

The Kelly Blue Book Value

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
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As the season winds down and the Indians (apparently relishing this "spoiler" role that I want no part of in future seasons) racking up victories on their march to finish above .500, it has become obvious that the biggest decision that the Indians must reach pertaining to players already on the roster involves what to do with Kelly Shoppach. In his latest, Paulie C talks about the big decision the Indians face with Shoppach this off-season.



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As anyone who hasn't been in a coma since the beginning of June knows, Kelly's emergence as a fixture in the Tribe lineup since becoming an everyday player because of the injury to Victor has been one of the bright spots of 2009. Shoppach has transformed himself from one of the best backup catchers in baseball to...well, one of the most offensively productive catchers in baseball over the course of about four months.

How productive has Mr. Show Pack been in relation to the rest of the AL, regardless of position, since entering the everyday lineup on June 7th?

OPS - .951 (12th in AL)
SLG - .588 (6th in AL)
HR - 20 (tied for 7th in AL)

Given that the timeframe that is involved here, which covers 272 AB for ShopVac, the "small sample size" argument begins to dissipate that Shoppach is

just riding a wave of success.

Now, given Shoppach's good standing among ALL players in the AL, realize how valuable Shoppach's bat is because it's at a position that generally isn't an offensively productive position.

Shoppach's rank among all catchers with more than 300 AB this season:

OPS - 3rd behind Chris Iannetta (COL) and Brian McCann (ATL)

SLG - 1st

HR - 3rd behind McCann and Geovany Soto (CHC)

Starting yet to appreciate what Shoppach has put together and how he's burst into the upper tier of catchers in all of MLB with his offensive output since Victor went on the shelf? Factor in that Shoppach is just hitting arbitration and under club control for another three years and his value right now cannot be understated.

As a quick aside here, let's get in the Silver DeLorean for a moment and go back to the Coco deal and imagine that the assumed return for Coco was Shoppach, some AAA 3B and a PTBNL instead of Marte, some AAA C, and a PTBNL...does it take the sting out of Andy Marte's regression as a player? Maybe not, but Coco's been relegated to the role of a 4th OF in Boston this year while one of the players the Indians received in return has established himself as a Top 10 player at his position in MLB with three more years of club control in front of him while Crisp is still owed \$5.75M in 2009 with a \$8M club option (\$500,000 buyout) for 2010. Interestingly, though, is there any irony that the Indians face the same question with Shoppach that they did with Covelli? That question is what to do with a player not thought to be irreplaceable on their roster, who likely has more value to another team in need of a player that the Indians already possess.

Back to the matter at hand here as the whole purpose of laying Shoppach's accomplishments out is to quantify what Shoppach has been able to do by busting through the window of opportunity presented to him in June. What he's done, suddenly, is provided the Indians with TWO completely viable options for catcher in 2009 (remember that Martinez guy, who has averaged a line of .308 BA / .381 OBP / .482 SLG / .863 OPS with 20 HR and 95 RBI from 2005 to 2007?) - and here's where "The Kelly Question" comes into play. That question, of course, is that if the Indians are sitting on a surplus at the catching position and Victor Martinez is assumed to be the starting catcher for 2009, what does the

team do with Kelly Shoppach?

To me, there really are only two answers here, which would be to either trade Shoppach to fill a hole on the roster or move Victor to 1B and allow Show Pack to become the starting catcher. Seeing as how one of those options goes against the organization's stated stance that Martinez is the everyday catcher in 2009, the trade of Shoppach this off-season looks to be both imminent and logical. The thought process being that (if Victor is going to be the starting C in 2009), returning Shoppach to the backup role is folly as he's proven that he CAN be a viable starter and finding the necessary AB on the Indians just doesn't look to be feasible.

But, wait...why are the Indians looking to MOVE a productive bat from behind the dish when a reasonable alternative exists? Namely, why couldn't Victor improve the overall offense by moving down the line to 1B for 120 or so games, allowing Shoppach to stay as catcher, have Victor play behind home plate for the other games, and keep a player like Garko (or someone else) around as a 1B/PH/DH as insurance that "Pronk" (as we once knew him) is never coming back and to allow more roster flexibility as Victor would essentially serve as the "backup catcher" while being a "starting" 1B.

The plan is not without merit as the numbers that Victor has averaged over the last three years is pretty much in line with average production from 1B in MLB within that timeframe:

Victor Martinez (2005 - 2007)

.308 BA / .381 OBP / .482 SLG / .863 OPS with 20 HR and 95 RBI

Average Production for 1B in MLB - 2007

.276 BA / .357 OBP / .464 SLG / .820 OPS with 25 HR and 94 RBI

Average Production for 1B - 2006

.285 BA / .362 OBP / .488 SLG / .850 OPS with 28 HR and 101 RBI

Average Production for 1B - 2005

.276 BA / .352 OBP / .471 SLG / .823 OPS with 27 HR and 96 RBI

But I suppose the key phrase there for me is "Average Production"; as Victor goes from a plus bat as a catcher (an "average" OPS for a catcher is usually between .700 and .750) to merely an average bat as a 1B. Now if the Indians feel that the years of by Victor is going to be catching (pun intended) up with him soon at the plate, as it has to Jason Varitek and Jorge Posada recently, and that a move to the less strenuous position of 1B will increase his offensive numbers due to less wear and tear on him throughout the season, this scenario absolutely needs to be considered. However, all public comments coming forth from the Indians convey the idea that Martinez is the catcher in 2009, leaving Show Pack on the outside looking in.

