

## Speculation: Why Aaron Boone?

Written by {ga=stevebuffum}  
Wednesday, February 01 2006 7:00 PM -

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Aaron Boone did not play well in 2005. In fact, to paraphrase Judith Viorst, he was terrible, horrible, no good, and very bad.

Well, that's not entirely fair. In September and October, he was pretty bad. In June, July, and August, he was relatively robust. And in April and May, he simply defied belief. He may have started slow, but at least he stunk when it counted down the stretch.

But look: for all the abuse he took last year and gets on fan boards now, Aaron Boone isn't a complete bag of phlegm. In all likelihood, he's a league-average (or at least league-minus-Alex-Rodriguez-average) third baseman, who can field okay (significantly better than Casey Blake) and can hit a little. Baseball Prospectus projects him to hit .256/.310/.409, which is poor, but I think they're over-weighting his 2005.

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I mean, you could make a credible argument that Boone's 2005 went a little like:

April/May: Great Odin's beard, I've forgotten how to hit a fucking baseball, and my knee is the size of a goddam honeydew!

June/July/August: Oh, yeah, that's how it works.

September/October: Damn, I'm beat.

Now it's overly optimistic to simply take Boone's best month and say, "That's what he's capable of, now that he's fully recovered that's what we'll get." Tuffy Rhodes did not hit 486 home runs the year he hit three on Opening Day. To expect Aaron Boone to hit over .300 seems like wishful thinking of the most egregious kind. But to not allow for the possibility that a healthy, rested Boone is at least more like the summer or Cincinnati model also smacks of overly

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pessimistic projection.

So what does it make sense to expect Boone to do? Well, in his Cincy days, he hit around .285, with an OBP a healthy .350 or so, and a SLG almost 200 points above his BA. That's a pretty valuable player. The funny thing was, he didn't build that SLG with a lot of homers, hitting 14, 12, and 14 from 1999-2001. It wasn't until 2002 that he became Aaron Boone, Longball Threat, slugging 26 (and 24 in split duty between Cincy and New York in 2003). Naturally, with the added homers, his SLG went ... down?

Yes, down. Aaron Boone, for whatever reason, became a marginally useless hitter precisely when he began hitting balls out of the park. The drop in SLG almost exactly mimics the drop in BA, as SLG-BA remains almost constant (except for 2005).

Here's my guess, and it's based at least some on what I saw from Boone when I got to watch him hit: Aaron Boone lacks bat speed and compensates by "guessing." It would explain the drop in batting average and the minor jump in strikeouts (hovering around 70 in 99-01, hovering around 100 in 02-05). Note: there's a sample size issue: he played fewer games in the first period than the second, but the K/game rate does go up a bit from around .62 to .66.

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But I think there's enough there to conclude that Boone isn't on the upswing of his career. Let's say I like him more than BP and expect around a .260/.325/.430 from Boone: his OBP-BA has been pretty good in the past, and although 2005 wasn't something you write off, it was pretty aberrant. (The suppressed SLG-BA comes from Jacobs Field playing more like a pitcher's park than the Great American Ballpark.)

Here's a question: why is this guy your everyday third baseman, when you've got The New Toy ostensibly ready to go in the guise of Andy Marte?

I think there are three elements to that:

- 1) Boone is a known and comfortable commodity: if Marte got off to the kind of start Boone did last year, it would cost the team and possibly Marte.

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2) Boone is a "great clubhouse guy." (From what I've seen of Victor Martinez, Marte would have to be pretty toxic to mess up the clubhouse, but I cede the point on grounds of ignorance.)

3) Mark Shapiro believes he is smart.

The second point I'm no help on. I don't know Boone, I don't know Marte, I don't know chemistry, I'm not particularly interested. The first point is one of Risk Assessment: if you believe you're going to get acceptable, consistent numbers from a Proven Veteran, the risk on plopping Marte in there in a Playoff Push Year is pretty unpalatable. I'll cede this point to the Indians: who knows how Peralta, Sizemore, and Michaels will start off? Why throw another variable in there? I don't necessarily agree with it (I don't), but I do understand the premise.

Which brings us to point three. Mark Shapiro IS smart. There are any number of things that support this, from the baseball decisions to the interviews to the educational background. The Marte deal is smart. The Michaels deal is smart. Signing Ron Belliard seems pretty smart in retrospect. Not every decision has been flawless, but the man knows smart.

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Therefore, signing Aaron Boone was smart, right? Here's one of those classic cases: guy finds damaged goods, takes a low-risk flyer, lives through the rehab, reaps the benefits later. It worked for Bob Howry, right? Scott Sauerbeck is one of those, right? It's a chance to get an above-average player at below-average prices, a crucial component of the small market strategy, and Really Very Smart.

Unless it's not.

I don't doubt that if Eric Wedge told Mark Shapiro, "Hey, this guy can't play, nice try, but get me a real third baseman," Shapiro would shrug it off and say, "You betcha." Or suggest Casey Blake. Oy. But Wedge is not a particularly creative manager, and likes having a Name Clubhouse Guy around to play an important position, one he saw butchered the year before, and believes in his heart that the guy will Turn It Around Now That He's Healthy. And instead of pushing Wedge on the issue, Shapiro, being Smart, lets the experiment run another lap.

THAT'S why Aaron Boone. Note that if Boone can muster that .260/.325/.430 line, he won't be a tremendous sucking wound any more and maybe we can get a right fielder instead. You gotta wonder, though: is that optimizing resources? I'm not convinced.