

Arizona Dreamin': Three Divided By Four

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Tuesday, February 10 2009 7:00 PM -

With the date that pitchers and catchers report being ... um ... THIS WEEK, it's finally time to hammer out the final installment of the Spring Training Preview - the infield. Having looked at the rotation, the bullpen, and the outfield, let's take it around the horn with Paulie C to see what 2009 may hold in store for the Tribe infielders. Paul focuses on four players in this installment. Victor, Shoppach, Garko, Hafner. Only three of them can be in the lineup each night. How will the AB's break down?



With the date that Pitchers and Catchers report being...um...THIS WEEK, it's finally time to hammer out the final installment of the Spring Training Preview - the infield. Having looked at [the rotation](#), [the bullpen](#), and [the outfield](#), let's take it around the horn to see what 2009 may hold in store for the Tribe infielders. As much as I'd like to get the whole infield into one nice, tidy package, the Indians' infield situation really has to be divided into two subsets of positions, with the players that figure into the C/DH/1B subset existing on a separate plane from the players that figure to fill 2B/SS/3B for 2009.

Thus, let's divide up this final installment into two parts (and I should still get the second part up before Thursday) by starting with the C/DH/1B contingent as one positional subset really has nothing to do with the other, unless you live, and don't just think, "outside the box".

As the 2008 meandered its way to the finish line, the Indians welcomed Victor and Hafner back into the fold (if in name only) while Shoppach concluded his reign of terror on the AL and Garko finished in a flurry to come close to respectability, if his 2008 totals are looked at simply as a final result. The thought process by many going into the off-season was that the Indians had an excess of players to fill three positions, with Martinez and Hafner assumed to be healthy and taking everyday AB in 2009 and with Garko at least providing his "placeholder" numbers as a 1B, leaving (at least at first glance) Kelly Shoppach as an odd man out, particularly as the quotes that "Victor is our Catcher" came en masse from Tribe brass.

Given that Shoppach had unquestionably earned a chance for an everyday job had some thinking that ShopVac represented a trading chip for the Indians that could be used to augment the starting rotation. But, as news surrounding Hafner's shoulder continued to come out and as the off-season rolled on (with Shoppach still obviously on the roster) a new rhetoric started to emerge - the idea that Hafner's shoulder would need days off as strength was still an issue and that Shoppach would surely see more AB, likely at the expense of Garko (who was suddenly being spun as a potential OF) and to fill the holes left by Hafner's assumed days off.

But before we get ahead of ourselves on the potential ways to fit four pegs into three holes, let's acknowledge that much of the production and positioning for C/1B/DH is going to depend upon the health of Martinez and, more crucially, Hafner. From 2005 to 2007, those two constituted the heart of the Indians' lineup as the pair posted two of the three highest OPS on the team every year from 2004 to 2006, with Hafner's mediocre 2007 (which put him .005 percentage points behind Garko, pushing him into 4th on the team that year) preventing the duo from accomplishing the feat for four straight years.

All of that steady middle-of-the-lineup production from Martinez and Hafner came to a screeching halt last year as the two combined for only 464 AB combined last year as injuries crippled their effectiveness in those AB, as the two COMBINED for 34 extra-base hits over those 464 AB.

Want some perspective on that?

Jason Bartlett, that all-glove, no-hit SS for the Rays had 29 extra-base hits in 10 fewer AB than Hafner and Martinez combined on his way to posting a .286 BA / .329 OBP / .361 SLG / .690 OPS line for the season.

So, imagine two Jason Bartletts occupying the #3 and #4 holes in your lineup. Yes, that's oversimplifying it, but the power outage for the two is staggering as Victor slugged .365 and he had a higher SLG than Hafner by a solid 42 points!

Obviously, the extenuating circumstances of injuries played a big role in that power outage, but the Indians are expecting these two to get back to being middle-of-the-order contributors to the team and, while the fact that the Indians led MLB in runs scored after the All-Star Break getting only 109 unproductive AB (10 XBH) from the duo proved that the offense can survive without them, having a

healthy and effective Victor and Hafner deepen the lineup and strengthen it by allowing the pieces that emerged last year to settle into complementary roles at the outset instead of being counted upon to carry the offensive burden as they did last year.

