

Things Fall Apart - The Missing Links

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Thursday, July 17 2008 7:00 PM -

Paulie The Masochist continues his All-Star break look at where things veered off track for the Erie Warriors this season, and today focuses on the ineptitude, then the absence of Travis Hafner and Victor Martinez from the lineup due to injuries, and the impact it has had on this offense. Paul takes a historic look back on exactly how big of a part of this teams run production this duo has been these past three years, and makes some comparisons to other slugger duos around the league.



Since the notion that the bullpen is at least partially responsible for the 2008 abomination of a season that we've been subjected to, let's get into another primary reason for the collapse of the Indians - the injuries to the middle of their lineup with Victor and Hafner on the shelf.

There's not too many ways to sugarcoat how inconsistent and inept the Indians' offense was as the season officially started circling the drain this spring. As frustrating as the lineup is to see when it's posted, as infuriating as it is to watch the team struggle throughout the course of the game, and as maddening as it is to examine in the final box score, something often gets lost in the mix because of the passage of time since the end of May and mid-June when the middle of the Indians' lineup hit the DL. Not to simplify things too much, but what gets lost is that the Indians, without Martinez and Hafner anchoring the middle of the lineup, are simply not a consistently good offensive team ... and won't be as long as they remain on the shelf.

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Whatever the reason for those two to not hit the DL earlier than they did, what's done is done this year and neither look to be close to returning to the lineup anytime too soon. With those two out for the foreseeable future, the way that the Indians' lineup is constructed, it's just too much for the Indians to overcome to put anything together that looks remotely like a consistent offense. The simple fact is that the Indians, whether you like it or not, have been built to rely on those two to provide the thunder in their lineup, and I know that I've posted similar stats to these, but bear with me as they're listed again to prove a point.

The Indians' RBI totals from Victor and Hafner and the percentage of RBI that those two contribute in terms of the whole team for the last few years are as follows:

2006

Victor - 93 RBI

Hafner - 117 RBI

Indians' Total - 839 RBI

210 RBI of 839 (25.0% of total)

2007

Victor - 114 RBI

Hafner - 100 RBI

Indians' Total - 784 RBI

214 of 784 RBI (27.3% of total)

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2008

Victor - 21 RBI

Hafner - 22 RBI

43 of 413 RBI (10.4% of total)

Don't mistake this as crying over what is missing in the lineup, but rather to illustrate how much these two mean to the Indians' lineup and to put it in perspective in terms of what losing that kind of production means in the greater context. Obviously, the RBI totals this year are skewed by the fact that the players have played about 1/2 of the season with Vic participating in 54 games and Hafner having played in 46 games prior to each hitting the DL.

The problem is that their replacements at C and DH (and, truthfully, Shoppach has hit very well as the starting C, leading AL Catchers in RBI totals with 14, and HR with 4, for the month of June) have only contributed another 43 RBI to the team total in their absence, meaning that the C and DH positions have contributed 86 RBI in 94 games, when the team is designed to rely on production from those two positions with Martinez and Hafner filling those positions.

Again, I know that I've brought this up before - but let me present it in a bit of a different light that gets to the crux of the situation. Since emotion tends to get wrapped up in the frustration of watching an Indians' lineup without Victor and Hafner and it becomes easy to simply come to the conclusion that the offense is going nowhere, consider the production of a few middle-of-the-lineup hitters that are known to even casual baseball fans on another team that tends to similarly rely pretty heavily on those two players in terms of RBI production:

2006

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Utley - 102 RBI
Howard - 149 RBI

Phillies' Total - 823 RBI
251 of 823 RBI (30.1% of total)

2007

Utley - 103 RBI
Howard - 136 RBI

Phillies' Total - 850 RBI
239 of 850 RBI (28.1% of total)

2008

Utley - 65 RBI
Howard - 68 RBI

Phillies' Total - 403 RBI
153 of 461 of RBI (33.2% of total)

Before writing to complain that I'm comparing Victor and Hafner to Howard to Utley, realize that I'm painfully aware of the superiority of Utley and Howard when it comes to pitting the duos against each other, both in terms of overall excellence and run production. The comparison is directed more at the fact that both the Indians and Phillies are generally reliant on two exceptional run-producers in the middle of the lineup, with a superb leadoff hitter in front of them, and

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complimentary pieces to scratch and claw for runs elsewhere in the lineup. This is by no means a proclamation that the Phillies have all of the answers in terms of constructing an offense (though the last time they finished below 3rd in the NL in runs scored was 2003), but rather to put what the loss of the two biggest run-producers in a lineup designed to lean on them into proper context.

The Phillies rely very heavily on Utley and Howard to drive runs in and if both were to miss significant portions of the 2008 season and were ineffective due to injuries prior to them missing time, the Phillies would be left to figure out how Pedro Feliz, Pat Burrell, Shane Victorino, and the platoon of Jayson Werth and Geoff Jenkins were going to drive Jimmy Rollins in to stay in the race for the NL East. Needless to say, there would be little Brotherly Love as the fans in Philly would be subjected to a lineup without their #3 and #4 hitters.

Don't like the Phillies' comparison?

How about the Twins?

Take Mauer and Morneau (who have 109 of the team's 443 RBI for 24.6% of the season output) out of the middle of the Twins' lineup and what run-producers do you have?

Michael Cuddyer...Jason Kubel...Delmon Young?

Sound familiar as we sit and wonder how Casey Blake (who has 5 less RBI than Pat the Bat, by the by), The Ben Francisco Treat, Jhonny Lasik, Garko-my-God-don't-you-wish-that-he-could-hit-that, and The Big League Choo are going to drive Grady Sizemore in to consistently win some games in the AL Central?

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The fact that Victor and Hafner have been non-existent in the lineup (even when they were there...at whatever percentage of themselves they were while injured, that is) has forced the aforementioned lesser players on the roster into spots that they shouldn't be subjected to - namely that their being asked to anchor the lineup when, as hitters, they are better suited as the complimentary pieces that they are supposed to be.

Few teams in MLB can survive without their #3 and #4 hitters and the Indians, designed to be built around strong starting pitching and a lineup reliant on a few exceptional and reliably productive players, just are not one of them. With that in mind as we look towards 2009, before we simply say that the Indians are doomed to settle into a stretch of a decade-long slump based on the play of the 2008 team (particularly their offense), let's remember that the #3 and #4 hitter are missing on a team designed to rely on their #3 and #4 hitter to drive runs in. What we're seeing now is a group of players designed to be complements to those #3 and #4 hitters put into spots in the lineup that they're not supposed to be occupying, being asked to carry an offensive load too heavy for them to shoulder.

Whether you agree with the organizational philosophy to rely on the production of the few, that's the way this Indians' team has been built and the absence of those few from the lineup for a prolonged period of time is not something that the rest of the roster can consistently make up for, no matter how much Grady is producing or if Jhonny or Casey are on one of their "hot" streaks. And that organizational philosophy is what makes the health of Martinez and Hafner for 2009 tantamount to things that "should be done" or "need to be determined" by the organization as the string of 2008 is played out.

Without a healthy Martinez and Hafner anchoring the middle of the lineup, the 2008 Indians' offense has been "exposed" (if you want to call it that, because it isn't like it was a dirty little secret) as reliant on those two, in the middle of the order, driving in runs. In their absence, the Indians become an inconsistent offensive team...one that hopefully doesn't show up when the 2009 season dawns.