewise, if Shelton and Wedge aren't seeing something, then the Indians need to get some more opinions. A player doesn't build a career with the kind of numbers Hafner had until 2007 only to suddenly go deeply south. There's a reason for everything and right now the Indians entire strategy seems to be built around hope, as in hope that the pain will subside.

The Indians did win 96 games last season, tied for most in the league. By any measure, that's impressive particularly considering it was despite Hafner. But for anyone watching the Red Sox playoff series last year, it presented an interesting picture. There were three keys to that series for the Indians: Sabathia, Carmona and Hafner. They didn't need all three to play well in order to win, but neither could they withstand the ineffectiveness of all three. Unfortunately, that's what they got.

The Indians are on the precipice of doing something great. The impending loss of Sabathia after the season only highlights how critical it is for the Indians to take advantage of the open window in front of them. But if they don't want to spend the post-season watching

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someone else celebrate again, their choices are few. Get Hafner righted or get a Plan B. Another season of watching and hoping is not an option.