

## Forward Thinking

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}  
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As the managerial search continues, but with little actually being cleared up in terms of John Farrell



As the managerial search continues, but with little actually being cleared up in terms of John Farrell's interest or what other names are legitimately involved, let's start to take a look towards what the Indians may be looking at in terms of the makeup of their 2010 roster and what questions face the club this off-season.

As usual, I'll break this thing down a little bit, if only to get into it as deep as I want to and so I don't unleash some 10,000 word monster in one fell swoop on your unsuspecting consciousness. Starting off with the infield (with the outfield/DH and pitching staff yet to come), with a look at how the Indians look today, in mid-October, in terms of how the club looks to shake out for next season.

### Catcher

When addressing the issue of catcher, the Indians are looking at their first year without Victor Martinez as their Opening Day catcher since Vic began the 2004 season behind the dish. The one-time assumed heir apparent, Kelly Shoppach (particularly after his 2008 season), does not seem to be in line to ascend to the starting position. That is, he wasn't used like a starting catcher in 2009, as ShopVac started 4 consecutive games only twice during the 2009 season (once from May 31st to June 3rd and once from August 19th to August 22nd), this a season after he posted a .272 BA / .364 OBP / .570 SLG / .934 OPS line after being installed as basically the everyday catcher on June 9th of 2008.

Whether the drop in Shoppach's production was a by-product of the infrequency of his use or the rest of MLB adjusting to him may never be answered, but the mitigating factor in Shoppach's unlikelihood to become the Indians' 2010 everyday catcher is his contract status. Shoppach is entering his second year of arbitration,

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after being on the books for \$1.95M last year, with the assumption that he will be due another pay raise, if only by the design of the salary arbitration process. For Shoppach, his usefulness drops proportionally to the raising of the number on his contract and if he's due for another pay raise with the idea that less expensive options are available to keep the area behind home plate warm for Carlos Santana's ascension, the writing certainly seems to be on the wall for Shoppach.

What would the Indians do with him?

It's possible that they non-tender him, though I would imagine that the Indians could extract something of value for him, if only on the basis of his 2008 season. There should be no shortage of NL teams looking for some sort of upgrade at catcher (NYM, CIN, HOU, MIL, etc.) not to mention a certain team in New England

whose veteran catcher's usefulness has also declined proportionally to his increased paycheck. Perhaps the idea that

Boston

may be looking for a catcher to complement Victor could be balanced with the idea that they may be looking for compensation for hiring their current pitching coach. Regardless of where Shoppach ends up (or if the Indians can net anything for him), it does seem that his time with the Indians is coming to an end.

If we're working off the assumption that Show Pack is not long for the Cleveland Indians, Blue Lou Marson looks to be the aforementioned adequate placeholder, as a high-OBP, low-SLG with some defensive skills, who can effectively hold down the fort behind the dish until Carlos Santana emerges from AAA. Marson's 2009 season in Cleveland looked much like his MiLB career as (in an embarrassingly small sample size of 52 plate appearances) he posted a .346 OBP and a .386 SLG, which are not far off from his career MiLB totals of a .369 OBP and a .386 SLG. Perhaps Marson is a Jason Kendall-type catcher (and there are worse things to have than a Kendall-type catcher, particularly at a league minimum salary and under club control) or maybe he's more. He certainly was more than a throw-in in the Lee deal and is likely to receive the bulk of the catching time in Cleveland until Santana is ready.

Some have compared Marson's situation to that of Josh Bard, circa 2003, designed to play the role of place-holder until the talented youth (Santana for Marson, Victor for Bard) arrives, making him expendable for trade. In terms of backing up Marson to start the season, it's likely that Wyatt Torregas fills that role, though he does not look to be a long-term viable back-up catcher by virtue of his

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offensive struggles as he has a career MiLB OPS of .739 and he'll be 27 in December. That being said, he could easily play the 40-man roster game filling in where he would need to until his options run out.

The real player in the whole catcher story is obviously Carlos Santana, whose status as the Indians' top prospect is unquestioned as he posted a .290 BA / .413 OBP / .530 SLG / .943 OPS in Akron after posting a cumulative .999 OPS in 2008. For the second straight he year he walked more than he struck out and figures to start the season in Columbus in 2010 with the idea that a call-up to Cleveland will not be far away.

Some have argued that Santana should start the 2010 season as the everyday catcher to quicken his adjustment to MLB and allowing him to be "finished off" against the best possible competition. However, if Santana is the catcher of the future, the Indians should manage his service time clock in a season that they aren't likely to contend in, allowing him to start the season in AAA for a time to delay his Free Agency year by a full year by keeping him out of the Cleveland lineup until his Super-2 status is not in question.

