

## Stranded at Third Base

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Thursday, January 27 2011 3:00 AM - Last Updated Saturday, January 29 2011 7:32 AM

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As we move ever so slowly closer to pitchers and catchers reporting (while ignoring [odd leaps of logic on these Interwebs](#)), there is one position that continues to stick in my head as the 3B situation has inexplicably become cloudier than it was when the 2010 season ended and it was as clear as mud back then. So as much as I'd like to focus on the fact that I think that Carlos Santana is going to provide a major lift to the Indians' offense or that Carmona, Masterson, and Carrasco are going to provide some stabilization to a rotation badly in need of it in 2011, and realizing that more e-ink has been spilled on the Tribe 3B this off-season, the stunning realization persists that the Indians are exactly where they were when the off-season started (and perhaps worse off and more confused)...all of which unfortunately leaves us all unable to get past 3B.

Of course, getting past 3B is an issue that many men deal with at some point in their lives, but the new wrinkle comes in the ([now-not-so-new](#)) news that the Indians are now considering moving Jason Donald to 3B in an attempt to find a stop-gap at the Hot Corner. Since the assumption most of the off-season was that Donald would be the 2B in Cleveland until Kipnis forced his way onto the roster, the way that 3B is somehow all wrapped up with 2B, let's (inexplicably) start at 2B as that is (inexplicably) how the Indians seem to be approaching the 3B situation.

Everyone have their bases straight here...yeah, me neither.

Regardless, the Indians have three middle infielders in Jayson Nix (a 2B), Jason Donald (primarily a SS throughout his MiLB career), and Cord Phelps (a 2B) as the most obvious options to play 3B in 2011. Given that the Indians have summarily dismissed Goedert as an option (and I'll get to that dismissal) and Lonnie Chisenhall ([ranked recently as the #36 overall prospect by MLB.com](#)) is going to start the year in Columbus (I'll get to that as well), that trio of middle infielders join Minor League

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signing Jack Hannahan in a convoluted “derby” to determine who will be the 3B to start 2011 with the assumed starter at 2B being intrinsically tied to it.

While most of these options are unappealing to most as they wait around for The Chiz and Kipnis to ride in on white horses to rescue these two positions, let's take a step back and realize that Jason Donald is not that bad of a “placeholder” at either position, assuming some level of defensive proficiency can be reached. In his first exposure to MLB, Donald had an OPS+ of 94, meaning that he was below league average and while the “harrumph, harrumph” crowd gets their “harrumphs” ready, realize that there were only 19 2B/SS who were better than league average at the plate in 2010 with 30 teams still playing one of those two positions, or less than a third of the middle infielders in MLB posted offensive numbers that were better than league average.

Further attempting to provide some context, how about the fact that [Donald actually finished 27th of the 61 players](#) who played the majority of the season in the middle of the infield and who accumulated more than 300 plate appearances?

You know which middle infielders he outperformed at the plate in 2010?  
JJ Hardy, Orlando Hudson, Marco Scutaro, Reid Brignac, Derek Jeter, Asdrubal Cabrera, Jimmy Rollins, Gordon Beckham, Chone Figgins, and I could keep going if you'd like me too...

Is this to say that Donald is a long-term answer in the infield?  
Of course not, as the Lesson of Louie V (he of the OPS+ of 90 in 2009, followed by the OPS+ of 51 in 2010) applies here, but look at what Indians' 2B have put forth for the past 8 years, in terms of offensive production in the context of MLB:

2010: .624 OPS (29th of 30 MLB teams)  
2009: .704 OPS (22nd of 30 MLB teams)  
2008: .658 OPS (28th of 30 MLB teams)  
2007: .639 OPS (30th of 30 MLB teams)  
2006: .745 OPS (10th of 30 MLB teams)  
2005: .726 OPS (18th of 30 MLB teams)

Really, since Ronnie Belliard left after 2006, the Indians' 2B have peaked at a .704 OPS, good enough to nearly crack the production among the top 2/3 of MLB. In case you're wondering, [Bill James' projections has Donald posting an OPS of .714](#)  
and  
[ZiPS projects an OPS of .687 for Donald](#)

Look again at those numbers from 2B above and realize that Bill James' projection would be the best production out of 2B since 2006 and the moribund ZiPS projection would outpace the production of the Tribe 2B in 3 of the last 4 years!

