

## J-Rod making himself an option

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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A new infielder has jumped into the Indians big league infield mix, and his name is Josh Rodriguez.

Prospect fans know that at one time Rodriguez's stock was much higher in the Indians organization and the general thinking was that one day he would at least become a utility option for the big league team. Unfortunately for him, injuries last year and a subpar performance the previous year in 2008 sort of wrecked those plans.

In Rodriguez's first full season in the Indians organization in 2007 at High-A Kinston he jumped onto the prospect scene with a dazzling 20-20 season with 20 home runs and 21 stolen bases. He hit .262 with 82 RBI and an .811 OPS that year along with 68 walks and 95 strikeouts in 568 plate appearances. He found his way in or just outside of many Indians' Top 10 prospect lists heading into the 2008 season, but upon going to Akron in 2008 he struggled all year and proceeded to hit just .241 with 7 HR, 49 RBI, 12 stolen bases, and a .694 OPS. In 621 plate appearances he had 77 walks but also piled up 122 strikeouts.

Last year Rodriguez was determined to bounce back and have a good season, and he was off to a very good start in a return trip to Akron where in the first 18 games of the season he was hitting .314 with 0 HR, 5 RBI, 2 stolen bases and an .841 OPS along with 15 walks and 13 strikeouts in 67 plate appearances. He seemed to be well on his way to a return to form of his 2008 performance, but on April 29th last year he suffered a severe hamstring injury which resulted in him missing an astounding 101 games and pushed him almost to afterthought status as a result. He came back late in the year to help Akron in their playoff push and then went out to the Arizona Fall League to make up some of the lost at bats, though struggled where in 15 games he hit just .222 with 1 HR, 4 RBI, and a .659 OPS in 59 total plate appearances.

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Finally healthy this year, the 25-year old Rodriguez is in the midst of a comeback season of sorts. He opened the year at Double-A Akron and in 19 games hit .291 with 1 HR, 10 RBI and an .849 OPS. He was promoted to Triple-A Columbus in the middle of May and since arriving he has done nothing but hit where in 17 games he is hitting .327 with 3 HR, 11 RBI and a .996 OPS. Overall, in 110 combined at bats between the two spots he is hitting .309 with 4 HR, 21 RBI, and a .922 OPS.

But even with the impressive batting average and OPS numbers, probably the most impressive number to date for Rodriguez is in 138 combined plate appearances between the two spots he has a very healthy 22 walk (6.3 PA/BB) to 23 strikeout (6.0 PA/K) ratio. This is a significant improvement as in 1495 career plate appearances coming into the season he had 182 walks (8.2 PA/BB) and 280 strikeouts (5.3 PA/K). Small sample size be damned, he's walking more often and also striking out less often, and at the same time being as productive at the plate as he has ever been.

Rodriguez's fallen stock and view in the organization was apparent at the start of this season where he opened in Akron for the third straight season and was a role player off the bench. He was now second on the depth chart at shortstop and second base behind Carlos Rivero and Cord Phelps, and with infielder Jared Goedert also on the bench with him to start the season he was going to have to fight for playing time in the infield. Because of the crowded infield situation, the Indians used him some in the outfield, a position he experimented with in the Fall League last year.

When Indians shortstop Asdrubal Cabrera went on the disabled list in May with a fractured forearm and infielder Jason Donald was called up from Columbus to Cleveland, it provided a chance to promote Rodriguez and get him every day at bats and fill a need in the infield in Columbus. Since moving up to Columbus he has made good on the opportunity, and now may have risen his stock back up in the organization to where he is now considered a big league infield option.

When the Indians had a need last week after infielder Mark Grudzielanek injured his hamstring and was released, they gave serious consideration to the thought of promoting Rodriguez to fill their vacant infield need. Instead, they sided with the idea to call up infielder Anderson Hernandez solely because he could play shortstop right now in the big leagues. They wanted a utility option who could fill in mostly at shortstop to give Donald a breather and also start giving him some playing time at second base so to properly expose him at the position he will likely become the everyday player at when Cabrera comes back probably sometime in July.

Rodriguez could become a utility option for the Indians later in the year, especially once Cabrera returns where they will then have two capable shortstops on the roster with him and Donald (they don't want to play Peralta there and I get the sense Valbuena is only for emergency use there now). When that happens Hernandez will no longer be needed, and they then may turn to Rodriguez. It is also possible that Valbuena could fill the utility need, but his performance in the field and at the plate has been below par all year, and he likely could find his way back in Columbus, which would open the door for Rodriguez. But since Rodriguez is not on the 40-man roster a player has to come off it in order to get him to the big leagues, so a

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Valbuena for Rodriguez swap is unlikely. However, a Rodriguez for Hernandez swap certainly is possible.

Right now the Indians are committed to getting Rodriguez some time at shortstop in Columbus, a position he has now played his last three games at, where in the previous 14 games he exclusively played second base. In fact, including the three games he has played with Columbus recently he has only played in a total of seven games at shortstop the last two years because he has primarily played second base. So, the Indians want to get him back up to speed at shortstop before reconsidering him as a utility option for the big league team.

Either way, the guy they call "J-Rod" looks to be back, and could be a part of the Indians big league future.