

The Axe Man Cometh

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Thursday, June 17 2010 9:32 PM - Last Updated Friday, June 18 2010 9:12 AM



To date, I've held off on any great pronouncement trumpeting the arrival of Carlos Santana as there have been enough of those to go around and I prefer to take on the angles that generally aren't covered by the mainstream media, among other places. Yes, we got him for just Lacey Cake and yes, he looks a lot like El Capitan (right down to the number on his back). Yes, the way that he wears his Indians' uniform is the sloppiest since Jelly Belliard and yes, he shares a name with a well-known guitarist.

These things we've known for quite some time...

However, now that he's arrived and since we can put away the Major League Equivalent calculator, we're finally able to watch Santana face MLB pitching and fill the batter's box from both sides. The obvious first impression is that he has looked the part of a stud hitter, posting some of the better AB against Cy Strasburg and more than holding his own since his arrival. After Thursday's game, he's posted a batting line to date of .272 BA / .385 OBP / .546 SLG / .931 OPS. So even with the small sample size alarms going off as loudly as they can, yeah...his bat has been as good as advertised.

Santana's presence in the lineup has revealed two things about him, things that we've heard about him since he arrived in the organization – that he has a tremendous batting eye and that, when he finds his pitch to hit, he makes solid contact and drives the ball. While the translations

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from Minor League numbers are still on the fuzzy side, perhaps it's better to take a look at Santana's tendencies at the plate to see if his batting eye and his ability to pick a pitch to put a good swing out have arrived with him from the Minors.

Even in the early going, his numbers have borne much of what we've heard about him out as he's walked in 15.4% of his plate appearances, outpacing every Indians' regular in that category (the two league leaders in the AL who have enough plate appearances to qualify are Justin Morneau and Kevin Youkilis, who have each walked in 17% of their plate appearances) and he has struck out in only 7.7% of his plate appearances, just twice in his first 26 PA. On a team like the Indians, where swings and misses are common (every Tribe player with more than 150 plate appearances has struck out at least 17% of the time), Santana's selectivity is a welcome respite. This particular percentage may be unsustainable (you'll see why below), but the more important thing to note here is that Santana's percentage of strikeouts to walks (right now, it's 2 K to 4 BB) is the one to watch and be impressed by.

Additionally, on a team that is sorely lacking in the power department in terms of extra-base hits, Santana's 4 extra-base hits in just 26 plate appearances (and it should have been 5 had he not slid over 2B on Wednesday night) put him at an extra-base % of 15.4%, infinitesimal sample size duly noted. To go further on that, Santana has 5 hits in 6 games and 4 of those 6 hits are for extra bases (3 2B and a HR...and again, it should have been 5 of 6 after Wednesday night), meaning that the book on Santana – that he drives the ball when he finds his pitch to hit – has carried through in his first week in MLB.

While it remains to be seen if The Axe Man can continue this early success (and really, we're just talking about 6 games here), the important point to make is that these numbers are simply a continuation from what Santana has been accomplishing over the past two years in the Minors. Just check these out...

Percentage of Walks per Plate Appearance (MLB League Average: 8.9%)

2010 – Cleveland: 15.4% (4 BB in 26 PA)

2010 – Columbus: 18.3% (45 BB in 246 PA)

2009 – Akron: 16.8% (90 BB in 535 PA)

Percentage of Strikeouts per Plate Appearance (MLB League Average: 17.4%)

2010 – Cleveland: 7.7% (2 K in 26 PA)

2010 – Columbus: 15.8% (39 K in 246 PA)

2009 – Akron: 15.5% (83 K in 535 PA)

Ratio of Strikeouts to Walks (MLB League Average: 1.95)

2010 – Cleveland: 0.50 (2 K to 4 BB)

2010 – Columbus: 0.86 (39 K to 45 BB)

2009 – Akron: 0.92 (83 K to 90 BB)

Percentage of Extra Base Hits for All Plate Appearances (MLB League Average: 7.8%)

2010 – Cleveland: 15.4% (4 XBH in 26 PA)

2010 – Columbus: 11.3% (28 XBH in 246 PA)

2009 – Akron: 10.3% (55 XBH in 535 PA)

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Percentage of Base Hits for Extra Bases (MLB League Average: 34%)

2010 – Cleveland: 67% (4 XBH among 6 H)

2010 – Columbus: 45.2% (28 XBH among 62 H)

2009 – Akron: 44.4% (55 XBH among 124 H)

Other than a preternaturally low K rate and the absurdly high percentage of extra base hits among all hits in the early going, what he's been doing in his first week in Cleveland falls pretty much in line with what he's done in Columbus and Akron. While the mistake is to assume that Santana can simply continue this torrid pace of hitting that he's enjoyed for the past 1 ½ years, the realization that adjustments will be made to him may scale back some of these numbers in the short-term. However, the track record is there for him in the Minors to excel at a level that he's sustained since the beginning of 2008 (and his 2008 cumulative numbers fall in line with those above) so his adjustment period at the plate will be interesting to watch...assuming there is one.

Of course, the “alleged” reason that Santana stayed down in the Minors until mid-June was that his defense and his handling of a pitching staff needed tweaking. All of that may be true to some degree (and the disappointments abound on the Clippers' pitching staff as evidence to back it up), but him staying in Columbus was an issue with the Indians ability to control Santana for an extra year and delay his arbitration years by keeping him in AAA. This is old news, I know, but to listen to the Mainstream Media and even the Indians' broadcasters, who ignore this point and attempt to crucify the organization for keeping Santana down “when he was clearly ready” means that those people simply aren't paying attention to the fact that the Indians aren't the only team employing this strategy as Strasburg and Stanton arrived for the Nationals and Marlins, nearly simultaneously to Santana.

Off that soapbox, what can be made of Santana's defense and handling of the pitching staff to date?

Outside of getting plowed over by Adam Dunn because he was wandering around home plate on Sunday, Santana has certainly looked like he's holding his own back there. He's thrown out 2 of the 6 runners who have attempted to steal on him, keeping with the percentages that he's put forth for the past two seasons in the Minors as he had thrown out 23% of would-be basestealers in Columbus this year, after gunning down 30% in Akron last year.

As for handling the pitching staff, the staff's ERA pitching to Santana is 5.20, striking out 27 and walking only 9 in the first 5 games that Santana's been behind the dish. What those numbers mean is anyone's guess and is just as dependent on who's pitching (Tony Sipp, please pick up the white courtesy phone) as who's catching at this point. All of the defensive idiosyncrasies will bear themselves out over the course of this season and the coming seasons; but for now, he has the opportunity to learn in MLB, with a number of pitchers that he figures to receive for the foreseeable future.

Carlos Santana has arrived and his first week has shown that he is indeed a special talent, capable of making a significant impact for the Indians as he begins his career as The Axe Man in the Rock and Roll Capital of the World.

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