

## Zippering Into the Future

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

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Throughout the off-season, the idea of “internal improvement” will become the phrase most often uttered at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario, as the Indians are unlikely to delve too deeply (or at all) into the FA market and with the trade market being the only likely avenue in terms of adding talent from outside of the organization. While some dreamed of a return by Westbrook (officially dashed, thanks to [2 guaranteed years and \\$16.5M guaranteed from the Cardinals](#)), the reality of the off-season is that the Indians will be looking for some ancillary pieces to augment what they already have in place.

In terms of what they already have in place, the Indians are quick to point to Choo, Santana and C. Perez, the (assumed) return of Sizemore, the continued recovery of Hafner and Carmona, and (most importantly) the opportunity for young players to adapt and mature at the MLB level. That last point, of course, is where the Indians hope to see the most improvement as the young players that they have acquired over the years (Santana, LaPorta, Brantley, Donald, Carrasco, Masterson, Talbot, Marson, and Perez) had varying degrees of success and failure in 2010.

While it's nice to dream on Carrasco's September, Talbot's first half, Brantley's second half, Santana's June, Perez's dominance as the closer, or the adjustments that Masterson seemed to make as the season wore on, the reality of the 2011 Tribe is that they remain a young and

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unproven team, as much as we'd all like to predict the best-case scenario happening for each player...and that best-case scenario happening right now.

With that in mind, perhaps it is instructive to look at the first of the [2011 Projections](#) that has been released, this one from The Baseball Think Factory, in projections that are known as ZiPS projections. ZiPS is a computer-based projection for performance that BTF runs for every team in MLB in an attempt to project performance for each individual player and, as a result, each team.

While some are more than a little hesitant to allow computers to go all [SkyNet](#) on them in terms of how they watch and enjoy baseball, let's consider this a fun little foray into what could be for 2011. Before we look forward however, maybe we should look back to see how the [2010 Tribe Projections from ZiPS](#) compared to actual [2010 production from members of the Indians](#)

Since all of this can start to feel like you're entering into some calculus class (and for the purposes of sanity), I'm just using the [OPS+](#) and [ERA+](#) numbers as posting triple slash lines and K/BB numbers for all of these guys is akin to lunacy and because OPS+ and ERA+ are a way to get to the quick and dirty projections and production for every player without devolving into crunching numbers that are, frankly, over my head.

Again, for my own sanity, I'm limiting this comparison to guys with 175 or more PA and 40 or more IP and am including total year OPS+ totals for players that split time between two teams and only for players that were included in last year's projections, which means no Bryanan, Kearns, Duncan, or Nix. So, with all of those "ground rules" finally out there, let's see how the ZiPS 2010 projections compared to the Real 2010 Production for the Indians:

### **2010 Real Production vs. 2010 ZiPS Projections – Position Players**

Choo (Real) – 148 OPS+

Choo (ZiPS) – 121 OPS+



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Santana (Real) – 144 OPS+  
Santana (ZiPS) – 105 OPS+

Hafner (Real) – 131 OPS+  
Hafner (ZiPS) – 114 OPS+

Peralta (Real) – 94 OPS+  
Peralta (ZiPS) – 96 OPS+

Donald (Real) – 94 OPS+  
Donald (ZiPS) – 69 OPS+

Cabrera (Real) – 90 OPS+  
Cabrera (ZiPS) – 97 OPS+

Marte (Real) – 90 OPS+  
Marte (ZiPS) – 90 OPS+

LaPorta (Real) – 88 OPS+  
LaPorta (ZiPS) – 104 OPS+

Crowe (Real) – 79 OPS+  
Crowe (ZiPS) – 74 OPS+

Brantley (Real) – 76 OPS+  
Brantley (ZiPS) – 88 OPS+

Marson (Real) – 59 OPS+  
Marson (ZiPS) – 77 OPS+

Valbuena (Real) – 51 OPS+  
Valbuena (ZiPS) – 85 OPS+

Looking at those projections and actual production falls in line how the expectations for the players resulted in some pleasant surprises (Choo, Santana, Hafner, and, to a lesser extent, Donald), some major disappointments (LaPorta, Marson, Valbuena, and Brantley) and some players whose performance was pretty much on par with the projections (Cabrera, Marte, and Crowe) as poor as those projections may have been. By the way, Sizemore doesn't appear on the list (despite having the highest projected OPS+ on BTF's list at 122 OPS+) because he had only 140 PA

Now, with all of those numbers fresh in your eyes and in an easy-to-scroll-to position, here's how ZiPS sees the OPS+ for the players that figure in most obviously for the 2011 Tribe:

### **2011 ZiPS Projections – Position Players**

Choo – 131 OPS+  
Santana – 120 OPS+

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Sizemore – 115 OPS+

Hafner – 109 OPS+

LaPorta – 105 OPS+

Cabrera – 99 OPS+

Brantley – 96 OPS+

Donald – 88 OPS+

Nix – 84 OPS+

With the caveat that we all thought the offense would be pretty good last year and simply wasn't, that's a decent looking offense with Choo and Santana doing most of the heavy lifting and nearly every player on this list has higher projected numbers than ZiPS predicted for them last year.

