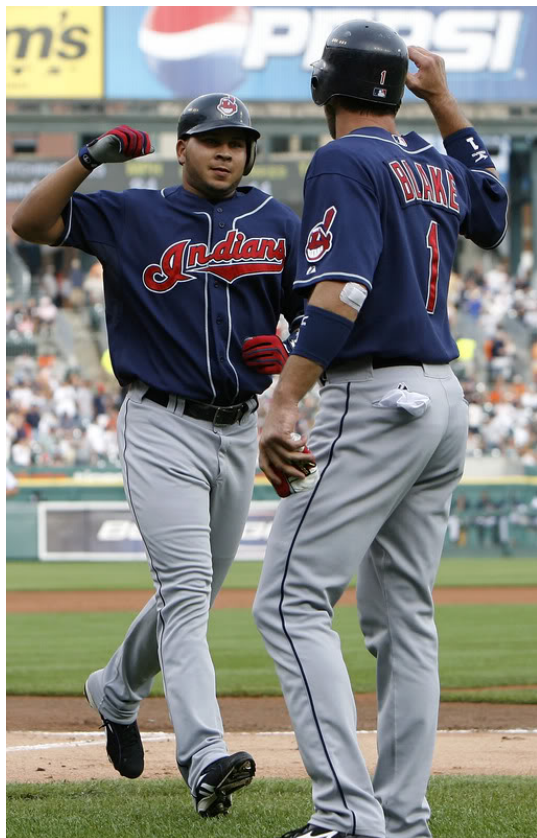


Jockeying For Position

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Sunday, July 20 2008 7:00 PM -

With 2008 officially now an evaluation season for 2009, Paul begins to look in that direction in his latest piece. The rotation seems fairly set for next year, in that they need one more starter with Westbrook not due back until (hopefully) the mid-point of the 2009 season. And the bullpen is in obvious need of a legitimate closer. This we know. Paulie's here to talk about the lineup, breaking it down position by position, and saying Shapiro's best option is to KEEP Jhonny Peralta in an Indians uniform.



Let the evaluation process begin.

2008 has essentially become extended spring training for the Indians and should serve as a 60+ game stretch to evaluate how the team lines up for 2009 and where holes exist that cannot be filled internally. The team should also determine if particular pieces and parts have more value to another organization, which would merit a trade to strengthen an organizational weakness.

The rotation seems fairly set for next year, in that they need one more starter with Westbrook not due back until (hopefully) the mid-point of the 2009 season. And the volatile bullpen is in obvious need of a legitimate closer, at the very least. This we know and remain topics for another day somewhere down the road when options become apparent.

Jockeying For Position

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Sunday, July 20 2008 7:00 PM -

Let's take a quick look at the myriad of options for the Indians' 2009 lineup and what answers to what questions clear the muddied waters.

It would seem that the only givens (assuming no trades are made) for 2009 in the Tribe lineup would be Grady in CF, Hafner (if healthy) at DH, and Victor, Peralta, Asdrubal (given his glove and success at advanced levels at a young age), and Francisco (though I'm still not sold on him as a lock-down everyday OF, he has nailed down his first legitimate shot to start 2009 with a position) with positions as yet to be determined. Their positions and the remaining positions are going to be determined by two convoluted "position battles" to see what pieces fit where for 2009 and where help from the outside may be needed (other than Matt LaPorta's assumed ascension to the parent club, wherever his position may be).

Those two groups figure to determine C/1B/LF/RF and 2B/SS/3B, and by that I mean that players can be grouped into one of those two groups, which affect what 2009 looks like because of the flexibility of certain players (Victor's ability to play C and 1B, Asdrubal's ability to play 2B and SS, LaPorta's presumed ability to play 1B and OF, Francisco's ability to handle both corner OF spots, and the hope that Peralta is versatile enough to land at SS or 3B) which affects who lands where for 2009.

Without getting into the lesser lights who would REALLY have to make a move to put themselves in the mix for 2009 (like Jordan Brown or Trevor Crowe) or players who don't obviously figure into the 2009 plans because of where they are in their development (like Wes Hodges), the first group of players involve the decisions having to do with the C/1B/LF/RF "battle". They are, in no particular order, Kelly Shoppach, Matt LaPorta, Ryan Garko, Franklin Gutierrez, and Shin-Soo Choo.

How could what The Big League Choo or Frank the Tank does affect where Ryan Garko or Kelly Shoppach fit next year? It breaks down rather easily when you consider that Victor and LaPorta figure to occupy two of these spots, with the idea that Francisco can handle one of the corner OF spots based on what happens

Jockeying For Position

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Sunday, July 20 2008 7:00 PM -

and who emerges from this "battle".

If Shoppach keeps hitting at the pace he is, he becomes the de facto C for 2009, with Vic moving full time to 1B, with LaPorta patrolling LF, and Francisco handling RF.

If Garko can come close to his 2007 (finding his 2006 isn't happening), he stays at 1B, Vic remains behind the dish, LaPorta goes to LF, and The Ben Francisco Treat takes RF.

If Chootierrez (the amalgamation of a platoon between Choo and Gutz) or one of those two AND The Ben Francisco Treat show enough to merit them taking up BOTH corners of the OF, Vic dons the tools of ignorance once again, and LaPorta mans 1B.

So, from that group of positions, you're looking at Shoppach, Garko, Choo, and Gutierrez fighting for the remainder of 2008 to seize an everyday spot for next year and let the rest of the chips fall into place based on who takes the reins and forces themselves into the Tribe's 2009 plans.

