

Hot Stove- Hot Corner Series #2

Written by {ga=stevebuffum}

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You can't spell "Blake" without a K and an E, and then all you're left with is "bla."
-- me, taking the [Cheapest Shot Imaginable](#) for comic effect, 2008

If there was ever a good case study for Confirmation Bias, it would have to be Casey Blake. Sure, there have been other memes over the years, but few players elicited the raw, naked emotion that Blake did in the middle years of his stint with the Tribe. Blake appeared to be the kind of "free flyer" (that is, a flyer who was free, not some kind of wacky hippie) in the vein of Shelley Duncan or Paul Sorrento when he arrived in 2003, and surprisingly played virtually every day as a 29-year-old rookie in 2003. He didn't hit very well (.257/.312/.411), but it was his rookie season, and he'd hit well in the PCL the previous three seasons:

2000: .317/.406/.529 (342 PA)
2001: .309/.376/.485, 10 HR in 417 PA
2002: .309/.383/.492, 19 HR in 546 PA

Sure enough, 2004 was a bit of a breakout season for Blake, in which he hit a robust .271/.354/.486 with 28 homers. Oddly enough, he played kind of lousy defense at 3B after playing well as a "freshman," but that seemed like a fine tradeoff. Without going into a long story:

2003: .257/.312/.411, 17 HR, 2.2 UZR/150 at 3B (90 wOBA+)
2004: .271/.354/.486, 28 HR, -6.1 UZR/150 at 3B, (120)
2005: .241/.308/.438, 23 HR, 2.9 UZR/150 at 3B, (97)
2006: .282/.356/.479, 19 HR, played RF (119)

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2007: .270/.339/.437, 18 HR, -5.9 UZR/150 at 3B (105)

2008: .274/.345/.463, 21 HR, -4.9 UZR/150 at 3B (114) (.289/.365/.465 as an Indian)

So, ups and downs to be sure, but that's a pretty valuable player, especially in even-numbered seasons. 20-homer power, an ISO close to .200, a decent number of walks to keep the OBP in the .350 range, kinda clunky at third but made up for it with sheer athleticism, versatile enough to be used at 3B, 1B, and RF without much of a seam. Was it worth putting up with the growing pains of 2003 (a bad team, to be sure) to get the 2004, 2006, 2008, and Carlos Santana out of Casey Blake? You'd have to say that was a pretty sound investment.

Here's the problem with Blake: perception is reality. Okay, obviously it's not, but that's kind of the point of the bromide: what you think you've seen colors what you believe you see now. And Blake produced these numbers in the middle of his run:

2005: RISP .171/.243/.248, ROB .192/.250/.308

2006: RISP .261/.360/.450, ROB .242/.329/.379

2007: RISP .190/.271/.294, ROB .227/.289/.344

There are other ways to cut the data that make Blake look even worse, but these were easy to find and speak to the general PERCEPTION of Cleveland fans during The Good Stretch (the time in the recent past when we didn't SUCK): Casey Blake was a rally-killer who never got a hit with a runner in scoring position.

Looking at 2006, you can see this is not entirely *true*, insofar as that it is outright *false*. But I'll tell you, as a guy who watched every game to write game recaps, it sure FELT true. Ferd Cabrera would walk a guy, Really Big Bob Wickman would put runners on base, Jhonny Peralta would wave at an empty-umpph slider in the dirt low and away, and Casey Blake would fail with runners in scoring position. Death, taxes, and fail: the Triad of Truth for Cleveland fans.

Anyway, Cleveland fans weren't very fair to Casey Blake, who was a valuable player for a number of years. One reason for this was because he could use his freakish athleticism to play multiple positions (even spending a few innings here and there at both middle infield positions: Blake was considered a serious option to play 2B before a more-permanent solution was found). A second reason was because he had significant power, enough to hold up a mediocre glove. A third reason is because his chin was plainly awesome. (Actually, that might be the first reason.)

(The conspiracy theorists amongst the Indians fans of the time was that Eric Wedge gave Casey Blake more playing time than he deserved because they both went to Wichita State. While Wedge did exhibit a tendency to stick with players longer than I might have liked, I don't think this has much merit. The fact that Corey Smiff and Wes Hodges wielded Industrial Strength Frying Pans was likely more influential.)

Was that too much setup? Yeah, that was probably too much setup. No sense crying about it now. I don't edit.

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Where does this leave Jayson Nix?

Well, one thing I've proven over the years is that I'm not actually any good at predicting which sleeper players are going to be awesome and which will disappear without a trace. This is evidenced by the fact that Ferd Cabrera is, in fact, NOT the Closer of the Future and that Paul Rigdon was, in fact, no good at all. There are many examples of my inability to identify breakout players littered throughout cyberspace. One thing I **am** pretty decent at, though, is determining what and why the Indians front office does things. For example, I wrote this season that I thought that we didn't grab Nix off the waiver wire to play SECOND base, but rather that he would be insurance for dealing Peralta and would likely play THIRD base, which is largely what happened. Of course, Nix also played LF and RF and 2B and SS and even DH, so it's not like he was locked in at 3B. He got more reps at 3B than anywhere else, though.

