

Opportunity Knocks: Anybody Home?

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Friday, September 03 2010 7:00 PM - Last Updated Saturday, September 04 2010 8:54 AM



As most of Northeast Ohio is ensconced in Scarlet and Gray or Brown and Orange, the Indians' season rolls on in infamy and coming off a month in which they posted the worst record in the AL (11-18 in August), besting only the Pirates and Cubs in the month, the extended auditions roll on. From the time that Bryan, Kearns, Peralta, Westbrook, and Wood exited stage left and Sizemore and Santana exited stage right, the Indians have been dipping into the shallow well of their upper levels in the Farm System (and in other places) in an attempt to cobble together some pieces and parts that figure in for 2011 and beyond.

While the pitching staff remains a crapshoot, with only Carmona, Talbot (out of options), Justin Masterson (in some capacity), Chris Perez, and maybe Rafael Perez assured of a spot in the 2011 staff, most of the performances of the pitchers since the opportunities came fast and furious in the organization are based on wildly small sample sizes. Thus, as much as I'd like to assert that Carlos Carrasco WILL be in the 2011 rotation on the basis of one start, a much larger body of work is necessary to dissect to find out which of these players is really asserting themselves.

With position players, the sample sizes are much larger and conclusions can start to be drawn on the performances of a number of players who either obviously figure into 2011, who have their foot in the door (if not more) and are attempting to establish themselves as a legitimate regular for 2011, and the players who are hanging on by a thread to a starting spot, much less a roster spot.

That being said, if opportunity has been knocking for the players on the Indians since...let's say the All-Star Break (because the stats are easy to find), which players have thrived, given the opportunity to take a hold of a starting spot or a roster spot for 2011. As I said, the position players can really be broken down into three segments, with their performances and what those performances mean being presented thusly:

The "Sure" Things

Pronk Lite

.377 BA / .455 OBP / .571 SLG / 1.026 OPS with 2 HR and 9 2B in 77 AB

Big League Choo

.311 BA / .389 OBP / .432 SLG / .822 OPS with 2 HR and 12 2B in 148 AB

Asdrubal

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.258 BA / .324 OBP / .348 SLG / .672 OPS with 2 HR and 8 2B in 155 AB

That heading is a little tongue in cheek, if you simply check out the amount of AB for Hafner and how they compare to the other two names on the list, but if you want the three players who are currently in the Tribe lineup who will unquestionably be in the 2011 lineup, assuming health, that troika represents the only players playing now assured of a spot coming out of Goodyear next Spring.

Seeing those numbers for Hafner is pretty jarring, as is the realization that he posted the 17th highest OPS in August among all MLB players. However, Andy Marte has as many HR as Hafner since the All-Star break in fewer AB and the batter on display now in the DH hole is a far cry from the Hafner of 2005 to 2007. Obviously, that is no great revelation, but Hafner's success is tied intrinsically to his ability to get on base and to the Indians giving him enough rest to remain effective and producing at a level that he has been since the All-Star Break. Hafner has excelled in the last 2 months, but he's a much different player now – call him Pronk Lite (and hold your tongue on any intimation of a double entendre there having to do with his appearance) – and needs regular rest to remain that different, and effective, player. If the second half to date has shown anything on Hafner, it is that he can still contribute to the Indians, just not as an everyday fixture in the lineup, and certainly not at a level commensurate with his salary.

If Hafner remains a wild card, in terms of health and usage, it runs in stark contrast to the consistency for Choo (whose Pre-All Star Break numbers were a line of .286 BA / .390 OBP / .475 SLG / .865 OPS), and his steadying influence on a wildly inconsistent lineup. The BLC has firmly established himself among the elite hitters in the AL as he currently sits on the 14th highest OPS in the League and the 7th highest OBP among all qualified AL players. In a season that has been racked with uncertainty and frustration, Choo has remained the only real "sure" thing in the Tribe lineup and his 2nd half has done nothing to refute that, only strengthen it.

As for Asdrubal, if there has been a disappointing season to point to for a player that looked to be on the verge of breaking out, it belongs to Cabrera. Even before his arm injury, his OPS of .689 underwhelmed and he has continued at the same pace after returning. While his on-base ability has been average this year, it is a significant downgrade (2009 OBP was .361) and he has been completely bereft of power, with his SLG down significantly from his career number going into 2010 (.411 SLG), which either means that Cabrera has regressed significantly this season at the plate or that he has simply never been able to get untracked as the injury interrupted his season. His current numbers are actually lower than those from the 2008 season, in which Cabrera struggled out of the gate and was sent to AAA. His defense alone merits his inclusion on the roster going forward, but 2010 has been a lost year for Asdrubal and hopefully it represents the aberration in his career instead of the beginning of a trend.

