

Hot Stove- Hot Corner Series #8

Written by {ga=stevebuffum}

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Look, someone who roots for a team in the A.L. Central should probably not be throwing Wasteland Rocks™ at another Division. I understand this. There are more good teams in the N.L. Central (and a higher proportion thereof) than in the A.L. Central. The Indians' Division features one truly good team (Minnesota), two average-but-flawed teams in Chicago and Detroit, and two crummy teams in Cleveland and Kansas City. Of course, KC's farm system looks like it will produce a pretty good team in a couple-three years, Cleveland may join them, and Chicago and Detroit have innovative general managers, but in 2010, it wasn't a very good Division top-to-bottom.

In the N.L. Central, Cincinnati won the crown with a good young team that looks to stay in contention for the foreseeable future (in baseball, this is two years), and St. Louis still has the finest player on the planet and some excellent pitching when healthy. Chicago and Milwaukee have what chicken magnates one termed "pieces-parts," while Pittsburgh and Houston ... well ... look, let's not mince words. They stink. Those are bad baseball teams. Projecting the next playoff run by the Pirates or Astros is truly an exercise in "asteroid hits Earth" probability theories. Still, the N.L. Central has two good teams making up 33% of the Division, while we have one good team making up 20%. Of course, you could argue that St. Louis isn't REALLY an order of magnitude better than the Sox or Tigs, or that the N.L. is a Silly Place from the start, but the point remains: my Division is bad, so who am I to complain about the quality of someone else's?

I dunno ... a sentient biped?

The third base situations around the N.L. Central fall into four basic categories: the Steady Veteran, the Guy They Wish Would Get Out of the Way, the Yoot With Potential, and My God, What Have I Done?

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Chicago Cubs: Get Out of the Way!

Aramis Ramirez was once a premier third baseman with excellent defense and a powerful bat. I can't really speak to the defense, but the man hit .241/.294/.452 last season. In Wrigley. Facing Pittsburgh and Houston pitching. Two ninety four. Hey, an ISO of .211 is quite good indeed. Ramirez might have a bounceback season: he's only 32. But more importantly, he's making umpty-bazillion dollars in 2011 and isn't going anywhere.

Backing him up is Jeff Baker, who hit .272/.326/.413 and split time as the backup utility guy mostly between 3B and 2B, which appears to be more of a meme than I thought before I started the project. He appears to be a very good defensive second baseman. He appears to be an animated bag of suet as a third baseman. I can hardly imagine a more lateral move for the Tribe.

Now, the Cubs have a 25-year-old in AAA named Marquez Smith: Smith does not appear to be a polished third baseman (11 E in 91 G), but he hit a tasty .314/.384/.574 in 303 AB with 17 HR and 44 extra-base hits. Ordinarily, I would say that Smith would be untouchable as the likely replacement for Ramirez, but the Cubs also have super-high-draft-pick Josh Vitters at AA. Sadly, Vitters hit .223/.292/.383 there as a 20-year-old (in baseball terms: he turned 21 in August) and apparently plays third base in the manner of Andy Kaufman (absurd, occasionally hilarious, usually awkward). So while I might have said that Smith is simply a placeholder for Vitters, it may actually be that Vitters is Corey Smiff and that's quite enough of that. Marquez Smith looks like he'd be an upgrade, though, even after taking the air out of his PCL numbers.

Cincinnati: Veteran Presence in Action

I thought the Reds were RIDICULOUS for trading for Scott Rolen. I mean just LUDICROUS. I badly misjudged both Rolen and the Reds' closeness to being competitive, so huzzahs all around for the Reds' front office for being smarter than I was. Anyway, Rolen is a fine contributor when healthy, which is of course kind of the point. Rolen was fantastic this season when he played in 133 games. 112 in 2007 and 115 in 2008, not so much. 35-year-old third basemen with a history of back trouble are not exactly Smart Money Bets. Still, Rolen is the third baseman, and the Reds back him up with Paul Janish (who hits like a shortstop, because he's a shortstop) and Juan Francisco. Francisco can give the ball a ride (.286/.325/.565 in AAA,

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although .273/.322/.382 in the bigs), but his plate discipline is flat-out terrible. He also made 13 errors in 77 AAA games. Consider this: his AAA hitting numbers, as amazing as they look, are essentially the same as Wlad Balentien's. (Amongst Francisco, Balentien, and Johnny Freaking Gomes, this is a organization that puts a premium on mashing and headless-chicken defense.)