Another factor in the whole "Victor to 1B" idea is the very real possibility that the Indians are pegging Matt LaPorta to be their 1B of the (very near) future as 1B is his "natural" position and that his bat is purported to be very nearly MLB-ready, if not already an MLB-ready impact bat (and he sure better be if the Brewers get to decide the PTBNL if they miss the playoffs). And that doesn't even take into account the batch of 1B elsewhere in the system with Garko, Mike Aubrey, Jordan Brown, Beau Mills, etc. Granted that most of those names don't exactly get the pulse racing until you get down to Les Beaux Moulins, but if LaPorta's natural position is 1B, the logic of suddenly blocking him with a player who provides a plus bat from the catching position doesn't hold water.

Now, if LaPorta's performance as a LF allows him to stay slated in the outfield AND the Indians feel that Victor's offensive numbers would improve dramatically with less wear and tear by moving him from C to 1B, the case for keeping Kelly becomes much more compelling. But those two answers look to be pretty big leaps of faith, mainly based on the comments from Tribe that [Victor is "still our catcher"](#).

So where, ultimately, does that leave us in terms of trading Shoppach?

If Kelly is deemed to be a luxury on this roster, would trading him weaken the team from the standpoint of depth?

Not really, as the Indians have players in the upper levels of the organization that project as backup catchers in Wyatt Toregas and Chris Gimenez. While neither

Toregas or Gimenez project as much more than a serviceable backup catcher, capable of spelling the starting catcher from time to time and serving as a defensive replacement if necessary, as long as the team isn't asking either of the 25-year-olds to sit in the middle of a lineup and put up an OPS over .800, having either on the team isn't too much of an issue.

Are they steps down from having Shoppach as the backup?

Absolutely, but remember that prior to this year, the most AB that ShopVac had ever logged were the 161 AB he accumulated last year. So, as long as Victor is able to stay healthy (fingers crossed and knocking FIRMLY on wood) next year, the Indians should be able to carry either as a backup catcher. If reservations exist about either player's readiness for MLB, the Indians can always re-sign Sal Fasano, or a player like Fasano, as middling veteran catchers are bountiful throughout baseball.

Beyond Toregas and Gimenez and the possibility of adding a backup catcher from the scrap heap, the addition of Carlos Santana to the organization cannot be underestimated in this decision as Santana finished his brilliant 2008 campaign in Akron and figures to top many national prospect lists for the Tribe. Santana looks to remain as a catcher with the Indians and has been compared favorably to Victor Martinez at similar stages of their development, particularly offensively. While Santana doesn't figure into the 2009 plans, there certainly exists a possibility that he could flourish in Akron next year to merit a call-up to Columbus at some point or even factor into the Tribe's plans as early as 2010. That, too, would figure to give the Indians enough confidence in their catching depth (and the quality of it) to consider Shoppach as more of a luxury than a necessity.

And that's where this all comes down for me, the question of luxury versus necessity, in that Kelly Shoppach proved this year that he is a viable MLB catcher. Unfortunately for him, he did this on a team with one of the top 5 catchers in all of baseball. His 2008 put Shoppach on a short list of top offensive catchers...it just so happens that one of the names above his (because of longevity and track record) is also the name above his on the depth chart for the Tribe. Thus, he becomes more of a luxury on a roster that has holes elsewhere than a necessity as a contributor from the backup catcher position. Given that the Indians are looking to fill holes in the infield (2B or 3B), the bullpen, and the middle of the rotation, wouldn't one HAVE to assume that the biggest chip that the Indians have to play this off-season would be Shoppach?

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Trading him doesn't create a hole on the team the way that trading a player like Peralta does in that his assumed role (that of a backup catcher) is not essential in the way that a starting IF would be. Rather trading him now, at the point that some could argue is the peak of his value given his productiveness and contract status, actually allows the Indians to FILL holes as opposed to creating them by dealing from their depth.

Could Shoppach be moved in a package for a 2B or 3B, similarly under club control for the next few years, which would shore up the infield?

What about seeing him moved to a team that may have an extra middle-of-the-rotation RHP a few years away from Free Agency?

Certainly he would net a bullpen arm - but would an established, bona-fide closer be too much to ask in return for him?

There's no question that interest would be out there for him on the open market, particularly when you consider that he could (note the "could" not "does") project as a middle-of-the-order hitter, particularly in the NL. Consider for a moment what type of production certain teams received from their catcher position...and know that this is not just from their regular catcher, but SEASON-LONG production from anyone who donned the tools of ignorance for them and picked up an AB:

Astros - .195 BA / .274 OBP / .279 SLG / .553 OPS with 8 HR and 48 RBI in 502 AB

Padres - .201 BA / .267 OBP / .291 SLG / .558 OPS with 8 HR and 52 RBI in 547 AB

Yankees - .234 BA / .294 OBP / .340 SLG / .634 OPS with 8 HR and 43 RBI in 526 AB

And that's just the bottom three [among the 14 teams that have not even received OPS production over .700 for the season from the catcher position](#)

. In reality, it's easier to determine who DOESN'T need a catcher like Shoppach instead of who DOES as it can reasonably be argued that Shoppach (if his 2008 is not a mirage) would represent an offensive upgrade for every team save...say nine teams.

One of those teams, unfortunately for ShopVac and his tenure with the Tribe, is

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his current team and as long as he remains on the same roster as a healthy Victor Martinez, his time to take the reins as a starting catcher (something he has certainly earned this year) doesn't figure to happen in Cleveland in 2009.

It will likely happen for him somewhere next year...just not with the Tribe.