

Opportunity Knocks - Shouldering the Load

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

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As the Indians attempt to “fight” their way out of the AL Central this week in Kansas City, the extended auditions continue for an Indians team that has been casting an eye past 2010 for the better part of two months. While the rotation and bullpen will remain open casting calls (with few exceptions) as the season continues, there are definite spots of stability and volatility in the lineup going forward. As has already been hit on, [the 2B and 3B situations will continue to bear themselves out](#), but another spot for which the young players that we’re seeing on the field these days could be just as in play for 2011 and beyond, despite the presence of the team’s highest-paid player, who was supposed to be the anchor in the lineup from the DH position for the next few years.

The Hafner situation is nothing new and innumerable keystrokes and spoken syllables have been exhausted on his contract, his performance, and his fall from the elite of MLB hitters to where he sits today. That is not worth re-hashing as even casual Indians’ fans are aware of Hafner’s drop-off since signing his extension in 2007.

However, the most recent stint for Hafner on the DL and his return, in which he came back to going directly into the lineup, start to raise serious questions for his future...as if questions didn’t already exist. When Hafner decided to eschew a rehab assignment and head right back to the parent club, it was seen in some circles as noble and brave (relatively speaking) as the first two pitchers that the Indians were to face were King Felix and Greinke. In fact, since his return, Hafner has hit the ball very well, hitting the Grand Slam (which was a thing of beauty) against Hernandez and finding success against Grienke, one of the only Indians to do so.

This performance however, and those glimpses of being the man whose exploits merited a section at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario to be named after him, come after a period of prolonged rest, forced by what was only termed “shoulder soreness”. There was no other impetus for the DL stint, nor was there any kind of smoking gun other than the “lingering issues” that seem to always find their way into sentences about Hafner these days.

Therein lies the issue with Hafner going forward, in that Hafner may never be fully healthy and (if his most recent DL stint is any indication), the Indians can’t be certain that he’s not going to

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be battling a further deterioration or worse “lingering issues” with his shoulder. Don’t take this the wrong way on Hafner, who could have simply gone in the tank, collected his paychecks, and deposited himself on the DL with a chronically weak shoulder in the 2008 season.

The idea that Hafner may not ever be an everyday player is certainly not a new one, but it also is by no means a personal attack on Hafner, as this represents only an attempt to rationally assert that there are only so many swings in Hafner’s shoulder left and that his ability to play on a regular basis, much less in consecutive games, is very much in question going forward.

As much as we would all like to believe that Pronk is returning to play every day at some point, the reality is that Travis Hafner (which is to say Clark Kent, not Superman) may not even ever return to play every day. Even if he is healthy enough to play every day, recent trends have shown that [he may be devolving into not much more than a platoon player](#), which could lead to the chicken-or-the-egg question.

Since I’m not all that interested in dealing in hypotheticals (and since I have no insight as to what is going on in Hafner’s shoulder), the raw facts are that Hafner (who was purported to be as healthy as he’s been since the shoulder issue) has 322 Plate Appearances this year, fewer than Trevor Crowe, who didn’t get called up until mid-May, and less than 30 more than Matt LaPorta, who spent nearly all of June in Columbus.

Last year, Hafner had 383 PA last year in 94 games and he’s probably going to come close to reaching 400 PA in about 100 games this year, a number that could end up being on the high side as time takes its toll on his shoulder. To borrow a phrase, “what if this is as good as it gets” with Hafner’s availability as a DH?

If Hafner is going to max out at about 400 PA for the next two years (while he’s still under contract), that would leave about 300 to 325 Plate Appearances that would be up for grabs going forward. Going back to the whole idea behind this little “series” (which is just two parts), that would seem to offer some opportunity for some of the current Indians to assert themselves as an option for those 250 to 325 Plate Appearances for 2011 and beyond, essentially made available if Hafner’s shoulder precludes him from playing on a consistent basis.

While the obvious names of Shelley Duncan and Jordan Brown jump to everyone’s lips, here’s [a little snippet from Will Carroll at Baseball Prospectus](#), which relates to this situation more than you might think:

I got to talk with Manny Acta in Cleveland and he’s very encouraged by the early reports on Carlos Santana. Acta thinks Santana will be fully recovered by next spring. The team is likely to use Santana more at first base and DH, but it expects he’ll still be the primary catcher. Call it the “Victor Martinez plan.”

This is great news on Santana and really nothing new as Castrovince reported some time back that Santana would be playing more 1B to lessen the load on him, particularly given his recent injury. But follow the bouncing ball on this if you figure that Santana is going to play some 1B (which would likely move LaPorta to DH) or spend some time at DH himself as it would leave an obvious opportunity for Lou Marson to insert himself in a convoluted platoon between C, 1B,

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and DH.

