

Less Sizemore

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

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While the Indians pad their lead in the AL Central and as the Royals sink like a stone in the division, the big news to hit the roster front this week came when Grady Sizemore's bone bruise landed him on the 15-day DL. While the move was retroactive and Sizemore can return on May 27th (which is next Friday), the implications of the injury and the DL stint are noteworthy in terms of the team as it stands without Sizemore and the way it figures to look upon his return.

If you'll remember, Sizemore's blazing return prompted intimations that Superman had emerged once more from the phone booth to save fair Cleveland and the fact that Grady is currently tied for the team lead in HR and 2B while playing in basically $\frac{1}{2}$ of the games is a testament to how effective he was (until recently) upon his return. Of course, the Indians marked their first game with Grady on the DL by putting a 19 on the board in KC and following that up with another victory in the City of Fountains by exploding again on the KC pitching staff. Who needs Grady, right?

Well...not really, as the performances of the offense over the last two nights are largely attributable to guys named Davies, Mazzaro, O'Sullivan throwing from 60' 6" instead of players with Price, Shields, Weaver, Haren, Cahill, and Anderson on the back of their jerseys. As much as I'd like to assert that the Indians will be fine without Sizemore (19-1 win or not), all those words written about the Indians' "found" superstar as they pertained to Grady when he was bashing XBH (he had 16 extra-base hits in 84 plate appearances) all over the yard still apply.

Yes, the youngsters are taking major strides (most notably Brantley, LaPorta, and a re-emerging Axe Man on the offensive side), but if the Indians are going to stick around in the AL Central this year, some of the burden is going to have to be shouldered by their veterans that have a track record of success – most obviously Choo (he of the OPS below...wait for it...Orlando Cabrera), Hafner (who has been "shouldering" the load), and Sizemore, who (if

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you're into this kind of thing) [leads the Indians in WAR and is 16th in the AL](#) , despite playing ½ of the games of most of the other regulars around the league in a metric in which time on the field plays a major role.

Of course, the question remaining for Sizemore isn't whether he was healthy when he returned a month ago, it's whether he's going to be healthy a week from now. While the Indians' reportage of injuries has certainly not bought them any benefits of doubt, this move to the DL for Grady (assuming it is nothing more than a bone bruise) reeks of the idea that the Indians almost need to save Sizemore from himself as he gets "healthy" from microfracture, because he's not going to take his foot off of the accelerator on his own. Grady is Grady – on the basepaths and in the field – and by shelving him for this stint gives a glimpse as to how far the Indians are willing to go to protect the player that is still likely their best, when healthy.

That's the whole point of this "protection" and "precaution" path with Sizemore as the Indians sticking around the AL Central race gets a lot easier to see contention with him (again, 19-1 win or not) and maximizing his health and his ability to be on the field is what the focus should be. Truthfully, this DL stint is likely a reminder of the plan to ease Sizemore back into playing everyday. That may seem obvious, but there were only two games that Sizemore didn't start from the time he came off of the DL until his injury, an 18-game stretch.

Perhaps the Indians will pull back on the reins with Sizemore when he returns as he did show some signs of fatigue just prior to the injury as in the 8 games leading up to the injury, Sizemore had posted a .603 OPS with 10 K in those 8 games. Some of that was a result of facing the aforementioned sextet of elite pitchers from the Rays, A's, and Angels, but it is worth remembering that Grady may need more than the occasional day off (assuming he returns healthy) to maximize his effectiveness through the end of the season. If the Indians are going to stay in this AL Central race "through the end of the season", having a healthy Sizemore contributing (even if it isn't every single game) is tantamount to carrying the offensive load into the Fall.



Certainly, you could imagine that the Indians wanted to give Sizemore more days off in the last month but were reticent to do so because of the struggles of his obvious replacement on the roster at the time – Austin Kearns. In case you were wondering, Kearns' .450 OPS ranks 327th among the 333 MLB players who have accumulated 50 plate appearances on the year

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(although he is ahead of Shoppach) and the performance of Kearns to date (and the manner in which the Indians have used Travis Buck since being recalled from Columbus) seem to point to the idea that Kearns left holding the short straw when Grady does return from the DL, in terms of roster turnover.

Lest you prepare your “he’s RH” or “he was one of the only FA signings of the off-season” arguments, realize that since the Tribe traded Kearns last year, here’s his line over 175 PA: .210 BA / .314 OBP / .283 SLG / .597 OPS with 7 extra base hits in those 175 PA

If you figure in that in the two years prior to initially joining the Indians in 2010 he posted this line - .209 BA / .320 OBP / .312 SLG / .633 OPS with 28 extra base hits in 568 PA - with the Nats, you realize that the performance that Kearns put forth in Cleveland last year may be the aberration and that Kearns may have been available as a Minor League FA last off-season for a reason. That’s not to discount the production that Kearns contributed last year in Cleveland (when the Tribe was badly in need of it), but the time is coming near in which the Indians thank Austin Kearns for netting them Zach McAllister and for his contributions as an Indian, wish him the best while keeping those paychecks en route to him, and simply move on

If Kearns does, in fact, draw that “short straw”, it would mean that Travis Buck sticks around on the 40-man roster and, if you’re still thinking about that “RH bat” idea, remember that Shelley Duncan has usurped Kearns as the RH bat off of the bench (who can play OF...if only nominally) and that Buck is a superior defensive OF to Kearns. So, if Kearns isn’t the first RH OF option off the bench and isn’t the best defensive OF option off of the bench, what purpose is he serving on the roster?

Maybe the idea exists to get Buck consistent plate appearances in Columbus, but if you go back to the idea that Sizemore is going to need periodic days off and realize that the rest of the Indians bench is decidedly RH (Duncan, Marson, Everett), keeping Buck around – as a better short-term AND long-term option – is the best course of action. Going past that notion is to harken back to all of those warm-and-fuzzies that floated around Buck after ST, as a former top prospect in need of a change of scenery who is under club control through the 2014 season.

Buck, in the here-and-now, represents a likely upgrade over Kearns at the plate (unless he completely craters from now until next Friday) and certainly in the field when Sizemore needs to sit, offering the Indians more depth in 2011. Past that, the club control and the promise that Buck has shown suggests that Buck can perhaps represent another Indians’ reclamation project that is under club control longer than both Sizemore and Choo.

Regardless of what happens when Sizemore returns, his performance upon his return is going to provide a glimpse as to what might be expected from the Indians’ offense for the final four months of the season. Because while Mike Brantley has improved greatly and Choo figures to get on track eventually (and this is me crossing my fingers), the Indians’ offensive engine is purring when it’s fueled by the contributions of a healthy and effective Sizemore.

Whether a “healthy and effective” Sizemore returns in a couple of weeks has become a major topic to consider...again.