Past Francisco, who looks like a terrible risk, you have Mike Costanzo hitting .270/.349/.458 in AA, making 14 E in 88 G. So they have that going for them, which is nice.

Houston: Yoot with Potential

Houston's big prospect in AAA was Chris Johnson, who is now their major-league third baseman. They literally have no one below Johnson who is more intriguing than a box of oat bran. Houston is going to be a bad, bad, bad, bad, bad team for a long, long, long, long, long time.

Milwaukee: Yoot with Potential

Casey McGehee: is he for real? He better be, because the backups are Mat Gamel and Joe Inglett.

Let us pause here for a moment to rejoice in memories of Joltless Joe Inglett.

All right, we're done. Gamel was going to be Great Stuff, until he wasn't. He can still hit to some degree (.309/.387/.511 in AAA with 13 homers in 82 games and a 38:64 BB:K ratio), but has struggled at the major-league level (.242/.338/.422 in 128 AB was a high-water mark, and featured an unfathomable 54 Ks). But mostly, Gamel is not really a third baseman. He stands near third base. He occasionally catches balls hit near third base. He cannot actually play third base. He is on the Ryan Braun career path, except without the ability to hit major-league pitching yet (he backs up Braun in LF). He made 16 E in 82 G at AAA. I would have been excited by the prospect of acquiring Mat Gamel a year or two ago, and now ... now I am less excited.

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Let me say this about the other third basemen in the Milwaukee system: no.

Pittsburgh: Yoot with Potential

Pedro Alvarez and Neil Walker both played some third in the minors this year. Now Alvarez plays 3B and Walker plays 2B and they're more-or-less ensconced for the hyper-foreseeable future. Behind them were Andy LaRoche and Delwyn Young. They were released this month. This is because they are no good at baseball.

Quick: can you name the largest desert in the world? Some might say the Sahara, which is quite big indeed, but it is not the largest. Some may remember the Gobi, in which the high winds buffet you so hard with the yellowish sand that it actually dyes your skin, but no, that is not the largest either. It's a bit of a trick question, because most think of deserts as hot, but the technical definition is "dry," not "hot." The continent of Antarctica receives virtually no precipitation and thus is the largest desert in the world.

Pittsburgh's third-base prospects behind Alvarez and Walker fall between the Gobi and the Sahara.

St. Louis: My God, What Have I Done?!

Here is the St. Louis third base depth chart, according to ESPN:

Daniel Descalso

Pedro Feliz

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Tyler Greene

Allen Craig

Of these, Descalso and Craig were the only ones to post an OBP over .300 ... and each was in the Tyner Zone (for all practical purposes, OBP = SLG for both players). Craig's .246/.298/.412 line looks very Nixian ... and he's actually a 1B/LF. I don't know where David Freese fits into this. This is a very, very bad set of options.

In AAA they have a guy who hit .285/.410/.436 but made 19 errors in 139 games. This might actually seem acceptable until you realize it's Ruben Freaking Gotay, and makes you question everyone's AAA numbers immediately. He had a decent-enough 2007 in the bigs, but was awful in 2008 and hasn't been back, largely because of an inflammation of Being Ruben Gotay.

Matt Carpenter looked good in AA, making 8 E in 105 G and hitting .316/.412/.487 with 12 homers. He is 25. Andrew Brown made 8 E in 98 G, meaning either the AA affiliate played 203 games last season or these guys played different positions. (For what it's worth, Baseball Prospectus lists Brown as a 1B: I assume he's learning third because he will never, ever play first base for the St. Louis Cardinals.) Brown hit .291/.371/.526 with 22 homers, but turned 26 in September. Neither was considered good enough to move to AAA to unseat Ruben Gotay. I assume these are the guys who take over 3B when Descalso Et Al fail.

Summing up then:

Guy who I'd actually try hard to get: Marquez Smith

Former hotshot prospects I'm no longer excited by: Mat Gamel, Josh Vitters

Guys who frighten small children: Juan Francisco, Daniel Descalso, Allen Craig, Tyler Greene

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Guys who I'd call about but need my scouts to evaluate: Matt Carpenter, Andrew Brown