Looking for the Toehold

Mike Brantley

.274 BA / .344 OBP / .368 SLG / .711 OPS with 2 HR and 3 2B in 117 AB

Matt MaTola

.217 BA / .292 OBP / .357 SLG / .649 OPS with 4 HR and 6 2B in 143 AB

Jason Donald

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.240 BA / .295 OBP / .349 SLG / .644 OPS with 2 HR and 6 2B in 129 AB

The disappointment here is obviously LaPorta, who has shown glimpses of the power that he has shown in the Minor Leagues, but has lacked any kind of consistency in terms of getting on base regularly or driving the ball. He's posted a .760 OPS since being recalled and put in the everyday lineup, but the disparity between that .760 OPS and the one since the All-Star Break (.649 OPS) show how streaky MaTola has been at the plate. He will continue to get chances due to his pedigree and the fact that he represents the promising option at 1B in the organization. Additionally, him not breaking Goodyear as the 1B next year would be a MAJOR surprise but the end to LaPorta's honeymoon period is not far off and with 537 MLB Plate Appearances now under his belt and with him turning 26 in January. LaPorta may not have as long of a rope as previously thought, particularly if he is unable to find success...and, more importantly, consistent success.

While the numbers for LaPorta are similar to that of Donald after the All-Star Break, the reality is that expectations for LaPorta dwarf those for Donald, who has quietly put together a pretty solid, if uneven, season. Overall, he sits on a .702 OPS (95 OPS+) and while that may not overwhelm, for a 25-year-old middle infielder getting his first taste of MLB, it should be taken as a positive step. That's not to say that Donald's performance to date has guaranteed him of anything, by way of a position, going forward, but his defense at 2B is improved (and markedly better than it was at SS) and his 18 2B (tied for 5th on the team) show that he may hold some value. He still walks far too infrequently and strikes out too much (18 BB to 65 K on the year), but Donald figures into the 2B mix and probably starts the 2010 season as the starting 2B.

While those other two seem to be in the 2011 lineup despite not seizing the opportunity in front of them as of late, Mike Brantley seems to be the one young position player who has taken the opportunity presented to him as of late and run with it as his numbers since his return from Columbus are essentially in line with what he's always done in the Minors – high OBP, low SLG. His “high OBP” isn't inordinately high, but it certainly represents an improvement over his initial stint with the team to start the year (.229 OBP, .416 OPS in his first 9 games) and his brief return (.231 OBP, .445 OPS in his next 17 games), as he's posted a .341 OBP and a .750 OPS since being recalled at the beginning of August. Given his age (he's still 23) and his .388 Minor League OBP, Brantley figures into the Indians' OF for 2011 and the last month of the season has allayed fears that he would be overwhelmed at the ML level. Don't get me wrong – his adjustment to MLB hasn't come without some red flags, as he's struck out 26 times in 206 PA after striking out a total of 103 times in the last 3 seasons in the Minors over 1,323 plate appearances, but Brantley is one of the young players who at least seems to be trending in the right direction as this season winds down...an unfortunate rarity for the Tribe.

Fighting for their Lives

Sonny Nix

.291 BA / .329 OBP / .455 SLG / .784 OPS with 5 HR and 7 2B in 134 AB

Andres Marte

.254 BA / .324 OBP / .403 SLG / .727 OPS with 2 HR and 4 2B in 67 AB

Luis V.

.178 BA / .213 OBP / .200 SLG / .413 OPS with 0 HR and 1 2B in 45 AB

While a couple of these players (Nix and Marte) have asserted themselves offensively

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(relatively speaking) since the All-Star Break, I'll stand behind the notion that defense should play a major role here and defense is obviously not included here in these numbers. Nix at 3B looks to be woefully out of position, but his recent numbers suggest that he does have some value to the team as a cheap, versatile RH bat who can provide some pop. If anything can be taken from usage patterns for the 3-headed monster (and I do mean "monster"), it is that Andy Marte's days are numbered in the organization as the situation would seem ripe to simply get him out there to play and, as you can see by the AB, he's played in 1/2 of the games that Nix has since the Midsummer Classic, with a portion of those at 1B. As for Louie the Fifth, his numbers since returning are worse than in his first stint with the team (.514 OPS in his first 49 games this year) meaning that...well, to be charitable, Valbuena is likely to spend 2011 in AAA and it won't be just to improve his ghastly defense.