C – Santana

1B – LaPorta

DH – Hafner

C – Marson

1B – Santana/LaPorta

DH – Santana/LaPorta

If you'll remember from the piece a couple of Sundays ago, Hafner's main difficulties this year (and in the last couple of years) have come against LHP, so how has Marson performed against LHP if we're talking about a very weird platoon between those two players?

For his career, Marson has hit LHP a little better than he has RHP in the Minors (career .784 OPS vs. LHP, career .743 OPS vs. RHP) and, with the small sample sirens wailing, that continued to MLB, as he sits on an MLB OPS of .758 vs. LHP and a MLB OPS of .544 vs. RHP in his 268 career MLB PA.

While that may represent a leap of faith to figure that the Indians are going to play it out like that, what are the alternatives?

Shelley Duncan, who will be 31 years old next year, whose 37.2% K rate is 2nd among those same 153 AL players (behind only Jack Cust, whose K rate is 37.8% and "besting" Rusty Branyan, whose K rate is merely 32.8%) and who doesn't walk as much as those guys and he trails each of them in Slugging Percentage, meaning that the pay-off for surviving those strikeouts isn't nearly as compelling as it is for even a Branyan, whose SLG outpaces Duncan's by a solid .050 points.

Duncan is RH and does offer some value to the team as a RH bat off of the bench who can play a little OF and a little 1B while providing some leadership for a young team, but Shelley Duncan getting 250 to 325 Plate Appearances next year seems more than a little far-fetched, particularly for an organization that looks to be promoting from within with some gusto in the last year or so.

To that end, what about Jordan Brown?

Well, for one, Brown will be 27 this Winter and he (like Hafner) is LH. While he has won two Minor League MVP awards, his inability to take a BB concerns me as he walked 81 times TOTAL in the last three years in the Minors over 289 games. Maybe this is simply projecting something that isn't there, but his ability to get a bat on the ball and put it into play at the expense of a walk could very well lead to weak grounders, something that we did see with Brown in (cue the small sample size siren) his brief time with the Tribe, putting 63% of the balls that he put into play onto the ground. Brown's GB percentage has reduced in the past few years, but he's also been playing at the same level for the past three years:

Groundball Percentage

2010 in AAA – 38.7%

2009 in AAA – 43.5%

2008 in AAA – 47.1%

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Beyond the BB and Groundball concern (or maybe related to it), his lack of power is the other concern as he's hit a TOTAL of 39 HR in the last 4 years in the Minors over 416 games and with him turning 27 this Winter, the likelihood that power is going to appear suddenly at the MLB level is remote.

Just for a bit of comparison's sake (and reference the numbers above here), Nick Weglarz has walked 196 times in the last three years over 298 games, hitting 63 HR in the last 4 years over 424 games...and he'll turn 23 this Winter.

That's not to sit here and say that Brown is not without worth as a sort of stop-gap measure, but (and I know that this is not new ground) he projects as more of a Ryan Garko type player to me, a player that is without an obvious defensive position who can put the ball into play on a consistent basis. The big difference between Brown and Garko (who both have a .472 career SLG in MiLB) and that at this point in Garko's development (which is to say, when Garko was 26), he had established himself as a MLB player, even if he was never anything more than a placeholder.

Of course, the likelihood of Duncan or Brown filling this role on the team would be helped by their ability to play the OF, and they both can do that. However, at this point, it would seem that the 4 spots for the Indians' 2011 are spoken for with Choo, Sizemore, Brantley, and Crowe.

It would seem obvious that the first three names will represent the starting OF with Crowe as the 4th OF (bad routes and all) for 2011. The only question for the three starters is where they fit in and, while this may be a little off-topic, here's [a little blurb from a scout who had this to say to Baseball Prospectus' John Perrotto on Carlos Beltran](#)

:

"He's just not the player he used to be because of his knee. He's become extremely tentative in the outfield, and his power is negligible because he doesn't have a strong base under him without healthy legs. Maybe having the offseason to rest will help, but he is definitely a player in decline."

I have yet to see a definitive "Sizemore had the same surgery as Beltran" assertion, but does it still feel premature to say, "Your next LF of the 2011 Indians...Grady Sizemore"?

Sure, Weglarz enters the conversation at some point, but that's as related to one injured veteran (Hafner) as it is to another (Sizemore) and this little exercise has gotten depressing enough.

All told, the Indians could go outside the organization to complement Hafner at DH in 2011 as they should know that the likelihood that Hafner is able to take more than 400 Plate Appearances in 2011 (and beyond) is optimistic, to say the least. That being said, internal options look to be confined to Duncan, Brown, and (in a roundabout, convoluted platoon) Marson with perhaps some combination of two of the three of them, as well as players getting a day off from the field assuming some DH duties, filling in for those extra Plate Appearances from DH.

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The situation may not be ideal, but with the Hafner situation at this point is more about making lemonade out of lemons at this point.