Of course, with these two it's all about health in terms of figuring how productive they can be, but their usage may assist each in staying healthy. If Hafner's shoulder is not at 100% and needs periodic rest, the Indians have the depth with Shoppach and Garko to allow Hafner to take days off to maximize his effectiveness when he does DH. With Victor, the emergence of Shoppach last year allows Martinez to shed the tools of ignorance from time to time (which hopefully reduces the wear and tear on his body) and play a less exhaustive 1B to keep Victor's legs fresh, perhaps allowing the power that left him in 2008 to return. Regardless, keeping both players fresh and healthy throughout the season is an important goal for the Indians because, while the offense can sustain itself without them, it's much easier with them.

As for the players that figure to be the depth that augment Hafner and Martinez, Shoppach entered the everyday lineup on May 22nd, and from that point to the end of the season, he posted a line of .266 BA / .356 OBP / .552 SLG / .908 OPS with 20 HR and 25 2B over the 90 games he played in that stretch. To put that in perspective, Victor's highest season total for OPS is .879 in 2007 and that's not to take anything away from Victor as he and Show Pack are inherently different players with Shoppach's strength being his power, if not always putting the ball in play while Victor's strength being that ability to put the bat on the ball. It's more to point out that Shoppach, from the time he entered the lineup last year, was an elite player in all of MLB.

Whether he can sustain that level of excellence in 2009, as pitchers make adjustments to him and exploit his weaknesses, will be certainly a thing to watch as one of the warts on Shoppach that figures to become much more prominent with increased AB is the frequency with which he strikes out. Last year, in his first extended look in MLB, Shoppach posted a 37.8% K rate, which is the same K% as Arizona's Mark Reynolds, he of the 204 K last year. Factor that out over 500 AB and you're looking at 189 K, over 600 it becomes 227 K. Regardless, warts and all, Shoppach's 2008 served as the revelation on the team (along with Lee and Choo) and whether he can continue that success in 2009 will determine how often he finds himself in the lineup.

If Shoppach is trying to translate his 2008 success into 2009, Ryan Garko finds himself on the opposite end of the spectrum as he tries to distance himself from his nightmarish 2008 season at the plate, during which he didn't have an extra-base hit in 24 straight games last year from June 10th to July 9th over 97 plate appearances. Just to blow your mind on that stat, over that same stretch of games, Andy Marte netted 2 extra-base hits in 24 plate appearances...and Marte looked positively lost at the plate all year!

I'm not sure why everyone keeps intimating that Garko's 2nd half performance "saved his season", when in fact (if we're using the All-Star Break as the dividing line) in the first 46 games out of the All-Star Break he posted a .281 BA / .356 OBP / .413 SLG / .769 OPS with 13 extra-base hits in 191 plate appearances. Sure, the OBP returned to Garkoesque levels, but the power remained absent until the final 13 games of the season.

Over those final 14 games, he posted a .467 BA / .500 OBP / .822 SLG / 1.322 OPS with 7 extra-base hits in 52 plate appearances, the net result of which raised his OPS a staggering 59 points in a little more than two weeks. And even with that Herculean push, his 2008 numbers remained inadequate, particularly for a 1B.

Looking, then, at the four players and how each looks to find time in the batter's box, how to divide up what would ostensibly be 1,900 AB for 3 spots in the lineup is really not that hard, assuming everyone's moderately healthy for the whole season:

Victor - 600 AB
Shoppach - 500 AB
Hafner - 400 AB
Garko - 400 AB

If you're looking at players who are purportedly 100% healthy (and Victor is, although maybe skipping the Opener isn't a bad idea given the events of the last two Openers) and have the most appeal in the everyday lineup, my thought would be to maximize Victor and Shoppach in the lineup while limiting Hafner's use and maybe putting Garko in the position to thrive perhaps by playing him more frequently against LHP (career OPS vs. LHP - .894, career OPS vs. RHP - .767) to get him to forget that 2008 even happened. While Hafner doesn't show such a defined split against LHP and RHP (career OPS vs. LHP - .849, career OPS vs. RHP - .962), his dominance against RHP may make it easier to see how

match-ups are going to play a big role in dictating who plays when.

Garko's had about 500 AB each of the last two years and, depending upon how much they protect Hafner's shoulder, he may even see his AB rise from that 400 AB number. Hafner's only topped 500 once in his career (in 2007), and according to some, his shoulder is going to benefit from additional time off, so that 400 number could come down pretty easily.

