

"grind - er (noun) - A baseball player with a strong work ethic, humility and no-nonsense attitude brought on by the fact that he has only marginal big-league talent, and therefore has to work that much harder just to stay in the big." That's not Webster's definition, but it's the definition we know as Indians fans. And Casey Blake is a grinder. In Erik's latest, he looks back at Blake's time in Cleveland and comments on the trade that sent him to La La Land.



Grinder.

Dictionary.com offers six definitions for the noun:

1. a person or thing that grinds.
2. a kitchen device or appliance for grinding food.
3. a sharpener of tools.
4. a molar tooth.
5. Chiefly New England and Inland North. Hero sandwich.
6. grinders, Informal. the teeth.

Fans of the Indians have more than willingly offered another set of definitions during the Mark Shapiro-Eric Wedge era:

7. A baseball player coveted by Indians management for his ability to take the same approach to every game, "grinding out" at-bats and innings.
8. A baseball player with a strong work ethic, humility and no-nonsense attitude brought on by the fact that he has only marginal big-league talent, and therefore has to work that much harder just to stay in the big.

9. The type of player Eric Wedge was during his short major league career.

Over the past five years, no player has come to represent the archetypal Wedge-infatuating grinder than Casey Blake. Like Wedge, he was a product of the hailed Wichita State baseball program. As a pro, he bounced around four different organizations between 1999 and 2002, playing a grand total of 49 games at the big league level before landing in the Tribe's laps in 2003. The Indians were looking for a stopgap at third base after injuries forced Travis Fryman into an early retirement following the '02 season. They found Blake, already 29 at the time.

Blake answered the bell, and then some. In 152 games for a stripped-down Tribe team that would lose 94 games, Blake amassed 143 hits, 35 doubles, 17 homers and 67 RBI.

Yet there was something about Blake that made us uneasy as fans. It probably started with his difficulty producing in the clutch. After years of watching the likes of Albert Belle, Manny Ramirez and Jim Thome produce late-inning magic with stunning regularity, we just couldn't stomach a guy who hit .233 with runners in scoring position and .154 with runners in scoring position and two outs, as Blake did that year.

It also had something to do with his plate reflexes, which always seemed a click too slow. He seemed to take a lot of called third strikes, particularly in his first several years with the Indians, as he couldn't seem to decide whether or not to swing at a pitch. In the fraction of a second he mulled it over, the ball hit the catcher's glove.

I started to call Blake a hitter with major league power but a minor league hitter's eye. He could drive the ball when he made contact, but it seemed like his natural-born reflexes just weren't quick enough to handle top-notch major league pitching. Better hitters could foul off a particularly nasty slider or a 98-mph fastball and stay alive in the count, whereas Blake tended to take a feeble swing or watch strike three sail right by him.

After all, there was a reason why Blake didn't catch on in the bigs until age 29. This guy was a baseball Rudy, minus the whole getting-into-Notre-Dame thing. He worked hard, he did what was asked of him, he got the most out of his limited talent, and he finally caught on with a big league club. Thanks for giving us a heartwarming story, Disney will be calling shortly for the movie rights. Now

seriously, Mark Shapiro, you're going to go find us a real third baseman, right?

Well, if by "real," you meant Aaron Boone, sure. Boone took over Blake's third base job in 2005. But Blake still hung on, receiving yet more praise from Shapiro and Wedge for taking his game to right field without a word of public complaint. He continued to not hit in the clutch, batting .171 with runners in scoring position and .085 with runners in scoring position and two out.

Wedge and Shapiro praised Blake's athletic ability. Not every player could make the drastic move from third base to right field successfully. Blake did so, at least in the field. But the shift likely affected him at the plate.

But the fans scoffed. "Heck, he'd make himself into a left-handed reliever and wash uniforms after the game if that's what Wedge wanted," we said. "If it wasn't for Wedge, Blake wouldn't be in the bigs. He'll do whatever it takes to please his surrogate dad."

The Aaron Boone era began with a whisper and ended with a whimper after the '06 season. Over the '05 and '06 seasons, Blake started more than 200 games in the outfield, committing 11 errors -- only three in 93 games in '06.

The 2007 season was supposed to begin the era of Andy Marte, the all-world prospect acquired in the Coco Crisp trade with Boston. By then, the court of public opinion had reduced Blake's ultimate sentence from "Lifetime banishment to Class AAA" to "He can stay as a bench player. But ONLY as a bench player."

Of course, we all remember what happened next. Marte didn't use that large wooden stick in his hand for much more than displacing air particles, and Blake was soon summoned from an odd outfield-third base-first base platoon situation to once again assume the everyday third baseman's job. He saved the position from becoming a black hole, hitting .270 with 18 homers and 78 RBI as the Indians won the division for the first time in six years. He still didn't hit with runners in scoring position (.190) or runners in scoring position and two out (.163).

By that point, we shoved our hands in our pockets and just accepted the fact that Blake is what he is. He's solid, versatile and would probably never hit with runners in scoring position. But after sitting through the brutal Trot Nixon and David Dellucci experiments, we learned that you can certainly do worse than Blake.

Blake rewarded our begrudging acceptance by becoming the Tribe's most consistent hitter in 2008. As he did in his first Cleveland season, he thrived on a Nowheresville team, leading the club in RBI for most of the season. He finally hit with runners in scoring position, batting at a .393 clip. We started fretting over what a lineup without Blake's production would look like. We knew we were going to find out soon.

This weekend, we did, as Blake was sent to the Dodgers. He is headed toward free agency, and the underdog grinder who had arrived on Cleveland's doorstep five years ago had played his way out of the Tribe's budget. It wouldn't be a shock to see Blake command \$7 million or \$8 million a year this winter.

On the surface, it seems like a very Cleveland thing. We suffer through the pitfalls as a player struggles through growing pains, perfecting his craft. Then, just as he becomes a finished product capable of commanding more than our team wants to spend, we have to let him go.

But maybe the trade was Blake's biggest gift to Cleveland. He saved his best performance for his walk year, and because of that, Shapiro was able to nab a closer prospect in Jon Meloan and a possible catcher of the future in Carlos Santana.

Blake is a grinder, no doubt. He grinded his way from obscurity to one of the better supplementary players in the game in five years. You might consign him to history as one of Wedge's more bizarre fascinations, but the fact is Blake saved the Tribe's bacon on more than one occasion, and might have delivered two mainstays of the future upon his departure.

If you look deep down inside yourself and remove all denial, you might even find a faint feeling of regret that he's no longer an Indian.