

Weakness in Numbers

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

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With the World Series being referred to in the past tense and all of the articles about whether the Giants can repeat and what, oh what are the Yankees going to do to ensure that they never miss a World Series again, let's try to bring the focus back to the North Coast even though the shores of Lake Erie have remained pretty quiet (as expected) for the last month or so.

Sure, the Indians conducted [a bit of 40-man housecleaning](#) , with the names being taken off of the 40-man not being all that surprising or newsworthy, but since most teams are dealing with their FA and which FA to pursue, let's all remember that the Indians aren't likely to be active on the FA market and also to realize that the Tribe has no players entering FA from their 2010 final roster.

Seriously, not a one...

While the FA landscape is dotted with former Indians like one CP Lee, Vic, and Jhonny (and the last two may be re-united in the Motor City on deals that will almost certainly be [too long](#) and

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for too much money, given their

[defensive limitations](#)

), the Indians have no real FA decisions to make in terms of player retention and with news that guys like

[Bruce Chen are looking for multi-year deals](#)

(good luck with that Bruce), maybe the prospect of dipping their toe in the FA water isn't such a great idea.

Feel that heat coming off that Hot Stove on the North Coast? Yeah, me neither...but that doesn't mean that there aren't topics to hit and internal evaluation to conduct and on that latter point, there was [an interesting piece that came from Joe Posnanski having to do with statistics](#) and attempting to emphasize the importance of statistics to the enjoyment of baseball, regardless of the stats that a baseball fan uses to measure a player's worth:

So, yes, I think people need baseball stats to enjoy the game. It's just that many people — and I understand this impulse — want to stick with the stats they've enjoyed all their lives. These stats are as familiar as family. And while they may know those stats are flawed, they prefer the flaws in their favorite statistics over the flaws of the newer ones. Why? Maybe the newer stats feel too much like math. Maybe, to them, the newer stats seem to dehumanize the game. --snip--For some of us, it will always be fun to explore the new numbers, to try and separate what a pitcher does from what the defense does, to break down a hitter by what he contributes to winning and losing rather than by how many hits he gets per at-bat, to judge a player's defense beyond the occasional diving catch and by how often the ball boinks off his glove. As I've always said, there are a lot of ways to enjoy baseball. And there is no wrong way.

After that terrific introduction (because much of what any baseball fan learned about the games has to do with those back-of-the-baseball-card numbers or the .300 hitter or the 100 RBI man), Posnanski proposes “new” stats or at least throws the curtain back on some of the more absurd stats and the caveats that come with them (like is a “sacrifice” a “sacrifice” based purely on intent?) and proposes some interesting wrinkles on adjusting well-known stats (like taking RBI achieved by hitting a HR out of the RBI total...which is actually much more interesting than you would think) and even attempts to come up with a measure for middle relievers, identifying Inherited Runners Stranded...something [I championed back in June of 2007](#) .

A few of Posnanski's “new” stats just feel like he's making a point of how ridiculous some of the “mainstream” stats really are – like when he suggests that a pitcher's W-L record should simply reflect whether the team won or lost in games started by that pitcher – as they represent more of a back-handed swipe at the “rules” in place for a pitcher to get a win or how ERA can be affected by a scorer's judgment as to what would have happened in an inning and deciding between Earned Runs and Runs based purely on one man's opinion. However, his overall point is well-taken as people want stats that justify what they see on the field and to be able to explain

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why one player is better than another.

Nevertheless, a couple of his “new” stats were extremely interesting to me as they attempted to truly measure a player’s worth, with the first one of note measuring a different kind of run production by taking HR out of the mix because, as he explains: *My sense is that with RBIs we are really looking for how often they drive in OTHER runners. By “Good RBI Man” people tend to mean the guy who will drive in the runner from second with two outs or the guy who can get the runner home from third. Tacking on their home runs muddies up the concept, I think.*

This is a fascinating concept to me and while it may never be met with more than eye-rolls and “why do they always want to change our stats” arguments, the application of this to the 2010 Indians is more than just a little insightful...it just takes a couple of steps to get there.

First, here are the “RBI minus HR” total leaders for the Tribe in 2010:

Choo – 68

Hafner – 37

Peralta – 36

Crowe – 34

Kearns – 34

LaPorta – 29

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Cabrera – 26

Duncan – 25

Valbuena – 22

Donald – 20

Marson – 19

Brantley – 19

Nix – 16

Santana – 16

Branyan – 14

Yeah, really...those are the totals. Truthfully, those numbers are interesting to a point (and WOW are Nix's run production totals affected by his HR), but they feel like they're in a vacuum that doesn't provide the proper context or just assumes that we're basing this on the same number of plate appearances...which obviously isn't true, particularly for YOUR 2010 Cleveland Indians.

To wit, Crowe is higher on the list than, let's say Duncan, with more of these "RBI minus HR", but Crowe had nearly twice as many PA as David Shelley Duncan, so simply counting these things out doesn't really provide the perspective necessary to achieve what Posnanski is trying

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to do here, which is to judge a player's run production while omitting HR from the equation.