You can figure out the different amalgamations pretty easily, just by moving Victor between C and 1B, slotting Garko and Shoppach to the open position and having the other fill in when Hafner's taking a day off from being the DH. Truthfully, the pieces and parts move around pretty easily, dependent upon who's pitching (Victor catches Carmona, Shoppach catches Lee for instance) and how often Hafner needs time off to rest his balky shoulder. Any of the four can DH (with no obvious alternative to DH ahead of one of the other three if Hafner has a day off) and Victor can play either C or 1B, so it's really just a matter of shuffling the players around to get them as much time in the lineup as possible (wherever they play) while resting Hafner adequately.

If anyone happens to go down to an injury in this quartet, the Indians do have some internal options, most of whom figure to start the season in AAA. Michael Aubrey, who can't really be considered a prospect anymore and is no longer on the 40-man, would be an avenue they could take, as is Jordan Brown, whose 2008 season in Buffalo was underwhelming enough that the Indians exposed him to the Rule 5 Draft (rightfully so, it turns out), who will be looking to put himself back on the map after experiencing his first non-MVP season in the Minors since 2005. Brown and Aubrey, however, would really need to distinguish themselves in Columbus to merit a long look for this year, while the possibility of Matt LaPorta may be one that the Indians find more appealing in that he still has that luster of a newly-found coin on him.

LaPorta, obviously, would be in the same boat as Aubrey and Brown as he's not on the 40-man and isn't going to get called up without some performance in AAA that would merit such a promotion. LaPorta also will likely be playing LF for most of his time in Columbus and a transition back to his old college position of 1B may be one that is inevitable, but it's also one that limits the versatility that the Indians are seeking to take advantage of by having him able to play 1B and LF going forward to fill a hole in either place as needed. Of course, if 1B does suddenly become a hole (though quite a bit would have to transpire with Victor and Garko

for that to happen), LaPorta could find himself at 1B/DH for the Indians. More likely would be LaPorta ascending to the parent club to essentially taking the spot of an ineffective Ryan Garko in the sharing of AB listed above. The extenuating factor in LaPorta replacing Garko on the roster is that LaPorta (seeing as how he will be playing LF in AAA) is just as likely to take the place of a struggling OF on the roster as he really represents the first viable option past Francisco (unless you count Crowe) in LF, whereas other options exist by moving the existing MLB parts around that 1B/DH role.

The other (and probably more likely) solution that the Indians could go if one of the assumed quartet of C/1B/DH goes down with an injury or is wildly ineffective would be to promote either super-utility/Catcher Chris Gimenez or C Wyatt Torgesen, both of whom will start the year in Columbus, and both of whom are already on the 40-man roster. If, for instance, Garko or Shoppach struggles badly or Victor or Hafner go down with an injury, the Indians could simply move Gimenez or Torgesen up to the parent club to be the back-up Catcher and allow the three remaining principals in the foursome of Victor, Kelly, Hafner, and Garko to slide around the diamond/lineup accordingly. Neither Gimenez nor Torgesen looks to be a major prospect at this point, but neither would be a defensive liability and their presence on the 40-man roster already would make a promotion/demotion of either easier than making a decision on adding a 1B.

Beyond those AAA guys, I suppose that there's an off chance that the troika of hitting jewels who figure to start the year in Akron (Santana, Weglarz, and Mills) could make a push to get into this mix (some see Weglarz eventually as a 1B), but it would take an awful lot to go wrong or one of those players going Roy Hobbs in Canal Park to make that happen.

All told, the C/1B/DH situation this year figures to be a pretty fluid one where the notion of resting Hafner's shoulder is going to allow the Indians to find AB for Shoppach and Garko to find out if Shoppach's 2008 was real (which they hope it was) and if Garko's 2008 was real (which they hope it wasn't). Regardless of how it shakes out, even if one player goes down or struggles, the Indians have the ability to slot the other three players into those three positions without too much trouble. The AB seem to be there for all four to stay busy, it's just a matter of the Indians being pro-active on these players to not keep trotting an ineffective or injured player out there (as they have done in the past) to the detriment of the team when another option exists.

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Still up (hopefully before the Pitchers and Catchers report) is the last section on the subset of infielders who figure in at 2B/SS/3B.