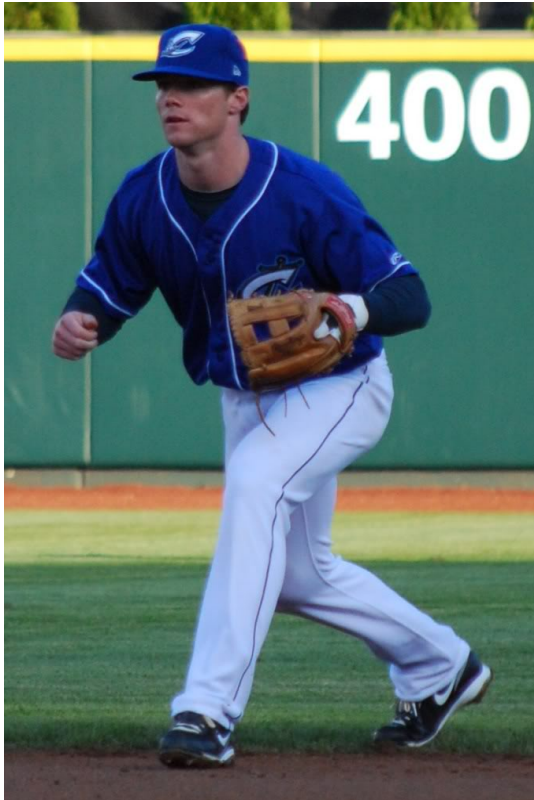


Donald's Future Looks To Be At Second

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Sunday, April 25 2010 12:00 AM - Last Updated Sunday, April 25 2010 6:02 AM



At this time last year, infielder Jason Donald was playing with the Philadelphia Phillies Triple-A affiliate in Lehigh Valley trying to make every impression possible to somehow crack a Phillies infield situation where he was road-blocked by All-Stars Jimmy Rollins at shortstop and Chase Utley at second base.

Even though the situation in Philadelphia appeared impossible for Donald to fit into, as teams in pennant chases often do there was always the possibility the Phillies would use Donald as a trade chip to help fill an immediate need at the big league level. That's exactly what the Phillies did last July when they sent Donald along with three other players in right-handers Carlos Carrasco and Jason Knapp along with catcher Lou Marson to the Indians for lefty Cliff Lee.

With one transaction Donald went from seemingly having no chance of being an everyday big league infielder to now almost every chance imaginable of achieving that big league dream with the Indians. He is fully aware of the opportunity, though is finally settling into the organization after arriving in the trade nearly nine months ago.

"I feel like I am settling in nicely," said Donald in an interview last week at Huntington Park in Columbus. "I've had some time to adjust from last year coming over, and I don't feel like the

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new guy anymore. It was different at first just because I was used to it a certain way with the Phillies who was the team that drafted and signed me. There is an adjustment period just kind of getting used to the guys and having to meet new people, the new faces, who does what, and who works with whom, but everybody was good about that. After that it was pretty easy. I am happy to be here, and I really like the people I have met in the organization. There's a lot of good, quality people."

The world in which we live in and the way we communicate has evolved so much over the past decade, especially in the past two to three years where nowadays fans often find out about trades before the players themselves. It's the result of a plugged in society where breaking information is at your fingertips and available almost on a real-time basis.

"Everybody finds out before you do as I was like the last guy to know," laughed Donald. "That's the internet and TV for you as there is always something going on. I found out when we were playing Columbus. I had just gotten back as I had torn my meniscus last year and I was rehabbing in Florida and had flown back to Lehigh Valley. I played that night and then the next day I had an off day and I found out in the dugout in the fifth or sixth inning from guys on the team and the Columbus guys. My manager said nothing to me, but when I went into the clubhouse after the game I had about 45 text messages and 15 voice mails. I just looked for my dad's text messages and that was it because I had a feeling something was up with [Carlos] Carrasco as his start got scratched."

While Donald was initially shocked and taken by surprise with the trade, he quickly understood the situation he was moving into with the Indians and the great opportunity that lay before him.

"Yeah, it was pretty wild and crazy, but I was real excited when I found out I was being traded over here," said Donald. "I never pictured myself being with another organization, and I always kind of envisioned myself working to get to Philadelphia, so now the sight is changed to Cleveland. It is just a great opportunity, and I was thrilled. I really was."

Excited is an understatement as he went from being blocked for the next who knows how many years by two perennial All-Stars in the prime of their careers in Rollins and Utley to a situation in Cleveland where the infield situation is very much unsettled and wide open. Shortstop Asdrubal Cabrera looks to be the guy there for the next half decade, but second base is completely open and the internal options for the Indians at the time of the trade were slim, which is a big reason the Indians picked up Donald in the trade.

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Even though Donald has a great opportunity now in the Indians' system, he knows he has not achieved anything yet and still has to work hard to become the everyday big league player he and the Indians aspires him to be.

Unfortunately for Donald, that track to the big leagues took somewhat of a detour last August when a back issue cropped up which severely limited his play so much that he had to finish the season on the disabled list. He ended up only playing ten games for the Indians Triple-A Columbus affiliate, and in turn lost out on a chance to be a September callup and make his major league debut, something that infielder Niuman Romero ended up doing in Donald's place.