Thus, just to take this a step further for the Indians, seeing as how many of the players above found themselves in the lineup for only portions of the season, what about dividing that "RBI minus HR" stat by the number of plate appearances to come up with a list of the most effective "run-producers" for the 2010 team:

Choo – 10.5% non-HR run production: 68 "RBI" in 646 PA

Kearns – 9.9% non-HR run production: 34 "RBI" in 342 PA

Peralta – 9.7% non-HR run production: 36 "RBI" in 373 PA

Duncan – 9.6% non-HR run production: 25 "RBI" in 259 PA

Santana – 8.3% non-HR run production: 16 "RBI" in 192 PA

Hafner – 8.0% non-HR run production: 37 "RBI" in 462 PA

Brayan – 7.3% non-HR run production: 14 "RBI" in 190 PA

Crowe – 7.1% non-HR run production: 34 "RBI" in 479 PA

Valbuena – 7.1% non-HR run production: 22 "RBI" in 310 PA

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LaPorta – 6.8% non-HR run production: 29 “RBI” in 425 PA

Marson – 6.4% non-HR run production: 19 “RBI” in 294 PA

Donald – 6.2% non-HR run production: 20 “RBI” in 325 PA

Cabrera – 6.1% non-HR run production: 26 “RBI” in 425 PA

Brantley – 5.8% non-HR run production: 19 “RBI” in 325 PA

Nix – 5.2% non-HR run production: 16 “RBI” in 306 PA

Now we're getting somewhere as that idea of a “Good RBI Man” starts to flesh out a little bit for the 2010 Tribe...as horrifying as those results might be. They're horrifying because 5 of the bottom 6 names on this list could be in the everyday lineup next year (depending upon what happens at 3B), so yeah...that's pretty terrifying in terms of a lack of run producing “ability” that we saw from those 5 players in 2010.

That's not to assume that those 5 players are simply incapable of topping those numbers next year in that some of them have a track record of success (like Cabrera does have) or are highly-thought-of-prospects (and LaPorta, Donald, and Brantley have all been Top 100 prospects in MLB at one time), only that the whole idea that “improvement is going to come from internal options getting better” is nowhere as apparent as it is right there for the offense. When those players (LaPorta, Donald, Cabrera, Brantley, and Nix) are outperformed (in this metric, at least) by Crowe, Valbuena, Marson, and two minor league FA (Duncan and Kearns), you start to see why the improvement of these players is tantamount to the Indians' success in 2011.

The thing that worries me with it is that the improvement almost needs to come across the board for a good portion of the assumed 2011 lineup...but that's another topic for another day.

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Back to the “new” stats from Posnanski, one of the most puzzling questions for me has always been how to recognize the effectiveness of a reliever (and particularly a middle reliever) as ERA isn't always revealing based on a reliever's usage and some of the other strikeout and walk totals give a glimpse into what makes a reliever effective, but they're too constrictive. Posnanski's suggestion (and [it is one that I had some time ago](#)) is to look at “Inherited Runners Stranded” or “how many innings did you end with other pitcher's runners on base?”

To put this measurement into application for the 2010 Tribe, here are the IRS (inherited runners stranded) numbers for all of the relievers of the Tribe from most effective to least effective:

Jamey Wright – 1 of 15 inherited runners scored – 93% IRS

Joe Smith – 7 of 36 inherited runners scored – 81% IRS

Tony Sipp – 9 of 45 inherited runners scored – 80% IRS

Jensen Lewis – 2 of 10 inherited runners scored – 80% IRS

Justin Germano – 2 of 10 inherited runners scored – 80% IRS

Chris Perez – 7 of 31 inherited runners scored – 77% IRS

Rafael Perez – 10 of 42 inherited runners scored – 76% IRS

Frank Herrmann – 10 of 31 inherited runners scored – 68% IRS

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Aaron Laffey – 7 of 21 inherited runners scored – 67% IRS

Hector Ambriz – 12 of 19 inherited runners scored – 37% IRS

For some perspective, league average effectiveness is about 69% IRS, so if you figure that Wright and Germano probably don't factor into too obviously (or at all) in the 2010 mix), do you notice how the RHP that top that list are Joe Smith and Jensen Lewis?

Let's get it out of the way right now that Smith is a match-up guy, despite the Indians' wishes and hopes that he would turn into something more. He's a RH specialist and from this point forward should be used as such. Past Smith, Lewis is probably best suited for a 6th or 7th role, which isn't meant to dismiss him outright, only to realize that he's probably not the answer to which RH pitcher is going to be setting up Chris F. Perez in 2011.

Interestingly, in terms of total inherited runners, the two leaders in inherited runners are both LHP and while that shouldn't be surprising, I'll go further than that and point out that Smith, Herrmann, and Ambriz (who apparently should NEVER be brought in with men on base) were the RHP that weren't closers that inherited the most runners in 2010.

So...we're talking about somebody from among Smith, Lewis, and Herrmann (or Germano, if you feel like throwing him in there) as the best options for the RH set-up man in 2011. Maybe you feel confident in Herrmann or Jenny Lewis or Vinnie Pestano or somebody else that spent most of the year in AAA to step into that void. Sorry, but I don't.

To that end, it gets back to the notion that as much as internal development is where the Indians hope to improve in their run production from the lineup, this listing of effectiveness from RHP that figure into 2011 (outside of CF Perez) get back to the Indians should be looking to add a RH arm to their bullpen. Is a guy like that Trevor Hoffman (who the Brewers declined an option for in 2011) or a player like Koji Uehara, formerly of the Orioles, [who will probably be available](#) ?

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Those are the types of questions that start to emerge as we hit the Winter for Indians' baseball. As the rest of the league (or most of it) is locked up in decisions on their own FA and adding FA, the Indians are probably going to let the dust settle and make their moves accordingly. Most of their "moves" (assuming there are any) will be under-the-radar, underwhelming lottery tickets as the development of the team will be tied to the improvement of the offensive players that underperformed last year and finding the right mix of arms (both internally and via additions) to maximize effectiveness while, frankly, minimizing cost and risk.