Speaking of Santana (at least in a round-about way of getting back to him), reliable sources have refuted [claims made by WEEI reporter Rob Bradford](#) and [furthered here on Sunday](#) that the Red Sox offer of a "mega-trade" for both Lee and Martinez "eclipsed" those that were allegedly on the table particularly that a "mega-deal" between the two teams "would be a proposition that would start with Clay Buchholz and only get richer";

According to a source connected to the team, talks between Cleveland and Boston did, in fact, bring the possibility of moving Lee to Boston with the Indians asking for Clay Buchholz in a one-for-one deal for Lee. The Red Sox passed on the offer, according to the source, of a straight-up Lee-for-Buchholz swap and Boston countered with a proposal that would have sent Clay Buchholz to the North Coast for Carlos Santana. The Indians declined the Red Sox offer that brought Santana into the mix (I told you I'd get to Santana) and the talks involving Buchholz between the two teams ground to a halt.

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As the recounting with the new information on the trade process shows, Santana is a coveted commodity in MLB and Indians' fans will find out why sometime in 2010.

### First Base

As confusing as the catching situation is, with one player likely on his way out, one player likely to serve as a placeholder, and one player representing the future, the situation at 1B for 2010 looks to have finally moved past that point of endless transition. That is, the days of seeing Ben Broussard and Ryan Garko, with a sporadic appearance by an Eduardo Perez seem to be over as the notion that the 1B for the Indians will be just "good enough" has given way to the idea that the Indians finally have their 1B-of-the-future occupying the same locker as their 1B-of-the-present in Matt LaPorta.

That idea could be...wait for it...delayed if the Indians decide to start LaPorta in LF with Mike Brantley starting 2010 in Columbus, with some amalgamation of Andy Marte and Jordan Brown (assuming either is even still in the organization) playing 1B until Brantley returns from AAA to moves LaPorta back to 1B. If you're asking me though, perhaps it's time to put LaPorta at 1B full-time from Day 1 (while acknowledging that his usefulness as a LF may be more attractive) and allow him to play every day at 1B.

The reason would be consistency, as we all know how LaPorta was mishandled during his first stint with the Indians, then thrived at the plate after being given consistent AB in his second trip to Cleveland. From the time he arrived for his second go-around, LaPorta posted a line of .273 BA / .315 OBP / .489 SLG / .805 OPS with 12 Doubles and 6 HR in 39 games (which breaks down to a 50 Double / 25 HR season over a whole season), while flipping between LF and 1B for the parent club.

Unfortunately, LaPorta logged only 181 AB in a season that was lost by mid-June as the Indians' top prospect that played the same position as a 1B and a LF that would be traded as spare parts in July. Why he wasn't up in MLB to play everyday in May could eventually be seen as a bullet point on the list of failures of Eric Wedge as the Indians' manager (hell, it was seen as a mistake back in May), but nevertheless his future with the team remains bright if his immediate position remains (somewhat) in question, while his long-term position of 1B seems rather clear. How quickly he assumes his spot at 1B figures to be answered by factors unrelated to him.

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Another reason for LaPorta to play 1B from Day 1 in 2010 would be the reality that the alternatives past him are essentially Andy Marte, a 3B, and Jordan Brown, who may be moved to LF...and that assumes that both players (who both turn 26 this off-season) stay in the organization through the off-season as both could fill the bill of "depth"; but perhaps not much else.

## **Second Base**

Heading into 2010, Luis Valbuena looks to be the 6th Opening Day 2B for the Indians since the departure of Robbie Alomar after the 2001 season and his arrival to Cleveland portends that he may finally represent the end of a long search for a viable 2B for the organization. As a 23-year-old getting his first extended look at MLB, Valbuena posted a respectable line of .250 BA / .298 OBP / .416 SLG / .714 OPS with 25 doubles in 398 plate appearances while never looking overwhelmed at the plate and supplying steady defense from the 2B position.

His age (he'll turn 24 in November) and his consistency at the plate are the cause of some optimism for Valbuena and his long-term prospects as a 2B, but his 2009 usage and performance do not come without concerns. Of Valbuena's 398 plate appearances, only 40 came against LHP (he posted a .661 OPS against LHP in that small sample), an obvious reaction to his career MiLB splits:

Valbuena MiLB vs. LHP - .241 BA / .319 OBP / .311 SLG / .630 OPS

Valbuena MiLB vs. RHP - .282 BA / .361 OBP / .447 SLG / .808 OPS

Knowing that then, how long of a leash should Valbuena have against LHP in an attempt to adjust to facing them and (hopefully) improving against them so he becomes less of a liability against LHP? His long-term viability as an everyday player seems to be tied into his ability to hit LHP (allowing him to play without concern for the handedness of the opposing pitcher) and how much latitude the Indians allow him in 2010 to make those adjustments certainly will be interesting to watch.