Of course, a major factor in Donald playing at 2B in 2011 is a presumption that Donald will improve on this as a 2B when he looked like a fish out of water at the position for the parent

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club in 2010. That being said, here's a factor that might have played into that whole "fish out of water" thing for Donald as a 2B – he had played all of three games in the Minors at 2B prior to 2010!

And...now, the (not-so-new) news comes that he may be playing 3B?

Care to hazard a guess as to how many games has he played at 3B in the Minors in his career?

Again, three.

Certainly, Donald looked horrible in Cleveland at his "natural" position of SS last year filling in for an injured Cabrera, but most projections had Donald moving across the bag to 2B at some point in his development and career. While he may have struggled in his first taste there, the idea of adding another position for him to learn as he's attempting to adjust to MLB strikes me as odd. Maybe he does convert over to 3B smoother than...oh, I don't know NIX, but shouldn't there be more thought to this than simply a prolonged trial-and-error period, particularly in MLB?

Aren't there paid employees at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario who should have been able to reasonably project whether Donald would be better as a 2B or a 3B prior to last year, given the gaping holes at each position last off-season?

The idea that Nix would pick up 3B crashed and burned, perhaps prompting this suggestion to move Donald to 3B, to clear a spot for Nix at 2B (you know, the 27-year-old with the career .635 OPS when he joined the Tribe...because the White Sox cut him), but this is all getting too confusing to follow. Maybe Nix is the best defensive 2B and this is me talking out of both sides of my mouth on this subject as I've been driving the bandwagon to create the best infield defense behind a groundballing staff as best possible, but the whole 2B/3B thing to start the year feels too much like the Indians trying to fit square pegs in round holes.



As a quick aside here, did anyone know that Jason Donald and Jayson Nix joined Matt MaTola and Lou Marson on [the 2008 Olympic roster in Beijing](#) ?

Weird...

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Nevertheless, there seems to be the idea that any configuration would be a short-term situation with Kipnis and The Chiz supposedly lined up for promotions at some point in the year. But is anyone else a little uncomfortable with how much they're counting on those two (and particularly The Chiz to be the salvation at 3B)...perhaps a little too much?

After an off-season of inactivity and a "new" plan to slot Donald over to 3B, it is stunning how much this team is simply assuming that The Chiz is going to come and rescue 3B. The assumption that has proclaimed Lonnie as "The Answer" at 3B is a corner that they've painted themselves into, with the first coat being laid back when The Chiz was still in Kinston.

There really is no "Plan B" past putting The Chiz at 3B and, in the context of the Indians dismissing Goedert as an option at 3B (and really that's what [this Pluto piece does](#)), how about Ross Atkins proclaiming that "to play third in the big leagues, you are talking about an .800 OPS along with playing a demanding defensive position."

Hold on there...I understand "perfect world production" as much as the next guy, but let's remember what we've been dealing with here in Cleveland at 3B before you make that proclamation. Not to wear out the gears on the silver DeLorean, but the Indians' 3B OPS for the past decade has been as follows:

2010: .700 OPS (22nd of 30 MLB teams)  
2009: .719 OPS (19th of 30 MLB teams)  
2008: .703 OPS (25th of 30 MLB teams)  
2007: .728 OPS (21st of 30 MLB teams)  
2006: .688 OPS (27th of 30 MLB teams)  
2005: .630 OPS (30th of 30 MLB teams)  
2004: .815 OPS (13th of 30 MLB teams)  
2003: .729 OPS (17th of 30 MLB teams)  
2002: .636 OPS (29th of 30 MLB teams)  
2001: .729 OPS (21st of 30 MLB teams)

So, for Atkins to assert that "to play third in the big leagues, you are talking about an .800 OPS along with playing a demanding defensive position" is all well and good as a criteria, but it comes off as arrogant in the way the quote is presented, as a dismissal of Goedert. Maybe Goedert's glove is shaped like a frying pan, but in the context of what we've seen from 3B in the last decade (when the Tribe 3B surpassed an .800 OPS once and never came within 71 points of it in the other 9 years) and particularly with that 2010 number...yeah, that kind of rings hollow as a statement from anyone associated with the Indians in dismissing anyone as a candidate to play 3B.

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