Does Nix hit well enough to play 3B? Well, yes and no. Yes, compared to other Cleveland Indian third baseman, Nix was Mike F*&#ing Schmidt. No, compared to the league as a whole, Jayson Nix was not a good hitter.

Out of curiosity, let's look at Nix' numbers in the PCL to compare to Blake's:

2006: .251/.317/.313, 2 HR

2007: .292/.342/.451, 11 HR

2008: .303/.373/.591, 17 HR

The difference here is that Blake's PCL seasons were as a 26 through 28 year old, while Nix' are at ages 23, 24, and 25. Sure, PCL power numbers are suspect, and Colorado Springs is a better home park than Edmonton, but this isn't apples to oranges here, although it may be more of a Jonagold to Granny Smith or something.

And then Nix hit the ground running in the majors:

2009: .224/.308/.408, 12 HR in 290 PA

2010: .224/.281/.396, 14 HR in 363 PA (.234/.283/.422 and 13 in 306 as an Indian)

Okay, well, maybe Nix more just "hit the ground" and bypassed the "running" part.

But Nix is not FUNDAMENTALLY a different kind of player from Blake. His ISO of .184 and .172 (.188 as an Indian) is largely in line with Blake's, or at least 90% thereof. He strikes out kind of a lot, but he's swinging for distance. He can play lots of positions.

The two real areas of concern, sadly, are probably deal-breakers for Nix:

- 1) He doesn't draw enough walks to boost his OBP: even if he hit .260, his OBP would be poor at approximately .320.
- 2) He is a terrible, terrible, terrible, terrible third baseman.

Well, now, wait a minute: am I being fair to Nix here? Probably not: he's actually been a pretty

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GOOD *second* baseman in his career. But the problem is that he has poor hands and poor accuracy on longer throws: these can be mitigated at second base where you have more time to react, more time to gather, and a shorter throw. At third, you have NONE of these luxuries, and Nix takes disadvantage of all three to produce some sickeningly-bad numbers at third. Yes, it's a small sample. True, he has not played a lot of 3B in his career. Granted, he could work on these skills and build himself to adequacy.

No, this isn't very likely.

The better question is, at what point can you consider the "Growing Pains" section of Jayson Nix' career to have been closed? Is it after 653 major-league plate appearances over two seasons? Blake had about that number in 2003 alone. Is it after one whole year of starting, every day, SOMEWHERE if not necessarily 3B, and seeing signs of development? Do you owe it to yourself to give 2011 to Jayson Nix as The Ol' College Try before closing the book on a guy with a career major-league OBP of .288? Couldn't you have argued the same thing for Andy Marte if you thought that way? Marte, at least, could actually play third base. He wasn't the advertised "plus defender" as far as the Own Eyes Test went, but he was certainly more natural there than Jayson Nix has been. And Marte just got the proverbial wazoo (although it's not inconceivable that he stays in the Cleveland system, I suppose ... why he'd want to stay in an organization that has destroyed his value is well beyond my ken). Is it, in fact, Third Base or Bust for Jayson Nix?

I would be ... well, not shocked, I guess, but I'll be awfully surprised if Jayson Nix isn't on the Opening Day roster. Consider this: for Nix NOT to make the roster, the Indians would have to decide that:

- 1) There are two players better-suited to playing 3B than Nix
- 2) There are two players better-suited to playing 2B than Nix
- 3) There are two players better-suited to playing LF than Nix

Now, this could all be the same player. It could be that the Brain Trust decides that Donald is the 2B, Cord Phelps is the 3B, and Luis Valbuena is the backup to both of them, while someone else backs up the left fielder. This would be an incredibly *atrocious* decision, but it is technically *possible*. But my bet is that the only way there are two third-sackers better than Nix is if Chisenhall and Phelps play out of their MINDS in the Spring ... and by all reports, Phelps is a very bad third baseman in his own right. Donald and Phelps (or Kipnis: my money is on Kipnis starting the year in the minors come hell or high water man 2B, but I don't see anyone standing in the way at backup 3B, if even someone ekes ahead of Nix as the starter. And the fact that Nix can play left ... and right ... and hit right-handed on a team starting three left-handed OF ... well, that player is going to be on the roster.

It remains to be seen if Casey Blake was the lightning in the proverbial bottle and Jayson Nix is more pyrite in a tin can, but I'm pretty sure that the front office looks at Jayson Nix, squints a little, and says, "Yeah ... I can see it."