

OPS Projections: A Banner Year

Written by {ga=jerryroche}

Tuesday, February 24 2009 7:00 PM -

The Cavaliers aren't the only reason that fans in these here parts have good reason to get antsy for April and May to arrive. The Cavs are no longer the only team in town that promises high scores and thrills galore. In Jerry's latest, he says that if the Indians stay relatively healthy, their offense has the potential to be the best since the mid-1990s, with a possible team OPS (on-base % plus slugging %) as high as .800.



It's almost springtime, when a young man's fancy turns to ... baseball.

The Cavaliers aren't the only reason that fans in these here parts have good reason to get antsy for April and May to arrive. The Cavs are no longer the only team in town that promises high scores and thrills galore.

If the Indians stay relatively healthy, their offense has the potential to be the best since the mid-1990s, with a possible team OPS (on-base % plus slugging %) as high as .800. That projection is highly speculative, but its speculations rely strictly on past performances, so it has some basis in fact.

PLAYER

BEST YR.

WORST YR.

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2008

2009?

Grady Sizemore, CF

.908 (06)

.832 (05)

.876

.876 (08)

Mark DeRosa, 3b

.857 (08)

.797 (07)

.857

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.827 (av)

Victor Martinez, C-1B

.879 (07)

.702 (08)

.702

.781 (06)

Travis Hafner, DH

1.098 (05)

.628 (08)

.628

.836 (07)

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Jhonny Peralta, SS

.886 (05)

.771 (06)

.804

.804 (08)

Shin-Soo Choo, RF

.946 (08)

.846 (06)

.946

.896 (av)

Ben Francisco, LF

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.770 (08)

.770 (08)

.770

.770 (08)

Ryan Garko, 1B

.842 (07)

.750 (08)

.750

.796 (av)

Asdrubal Cabrera, 2B

.775 (07)

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.712 (08)

.712

.743 (av)

Kelly Shoppach, C

.865 (08)

.782 (07)

.865

.824 (av)

TEAM OPS

.763

.795

An indication of this line-up's potential was on display after the All-Star break last year, when it led the majors with 379 runs scored -- without either Travis Hafner or Victor Martinez. And that's before Mark DeRosa (.285 BA, 21 HRs in 2008) was added in the off-season.

A team OPS in the vicinity of .800 for an entire season generally guarantees success in the won-lost column, unless its entire pitching staff basically sucks. And we know that the Tribe's entire pitching staff doesn't basically suck -- even though a raft of questions must be answered during the next six weeks.

In 1995, when the Indians scored 840 runs in 144 games (5.8 rpg), their team OPS was .840. In 1996, when they scored 952 runs in 161 games (5.9 rpg), their team OPS was .844. Obviously, this year's team cannot expect to approach the offensive explosivity (is that a word?) of Albert Belle, Manny Ramirez, Jim Thome, Carlos Baerga, Kenny Lofton, Eddie Murray and Sandy Alomar Jr.

Nevertheless, the current team figures to have an OPS of maybe .795, 32 points higher than last season.

The only major-league teams in 2008 to have an OPS of more than .800 were Texas (.816) and Boston (.805), which scored 5.6 and 5.2 rpg, respectively. The Chicago Cubs (despite not having the benefit of a designated hitter) had a .797 OPS and scored 5.3 rpg.

Team averages start with individual averages. When a given player records an OPS of .800, he's extremely valuable. An OPS of .900 puts him in the "elite" category; and sustained OPS's of 1.000 over the course of a career put him on the high road to Cooperstown.

The key for the Indians' offense this coming season -- and it's no secret -- is for Hafner and Martinez to bounce back from their dismal 2008 seasons. Hafner's

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career average OPS is .925, having hovered around 1.000 in 2005, 2006 and 2007. Last year, it was .628. Martinez's OPS was .702 last year, about 100 points below his career norm. He hit just two homers after slugging a career-best 25 in 2007.

Given Hafner's injuries and age (32), he is a huge question mark. Indications are that even he doesn't quite know what to expect. However, if he can turn in a season at least comparable to 2007 (.266 BA, 24 HR, .836 OPS), and if Martinez can have a season at least comparable to 2006 (when his OPS was .781), then that will provide a springboard for the rest of the line-up.

For the team to reach the 2009 numbers in the chart, we're not necessarily asking the rest of the starters to have their best years, either.

It will start with All-Star centerfielder Grady Sizemore, who must equal last year's .876 OPS -- and there are no indications, save injury, that he won't. As a matter of fact, most observers and fantasy-leaguers are expecting Sizemore to approach and maybe exceed his career-best .908 mark (2006).

Jhonny Peralta has to contribute what he did last year, which is an .804 OPS, 82 points lower than his best year ever (2005).

If the rest of the starting nine (ten, if you include Kelly Shoppach, who will get 300 at-bats) can simply equal the averages of their short major-league careers, the offense will be in good shape: DeRosa .827; Shin-Soo Choo .896; Ben Francisco .770; Ryan Garko .796; Asdrubal Cabrera .743; and Shoppach .824.

There is no reason those numbers cannot be attained. The absence of Hafner and Martinez for most of last year exposed most of the Tribe's previously inexperienced position players to pressure situations. That's turning a negative into a positive.

Even if some everyday players do not live up to expectations, there are plenty of offensive studs in the minor leagues for Manager Eric Wedge to call upon: infielders Luis Valbuena and Wes Hodges; and outfielders Michael Brantley, Matt LaPorta and Trevor Crowe.

CBSSports.com ranks the Indians the eighth-best team in the majors and fourth-best in the American League, behind only New York, Boston and Los

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Angeles. If the pitching staff can be stabilized from top to bottom, the sky's the limit. But even if the pitchers struggle, you can at least expect to see some exciting, high-scoring games at Progressive Field this summer -- and plenty of fireworks.