

## Opportunity Knocks - Infield Edition

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}  
Tuesday, August 10 2010 9:52 PM -

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With about 30% of the 2010 season remaining, the final 50 games will be devoted to a discernment (as best possible) as to which players potentially fit where for 2011 and beyond. Not even delving into the youth already on the roster, in light of the spate of recent injuries and trades, opportunities are there for the taking for a number of players to assert themselves squarely in the mix past this year.

Since the last 2 months is akin to an open audition on the pitching staff, as there are only three pitchers that I can safely assume to be obviously in their current roles when next year starts – Carmona and Talbot (remember, he's out of options) in the 2011 rotation and Chris Perez in the 2011 bullpen – the likes of Masterson, Huff, Laffey, Gomez, Tomlin, and Carrasco (and those are just the starters) will be jockeying for position for 2011. None of the pitchers (save the aforementioned three) can safely assume that they'll be part of the 2011 team, much less beyond, and while that fact is downright horrifying, it would certainly seem that the lineup looks to be decidedly more stable.

As it stands today, pending the health of the following players, the following positions would seem to have spots nailed down by these players for next year:

Santana  
LaPorta  
Cabrera  
Sizemore  
Choo

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Yes, health plays a role here, but assuming that each of those players is healthy, they'll fill 5 of the 9 spots on the roster...and should do it rather effectively. The spots omitted from that list would be two infield spots (2B and 3B), an outfield spot (LF or CF, depending upon where Sizemore plays) and DH. It is true that Hafner is under contract for 2011 and beyond, but given what we've seen this year (the struggles against LHP and his injuries), DH is as wide open as 3B in 2011.

That being said, I thought that I'd break down those 4 positions in terms of what the rest of the season is likely to look like as well as what the principals for each position project as in 2011.

### Second Base

Starting at 2B, Jason Donald moved to 2B on a full-time basis after Cabrera returned from injury and was given the nod over Jayson Nix as Donald essentially becomes the de facto 2B for now, over both Valbuena and Nix. Donald's struggles in the field have been well-documented, as have his strikeouts, but Donald is still getting used to a new position (31 career MiLB games at 2B) and still has all of 64 games under his MLB belt. His OPS has tumbled recently down to .717, but that should be examined with the knowledge that the average OPS for 2B in the AL is .722, meaning that Donald has provided the team with production commensurate with other players at his position in his rookie year, all while playing a new position.

Given that he's still 25, there's no reason to not give Donald a long leash at 2B, particularly when you consider that the only other options are Jayson Nix (more on him in a minute) and Luis Valbuena. That's not to write off Valbuena, who is younger than Donald and who posted a 1.032 OPS in Columbus in 119 PA this year after being sent down earlier in the year (Donald had an .820 OPS in 165 PA in AAA), but Valbuena needs to prove that his .520 OPS and lousy defense prior to his demotion is the aberration in his career and not the beginning of a trend. That being said, I'd still play Donald every day in Cleveland to afford him the same opportunity that was permitted to Valbuena to start the year.

As a quick aside here while we're talking about Valbuena, does everyone know that Franklin Gutierrez has posted a .246 BA / .316 OBP / .370 SLG / .686 OPS in Seattle this year?

Gutierrez's career line when he was dealt to Seattle was a .258 BA / .308 OBP / .409 SLG / .717 OPS...so, remember that idea that Gutierrez was never going to hit consistently in MLB when the Indians dealt him? Um, yeah...that would be what's happening now. Sure, the guy is an absolute wizard in CF and is a pleasure to watch while helping out his pitchers, but the Indians traded him as he was entering his arbitration years. The Mariners avoided arbitration with Frank the Tank by buying up those years (and guaranteeing one more) in the form of a 4-year, \$20.25 deal that will pay Gutz \$4M next year, \$5.5M in 2012, and \$7M in 2013 with a team option for 2014 worth \$7.5M. Unless his offense picks up or unless he actually sprouts wings to fly around the outfield, that option isn't getting picked up as that contract looks terrible with three more guaranteed years remaining on the deal.

But I digress...

Back to 2B, the real question facing the Indians going forward at the position is whether Donald

or Valbuena or even Cord Phelps (.935 OPS in AAA as a 23-year-old, which frankly [looks like an aberration compared to the rest of his MiLB numbers](#)) are good enough to gain a toehold at 2B to keep the position away from Jason Kipnis.

Kipnis is the 2nd round draft pick from a year ago who has blazed his way up to Akron after posting an .865 OPS in Kinston. Now that he's in Akron, he's actually improved on his performance at the plate, posting an .945 OPS in AA, [leading Baseball Prospectus' Kevin Goldstein to wonder if Kipnis has passed up The Chiz in terms of top prospects](#), which would essentially mean that Kipnis is the top position player prospect in the eyes of some.

A converted OF, Kipnis certainly still has adjustments to make as a middle infielder (despite most reports about the transition being smooth), but his bat may carry him faster and further than even the most optimistic projection from when he was drafted merely 14 months ago. Being a college draftee, he is "old" at 23 and it remains to be seen if he can continue this torrid pace and this unprecedented ascent for a recent draftee.