The other "battle" is essentially to determine what $\frac{3}{4}$ of the infield looks like next year with the Indians having to determine what they have in Josh Barfield and Andy Marte in the last half of 2008. Going off the assumption that Casey Blake isn't coming back to this team as he stands to get big money and years (no, seriously) on the FA market, I think that the 2009 infield composition really comes down to whether either Barfield or Marte (or both, ha!) are legitimate options to play every day in 2009. Depending on what we see with Barfield and Marte, Jhonny and Asdrubal fall into line accordingly at positions dictated by the performance of Barfield and Marte in 2008 and what can reasonably be expected from either in 2009.

Jockeying For Position

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Sunday, July 20 2008 7:00 PM -

If Barfield plays well enough to merit a look at 2B for 2009, Asdrubal and Peralta make up the left side of the infield (though Jhonny's bat is not quite as valuable as a 3B, and whether he can truly play there needs a definitive answer as well) next year with Barfield at 2B.

If Marte establishes himself as a viable candidate for 2009 (and, really, I can't even put numbers down that he could achieve in the remaining games that makes this happen), Jhonny stays at SS and Asdrubal stays at 2B with Marte manning the hot corner.

As an aside, the fact that the versatile Casey Blake is JUST NOW playing elsewhere on the diamond to free up AB for Marte remains one of the great mysteries of the season. While Delichchaels and Gutierrez struggled in the corner OF spots at the beginning of the year, Blake stayed and 3B and Marte mired. While Garko went weeks without an extra-base hit, Blake stayed at 3B and Marte waited. The fact that he has 87 AB in mid-July while being on the 25-man roster all year on a team flush with underperformers and injuries actually may tell you all you need to know about what stage of evaluation (fair or not) Marte finds himself.

Nevertheless, if both Barfield and Marte excel to close out 2008...well, I suppose you cross that bridge if it presents itself. However, if they both fail, the Indians have to look for the piece that holds either 2B or 3B (Orlando Hudson, Mark Grudzielanek, Mark Ellis, etc.) that bridges the gap to Akron 3B Wes Hodges for 2010 without blocking him for the long-term, with the flexibility of Peralta and Cabrera falling in line accordingly.

An interesting subplot in the determination of who fits where for 2009 is the idea that Jhonny Peralta could be moved prior to the Trading Deadline because of his offensive ability and the need, throughout the league, for RH power. If the Indians are really considering trading Peralta, they have to get AT LEAST one position player who is ready to contribute now, at a position of need, who is at least as many years away from Free Agency as Jhonny is to keep the majority of Indians under club control for the foreseeable future.

Jockeying For Position

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Sunday, July 20 2008 7:00 PM -

A quick reminder on Jhonny's remaining contract:

2009: \$3.65M

2010: \$4.85M

2011: \$7.00M club option

Unless you're filling a gaping hole with a comparably productive player (or players) ready to step right away who is further away from FA working under such a club-friendly contract, I don't know how you can justify moving him, given his hitting and affordability.

Lest anyone forget, Jhonny is on pace to hit 28 HR with 45 doubles and 87 RBI this year, which would all be career highs (yes, all higher than his breakout 2005 season) on a struggling offensive team. All of this for 26-year-old, who is YOUNGER than both Francisco and Garko, who are still trying to establish themselves as viable MLB players (something Jhonny has done) and is 7 months older than Barfield, who is also quite an unknown quantity.

His .787 OPS is tops in the AL among SS while no other AL SS has even cracked double digits in HR and only Texas' Michael Young (smack-dab in the middle of an offensive juggernaut) has more RBI than Peralta...by two.

For some perspective, here is Peralta's current line:

.263 BA / .307 OBP / .480 SLG / .787 OPS, 16 HR, 50 RBI

The line of the average AL SS:

.260 BA / .311 OBP / .364 SLG / .645 OPS, 5 HR, 39 RBI

Jockeying For Position

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Sunday, July 20 2008 7:00 PM -

The line of the average AL 3B:

.265 BA / .337 OBP / .426 SLG / .763 OPS, 12 HR, 50 RBI

Is he a clean-up hitter for a good offensive team? No, his OBP is too low to anchor the top or middle of any lineup; but he is an offensive presence in an Indians' lineup that is short of them at the moment and for the immediate future and his presence in the middle to bottom of a balanced lineup is certainly better than what we've seen for the last two months..

So why move him, if not just for a reason to lament the loss of a player entering his offensive prime working under an affordable contract for the next three years?

Is the reason to let Cabrera play SS and to let Barfield play 2B? Seriously?

Does ANYONE think that those two should man the middle infield with their combined offensive output and that Peralta is such a defensive liability that he has more value wearing another uniform?

Have you thought about an infield of Marte, Cabrera, Barfield, and Garko for next year?

By no means should the Indians not listen to offers (it would be foolish not to listen), but moving Peralta shouldn't be a given, particularly given his age, his production (albeit streaky), and his contract. If so many question marks face the Indians heading into 2009 (those listed above as well as Hafner's health), the potential haul for Peralta better answer MULTIPLE questions for 2009.

Jockeying For Position

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Sunday, July 20 2008 7:00 PM -

While he may not be the ideal SS in many people's minds due to his defensive deficiencies, he is a known quantity offensively at a young age, working under an affordable contract for the next three years. If you're looking to move him, a player who is as equally established, under the same club control timeline is the baseline to deal with. Throw in the fact that moving him means that potentially all four IF spots for 2009 will consist of players trying to establish themselves and I'm not sure why we're looking this gift horse in the mouth.

With Peralta ON the team, the Indians face a good number of questions as the water in the 2008 season slowly circles the drain and the Tribe would be best served to answer these questions by seeing what puzzle pieces fit where for 2009, particularly in the lineup where options need to be properly evaluated and contingency plans made accordingly so 2009 doesn't turn into Winter Haven (or Goodyear) redux by mid-July next summer.