"It was extremely frustrating," said Donald about the back injury. "I had never really been hurt like that my entire life where I couldn't do anything. I really think it just stemmed from compensating for the knee and really my body was just probably



depleted. That's the only thing I could really think of because I didn't have much time off in the offseason as I played a lot the year before. My body did not have enough time to really heal and I didn't give myself any down time and I really think that cost me. It taught me a lesson about the importance of rest and recovery and really how to take care of your body and what you need to do."

Obviously, when the Indians make such a high profile trade as the one they made involving former Cy Young Award winner Cliff Lee, they are going to give every opportunity to the players received in such a deal to live up to the hype and hope they had coming into the organization. Some may view that as unfair, or self-serving, but that's the way the business works as every team does this with key trades such as this or with draft picks they may have a lot of money invested in.

With that in mind, it appears that Donald is being lined up to be the eventual everyday second base option with the big league club as soon as the second half of this season. He will likely

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initially break into the big leagues in a platoon role with incumbent second base starter Luis Valbuena in the short term, but long term Donald is viewed as the likely everyday option at second base for the Indians while Valbuena may be more of a utility player.

The Indians are keeping their options open with Donald so as to not pigeon-hole him at second base, so Columbus Manager Mike Sarbaugh is currently splitting Donald's playing time about 50-50 at shortstop and second base.

"I'll switch between short and second," said Donald. "Sarby told me we are going to go back and forth between short and second with so many odd games at second in a row and so many odd games at short in a row and we'll go from there. It is not something where I look too far in the future and I don't think of it as I have options here or there. Wherever I am at I am at. Wherever they want me to play that's where I am going to play. I don't concern myself with this guy is doing this or that, I just try to handle my business and take care of what I need to do on a day in and day out basis."

The games at shortstop are more to keep Donald ready at the position in the event something bad should happen to Asdrubal Cabrera, but the time at second base is a true development opportunity for him as he is learning to play a position he really has limited experience at.

"I have played shortstop my whole life," said Donald. "Just recently last spring training and the fall league before that I started playing some third base and second base. I don't have a crystal ball to tell me what is going to happen. I don't know what they are going to want from me, but the biggest thing for me is to just get better everyday. Whether I am playing shortstop or second base that day, just be the most complete player I possibly can be."

Having played shortstop for so long, a position switch can be tough to adjust to, especially when you are moving from the left to the right side of the diamond.

"It's kind of like looking at yourself in the mirror as everything is turned around," said Donald. "The pivot and having to actually field the ball and throw the ball to your right on a double play where you are used to fielding everything and going to the left with everything, so everything is a little backward. The comfort level and the adjustments take place over time by putting in the work. There is no magic formula besides hard work and getting the reps and trying to play

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those different spots, so that's what I am going to try and do."

Donald is off to a solid start at the plate where in 12 games he is hitting .298 (14-for-47) with 0 HR, 4 RBI, 4 stolen bases and an .803 OPS. He doesn't really excel at any specific area of hitting, but has good average tools across the board where he can run a little, hit for some power, and makes consistent contact. This season his main area of improvement as a hitter is just maintaining consistency day to day and at bat to at bat.

"Approach-wise, it is the day in and day out grind of hitting," said Donald about what he wants to improve on as a hitter this year. "You are always fighting to find that comfort level and good swing. With me it's no different. Each day I work and try to shorten things up, be more consistent with my barrel to the ball, and being more consistent in my approach. That comes with playing and working."

While a lot of fans may not be too happy with the Cliff Lee trade, if they give Donald a chance he could quickly become a fan favorite. He first will need to prove he can stick at the big league level with his performance, but from a makeup perspective and all the other intangibles that he brings to the table he is completely off the charts. His tough, heady play to go along with his leadership qualities and passion he shows on the field will make him very endearing to Cleveland fans. He plays the game at a much higher intensity level than most players, and is just always plugged in to everything going on around him on the field.

While Cleveland fans tend to be bitter and extremely negative at times, they are still very smart and will recognize and appreciate tough-minded players, especially if they are at least a solid performer.

"I have never known a different way but to play hard and to pay attention and know what is going on," said Donald. "It is something my dad taught me at an early age, and my dad was my high school baseball coach. I wouldn't necessarily say I am taking charge as I think that sounds boastful or cocky, but I just try to stay plugged into what is going on out there."

In addition to being excited about joining the Indians' organization, Donald was also thrilled be once again with two of his best buddies from his days playing in college as an Arizona Wildcat. Upon hearing about the trade his two best friends and former Wildcat teammates outfielder

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Trevor Crowe and first baseman Jordan Brown (JB) got in touch with him and welcomed him to the organization.

"I lived together with [former Indian John] Meloan when we were in Arizona," said Donald. "I was really tight with JB and T-Crowe. They were the two most excited people when I got traded. We spend a lot of time together, and it is just a great opportunity to get back with those guys. Not only was I excited for the trade and the possibility and opportunity here, but I get to be with some good buddies that I kind of really started playing good baseball with."

Maybe soon all three of them will be playing at the big league level together with the Indians.

"Hopefully," said Donald.

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