Past that nine, the guys that spent significant time with the parent club this past year, with the majority of these players look rather underwhelming, even as depth or bench options:

Duncan – 97 OPS+

Valbuena – 85 OPS+

Marson – 83 OPS+

Crowe – 79 OPS+

After what would be assumed to be the starting 9 and the players that are most likely to come to Spring Training with a chance to make a club in some capacity, you have players that may or may not be with the team, either because they may be moved or because they may spend most (or part) of the year in the Minors:

Weglarz – 96 OPS+

Brown – 95 OPS+

Kipnis – 94 OPS+

Phelps – 92 OPS+

Rodriguez – 91 OPS+

Carrera – 85 OPS+

The Chiz – 85 OPS+

Is it surprising to anyone else that Weglarz projects with a higher OPS+ than Brown despite the difference in age and advancement?

Yeah, me neither...

Although it is interesting that both Kipnis, Phelps, and even Rodriguez project higher than Donald, that both Phelps, The Chiz, and Rodriguez project better than Nix and that Ezequiel Carrera projects with a better OPS+ than Crowe. If the Indians are looking to make improvements to what look to be some weaknesses in their lineup and on their bench, internal options may not be far off.

If you're looking for projections that look positive, a 96 OPS+ for Brantley would be a HUGE improvement and the idea that Choo and Santana would be elite offensive players would certainly make the 2011 offense much more potent. On the flip side, a projected OPS+ of 105 for Matt LaPorta, as a 26-year-old 1B would just solidify LaPorta as a bust and as a player who proved to be not much of an upgrade over Ryan Garko.

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If there are more positives to be taken than negatives – and not to let the air out of anyone's balloons (assuming someone is blowing up balloons) – let's move over to the pitching staffs. Starting off, we'll take a quick look at what ZiPS projected for the 2010 Indians' pitching staff, compared to how the individual players actually fared, again, using composite numbers for players that spent time with two teams in 2010:

### 2010 Real Production vs. 2010 ZiPS Projections – Starters

Carmona (Real) – 102 ERA+

Carmona (ZiPS) – 89 ERA+



Carrasco (Real) – 101 ERA+

Carrasco (ZiPS) – 76 ERA+

Westbrook (Real) – 92 ERA+

Westbrook (ZiPS) – 96 ERA+

Talbot (Real) – 88 ERA+

Talbot (ZiPS) – 84 ERA+

Laffey (Real) – 86 ERA+

Laffey (ZiPS) – 95 ERA+

Gomez (Real) – 83 ERA+

Gomez (ZiPS) – 72 ERA+

Masterson (Real) – 82 ERA+

Masterson (ZiPS) – 101 ERA+

Huff (Real) – 62 ERA+

Huff (ZiPS) – 86 ERA+

You'll notice that Josh Tomlin (Real ERA+ of 85) does not appear as ZiPS excluded him last year because...well, who would have thought that Josh Tomlin would have started as many games as he did when 2010 started.

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As for the projections, ZiPS really thought very little of the Tribe rotation going into last year (and just wait for the projections for 2011), with Masterson being projected to be the only starter with an ERA+ over 100 (which didn't happen) and while Carmona and Carrasco didn't finish well above 100, they did outpace their projections pretty significantly. Ultimately, some of that ZiPS pessimism ended up being overstated (Carmona, Carrasco, and Gomez), some of it ended up being spot-on (Talbot, Westbrook), and some of the projections wildly overshoot the actual performance of a particular pitcher (Masterson, Huff, and Laffey)...which sounds about right in terms of expectations versus reality.

As for the 2011 Projections, let's just say that the piece actually includes a tongue-in-cheek warning before looking at the projections because...well, let's just look at the projections:

### **2011 ZiPS Projections – Starters**

Masterson – 97 ERA+

Carmona – 93 ERA+

Talbot – 89 ERA+

Carrasco – 87 ERA+

Laffey – 82 ERA+

Tomlin – 81 ERA+

Huff – 76 ERA+

Gomez – 75 ERA+

Before everyone has to remove their shoelaces (as per instructions of the warden) after seeing those projections, let's remember what last year's projections looked like, as they were just as gory with Masterson at the top of last year's list as well. While the actual results of the 2010 starting rotation did nothing to evoke memories of the 1954 Tribe staff, Carmona and Carrasco (most notably) SIGNIFICANTLY outperformed their projections last year and, at first glance, if there were to be two pitchers to do it again on this list, those two would be my picks.

Interesting how those projections for Tomlin, Huff, and Gomez (thought to be the troika that will be given the first shot at that 5th spot) are all below Aaron Laffey and even JERRY SOWERS (ZiPS ERA+ of 83), even if just by a little bit. The trio's projections are actually below those of Alex White (ZiPS ERA+ of 81), who may emerge at some point to the parent club in 2011, but certainly not to begin the season.

If the perspective of looking last year was enough to convince you to keep reading and you're not running for the Pepto for the nausea caused by those 2011 projections for the rotation, let's cast our eye out to the bullpen, starting again by comparing last year's projections to real production:

### **2010 Real Production vs. 2010 ZiPS Projections – Relievers**

C. Perez (Real) – 226 ERA+

C. Perez (ZiPS) – 116 ERA+

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