Looking at 2B for the rest of 2010, I would continue to use Donald as the regular to monitor his adjustments at the plate and (more importantly) to a new position while giving Valbuena sporadic AB to give him confidence going into 2011. Going into 2011, Donald, Valbuena, and even Phelps should be given an opportunity to "win" the 2B job (and please no veteran, unless he's just there to "push" them) with the idea that all of them are being given the opportunity to establish themselves as a legitimate 2B beyond 2011 with Jason Kipnis being given the 2011 season to continue to fine-tune his defense and to adjust to AAA pitching. Given that Kipnis has less than 230 PA above high-A ball, there's no reason to rush him when options (that may be legitimate) exist. That being said, Kipnis could push his way very easily into this four-horse race, depending upon what the players ahead of him do with the opportunities that will be afforded them well into next year.

### Third Base

When Cabrera returned from injury and Peralta made his way to the Motor City, the Indians made the pronouncement that Jayson Nix would be their starting 3B with the idea that he may be able to serve as the bridge from Peralta to a duo of youngsters effectively as his defense, to that point, had been stellar, his offense had been surprisingly good and (despite that he was a 2B by trade) that he had experience playing 3B.

Since that time, Jayson Nix has revealed himself to be uncomfortable at 3B and to be the offensive player more in line with the one that the White Sox cut than the one who posted a 1.147 OPS in his first 12 games as an Indian. Since that 12-game stretch, Nix owns a .619 OPS in the 91 PA in 21 games, which pretty much falls in line with the .658 OPS that he had going into this year, compiled in two years with the Rockies and the White Sox.

Offensively speaking, looking at Nix's 12-game numbers and everything else that he's done to date in MLB, which guy do you think is more likely to be striding to the plate?

While the thought was that perhaps he could handle 3B, the last few weeks have shown that

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Nix's value is tied into his versatility and, unless the Indians want to make the same move that they did with Casey Blake (nullify his versatility by putting him in one position and keeping him there), his best asset (his versatility) should be utilized by allowing him to move around the diamond (2B, 3B, OF) and allowing him to simply serve as the complementary piece that looks to be his ceiling.

Where does that leave us for 3B...another infielder playing out of position in Valbuena?

As I prepare to duck, let me say "no" and to point out that the Indians have only one player on their roster who has been a 3B for the majority of his career...that's right, everyone's favorite relief pitcher – one Andy Marte.

While Marte is a lightning rod and a bit of a divisive individual, at this point, I don't see why the Indians give Marte starts at 3B through the end of August to see if he can play a better 3B than the other options (both converted middle infielders) and if the confidence from knowing that he's going to be in the lineup can give him some semblance of consistency at the plate.

Look, I understand that people hate Marte on a level that is almost Blakean or Peralta (what is it about us and our 3B?), but Marte is a 26-year-old who seemed to have a breakthrough year (or maybe it's "another" breakthrough year) in AAA last year. His .963 OPS in Columbus last year bested the numbers for Matt LaPorta (14 months younger than Marte) and Jordan Brown (2 months younger than Marte) and while he has certainly never shown an ability to hit at the MLB level, the damage done by having him take the AB at 3B for 3 weeks on a consistent basis is...what?

Truth be told, the Indians need a bridge at 3B until their prospects are ready to emerge to not just play, but actually contribute, and if the Indians have a player that can do that as an in-house option (meaning they don't have to go on the open market for a cheap veteran at 3B to start 2011), why not find out if Marte could be that guy?

If Marte completely tanks in the month of August, the Indians can call up Jared Goedert (OPS in AAA now "down" to .955) to see if he has a future with the team as a 3B (as his defense there has been reported as...um, "lacking" and on a team full of groundball pitchers, that's not good) or to see if he can continue on his Kouzmanoffian path that he's blazed this year. It is worth noting that Goedert is 25 years old and a just a year and a half younger than Andy Marte with all of 251 PA above AA to his name (Marte had 461 PA in AAA as a 21-year-old, posting an .878 OPS for Richmond), so affixing the idea that Goedert is obviously the "answer" is wildly premature.

Maybe a month (or more) of Marte will tell us something in August, maybe a month of Goedert will tell us something in September, but the reality is that Lonnie Chisenhall may not be ready for a Carlos Santana-esque promotion to fix this ongoing problem at 3B by the middle of 2011 as Chisenhall has been inconsistent and plagued by injuries this season. The overall body of work for The Chiz is still impressive (particularly his June and July numbers) given that he doesn't turn 22 until October, but that doesn't guarantee any kind of ETA for The Chiz in Cleveland.

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All told, 3B may be an open audition for longer than many care to admit and finding out about in-house options (Marte, then Goedert) leading into 2011 while seeing if Chisenhall can jump back onto that fast-track.

In terms of 2B and 3B for the foreseeable future, both positions have one top prospect currently in AA whose arrival date is still-as-yet-unknown as the distance between Akron and Cleveland is much further in baseball terms than it is as the crow flies. At 2B, the Indians have a number of options ahead of that top prospect who will be given an opportunity to assert themselves into the future of the team while jockeying for position amongst themselves. At 3B, the situation is much bleaker with the internal options including a converted 2B who has never hit in MLB, a former top prospect (but "natural" 3B) who has never hit in MLB, and a sudden prospect whose defense has been questioned and who will likely be given an opportunity at some point in Cleveland.

Opportunities abound...now it's just a matter of which players are able to advantage of them.