Perhaps the Indians can take something from the recent strong to mildly strong performances of Nix and Marte, but I don't anticipate the 2011 3B answer to obviously emerge from this trio as the defense of the best offensive player to date (term used loosely) leaves much to be desired in Nix and the lack of a consistent opportunity for Marte doesn't leave much to the imagination as to where he sits in the pecking order. As for Valbuena at 3B...well, given that Cord Phelps will be playing 3B in the Arizona Fall League and perhaps in Columbus in 2011 (with Kipnis at 2B in Columbus next year), it will be interesting to see where Valbuena and Phelps factor into the mix here [as Tony Latoria points out that Phelps did play 3B while he was in college at Stanford](#).

David S. Duncan

.215 BA / .294 OBP / .346 SLG / .640 OPS with 3 HR and 5 2B in 107 AB

Crazy Eyes Crowe

.240 BA / .296 OBP / .333 SLG / .630 OPS with 1 HR and 9 2B in 150 AB

Evaluating the "performance" of these two since the All-Star Break is not something I'm interested in exploring too exhaustively. Neither of these players should be on the team in 2011 as an alternative (read: a better player) should be found to take Duncan's RH role as a 1B/LF/DH for 2011 and Trevor Crowe...well, he can just go away now. Some will point to his 9 2B since the Break, but Crowe is a no-field, no-hit, no-instinct 5th OF who turns 27 in November. After an underwhelming Minor League career, he has underwhelmed in Cleveland in his first stint and while that can be said for many players currently on the Tribe (Brantley, LaPorta, Donald, Marson, etc.), each of those players have a Minor League track record of success to merit multiple looks. Crowe does not.

So, um...yeah, maybe adding a veteran to this OF mix (preferably a RH one who could also DH) is becoming more and more of a priority with the play of these two down the stretch.

Pile Jumper Gimenez

.216 BA / .326 OBP / .432 SLG / .758 OPS with 1 HR and 5 2B in 37 AB

Tofu Lou Marson

.186 BA / .262 OBP / .288 SLG / .550 OPS with 1 HR and 3 2B in 59 AB

This may sound strange in light of what was just written about Crowe, but I don't have an issue with either of these guys being on the team next year. Certainly not both, but I can see that either player has merit for inclusion on the 2011 roster. Perhaps that's a function of simply being

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excited about Carlos Santana coming back to relegate these two to a back-up role or back to AAA, but Marson's defense has impressed as of late and Gimenez has value in his versatility...plus, he's actually hitting the ball, albeit in a short timeframe. All told, I still think that Marson's trade bait at some point and could start 2011 in AAA with an eye towards building up that trade value. Additionally, Gimenez is not much more than a pile-jumper but to paraphrase the great Ty Webb, "baseball teams need pile-jumpers too, Chris" and Gimenez is perfectly capable back-up C who can play other positions as well as injecting some personality into this very young team.

Taking an overview, the numbers bear out what we've all seen with our eyes and unsurprisingly tell us that 3B and a RH OF are squarely in the mix for where the team needs to make upgrades going into next year, as is adding a RH complement to Hafner at DH to keep him rested.

While the 3B issue is one that will probably attract a far more attention, the Indians should look to add that RH DH who can play some OF from time to time if they're looking to upgrade the offense for 2011. While names like Pat Burrell, Marcus Thames, and Bill Hall would all make sense (please, keep your Jose Guillen suggestions to yourself), I wouldn't be surprised if the Indians went more of a capable OF route with players like Reed Johnson or Xavier Nady as insurance against Sizemore not being ready out of the gate in 2011.

Those names may not generate too much excitement, but the auditions taking place for the last two months in the OF, at 1B, 2B, and 3B figure to last into next year and perhaps even beyond. Unfortunately for the Indians, none of the players have taken the opportunity that's been afforded to them to nail down a position for 2011 and beyond as picturing guys like Brantley, LaPorta, and Donald as viable long-term options takes some squinting.

The auditions roll on in earnest as the Indians play out the string in 2010, hoping that somebody...anybody...makes themselves indispensable to the team's future plans with extended plate appearances or innings.