It will be interesting to watch because it would seem that the Indians netted what looks to be the RH complement to (or perhaps even straight-up competition for) Valbuena in the Lee deal in their acquisition of Jason Donald. Lest anyone forget because of Donald's injury that sidelined him after the trade, he is a now-25-year-old infielder (one year older than Valbuena) who was rated as the [6 9th best prospect in all of baseball by Baseball America](#) and

### 48th best by Keith Law

entering this season. While his injury unquestionably would preclude him from making those lists after this season, the talent does seem to be there with Donald. His health going forward may affect how quickly he factors into the parent club's plans, but his career MiLB numbers would seem to present an obvious complement to what the Indians have in Louie the Fifth:

Donald MiLB vs. LHP - .284 BA / .394 OBP / .429 SLG / .823 OPS

Donald MiLB vs. RHP - .282 BA / .356 OBP / .434 SLG / .790 OPS

Interestingly, looking at Donald's body of work, his consistency, and his right-handedness in a potentially LH-hitting heavy lineup, it's not inconceivable to figure that the Indians could open up 2010 Spring Training with Valbuena and Donald fighting for the everyday 2B job with the "loser"; essentially becoming Jamey Carroll's replacement as a Utility IF as both Donald and Valbuena's ability to play 2B, SS, and 3B mirror Carroll's defensive repertoire, coming at a much lower price tag in 2010. The notion is out there that Carroll could be re-signed to fill the role that he did to such critical acclaim in 2009, but the inclusion of Jason Donald in the Lee deal and his ability to play all of the positions that Carroll did certainly suggests otherwise.

### Shortstop

In a season of disappointments, one of the only shining lights that consistently burned brightly for the 2009 Tribe was that of their 2B...I mean SS, Asdrubal Cabrera. Still not 24 (OK, he will be 24 next month), Asdrubal finished the year with the 3rd highest OPS (.799) among AL Shortstops, behind only Jason Bartlett's otherworldly .879 and Jeter's .871. He tallied the most doubles (42) among all AL Shortstops at the plate and his glove (finally at his natural position) looked like everyone expected it to in the field after a brief sojourn at 2B.

With the adjustment period of 2008 behind him, Cabrera established himself as perhaps the best overall SS in the AL under the age of 35 and as a likely perennial All-Star from the middle of the diamond. His emergence as a hitter and a fielder should have a steadying influence on the team, whose strength up the middle (with Asdrubal and Grady and Santana eventually) could be the backbone that the organization finds themselves in need of.

There's no question that there are many questions facing the Indians in 2010 - who will be playing SS everyday for them every day (finally) doesn't figure to be one of them as the performance of and the potential around Asdrubal Cabrera

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remained a bright spot in an otherwise dark season.

### **Third Base**

From an unquestioned bright spot of the season, let's turn to one of the deep disappointments of the season as Jhonny Peralta regressed to the point that his long-term viability as a part of the Indians' organization is far from assured. Now a 27-year-old full-time 3B, Peralta has now compiled a career OPS of .756 (OPS+ of 97) and the promise of his 2005 season is a distant memory. But what does all of that mean for Peralta going forward as he's coming off of his worst season as a professional while playing a position that generally produces some power after posting a SLG of .375 in 2009?

Were his mid-season position change and his obviously strained relationship with lame-duck manager to blame for his regression?

Those are the questions that the Indians need to answer before making a decision on whether to go forward with Peralta as the 3B for 2010. They need to project what Peralta could do with a full off-season of preparing to play 3B and (hopefully) without a manager that calls him out for a perceived lack of effort. If they feel that he can improve (even marginally) for 2010, holding onto him this off-season makes sense if only because the obvious ready-to-step-in replacement simply doesn't exist internally for the club.

As well as Andy Marte played in Columbus in 2009, he didn't play one inning as a 3B for the parent club in 47 games - a pretty startling fact and a good indication that the team was attempting to get Peralta untracked at 3B as much as anything else related to Marte. Maybe Marte plays the role of the backup 3B and 1B while providing a RH bat off of the bench with the idea that he could step in if Peralta were to be moved at some point during the 2010 season, but Marte's performance in MLB after being promoted did nothing to put forth the idea that Marte is a legitimate option for everyday use in 2010.

Of course, the other mitigating factor with 3B is the fact that Peralta's owed \$4.6M in 2010 and if the idea exists that Shoppach and Carroll are replaceable for cheaper alternatives who may come close to their level of production, why shouldn't that axiom apply to Jhonny?

Could the Indians get by with the "production" from Marte in Peralta's absence until the 3B-in-waiting is ready for MLB? That 3B-in-waiting would be

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Lonnie Chisenhall, but the 20-year-old Chiz just spent all of 24 games in AA this year, meaning that the optimistic &quot;Carlos Santana-esque&quot; path to the big leagues would put his ETA closer to 2011...and that's assuming that everything continues to break his way.

All told, it's likely that the Indians hold on to Peralta through the off-season, keeping Marte around as his back-up with the idea that Peralta could always be moved at the Trading Deadline (assuming he boosts his trade value in the first half of 2010), because moving him now would be selling low on a player who may simply need a &quot;Wedge-free&quot; off-season to concentrate on 3B in the hopes that he can find the player he once looked to be.

If you can believe, the infield actually represents one of the more known areas of the team, with most of the assumed pieces already in place or not far off. That being said, much can change from the perceived make-up of the infield in mid-October to its actual alignment in April of 2010.