

## Tomahawks Hitting the Edges of the Roster

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Thursday, June 23 2011 9:29 PM - Last Updated Saturday, June 25 2011 10:16 AM

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As the Indians head off to the Left Coast for non-DH Interleague match-ups while much of the North Coast celebrates the fact that Yuengling will be available in October in Ohio (why it was not previously available is beyond me), my excitement comes from the fact that the (somewhat) long search for the Blonde Bombshell has finished with a happy ending. My odyssey took me to Rozi's in Lakewood (not sure why I didn't try there first or why I just don't go there more frequently, given their selection), where I found the Mother Lode of the Bombshell and loaded up. Just to make my trip all the more sweet, Rozi's carries Bell's Third Coast Beer, which I had been unable to locate (other than at the Winking Lizard) up to that point.

Regardless, the Bombshell was back where it belongs in my fridge on Wednesday and...what do you know, the Indians were able to salvage the series against the Rox. Perhaps this idea that the Bombshell holds some magical powers this year for the Tribe is not as far-fetched as it may seem to ANY rational person.

Nevertheless, while I'll attempt to do MY part (even with the team playing some late games in the coming week) with the Bombshells, let's get some Tomahawks in the air...

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While the Indians made a move to firm up their bench for the NL park games, calling Shelley Duncan up (to ostensibly be the RH pinch hitter) and sending Travis Buck back to Columbus, as

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Austin Kearns lives to see another day...though he may not be seeing many more. That said, the movement in the 4th OF/RH bat position doesn't interest me nearly as much as what's happening in the Indians' infield...but I'll get to that. For now, while I know that Kearns has a giant bulls-eye on his back right now – and deservedly so – with the Indians troika of OF figuring to take the lion's share of plate appearances, the replacement of Buck for Duncan suits me fine, even if I'd rather have Buck as the 4th OF.

That said, it's going to be interesting to see how the Indians use that bench in these NL parks given the obvious hesitation from Acta to use guys like Adam Everett and Austin Kearns in many situations. While that "hesitation" is completely justifiable, the presence of Cord Phelps and Shelley Duncan on the roster means that Everett and Kearns are pushed further down the list of useful options really at any time.

This isn't worth a long dissertation (or even a lot of thought) because one could certainly make a strong and compelling argument that if Kearns' main function is as a 4th OF since Duncan is now the assumed RH bat off of the bench and if the skill set of a 4th OF is to play all 3 OF positions with some level of capability in the field and at the plate, Kearns doesn't really pass the muster. Really, with Buck representing a better 4th OF option and Duncan being the better RH bench bat, the argument to keep Kearns around really doesn't exist. Further, if The OC is going to be the primary back-up 3B (and I'll get to why this is a horrible idea), the question becomes what purpose Adam Everett serves on this team, other than pinch-running responsibilities.

Realizing that this is complaining about the periphery of the roster that have little to no bearing on games, with the Indians about to play 9 games in NL parks, their bench should be full of useful players who have a specific role to play on this team. Right now, Kearns and Everett (particularly as he's being used) are neither useful nor do they fill a role. While money may play a role in the decision to keep Kearns afloat on the Indians, let's hope that the Indians come to their senses and maximize their roster options and eventually send Kearns (who now has a .589 OPS in the 217 plate appearances he has since the Indians traded him to the Yankees last year over) on his merry way...blazing a trail that will hopefully be followed soon by another off-season FA "addition" from this past off-season.

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If the quotation marks around "addition" didn't clue you in as to who I'm going after following that little plea to maximize the roster, let me first assert that I don't really have that much of a problem with Everett on the team as he represents a SOLID defender who CAN play multiple positions, even if his bat leaves something to be desired. That's not a bad bench piece to have, even if he's unlikely to represent a viable PH option for the team. What I do have a problem with is the Indians continually playing Uncle Orlando, a SUBPAR defender who CANNOT play multiple positions AND has a bat that leaves something to be desired.

Seeing as how allowing him to thrash about 3B instead of 2B is the way that the Indians are going to handle Uncle Orlando, I have another suggestion (and click on [these](#) links [to](#) three [t](#)

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### weets

from WTAM's Nick Camino to see how Uncle Orlando is responding to questions about his new "role") in that if he's not happy in the everyday lineup and is going to become petulant, outright him off of the roster.



While that may seem harsh, realize that Uncle Orlando now has the **FOURTH-WORST OPS** among qualified MLB players with a .590 OPS. Only Chone Figgins, Miggy Tejada, and Dan Uggla are worse and (with the exception of Tejada), those players represent players that are going to keep playing because of the unfortunate contracts that were meted out to them. Now, if The OC's glove was a redeeming quality (as Hannahan's is), it makes his flailing at the plate somewhat easier to digest but (since I don't trust any defensive metrics out there as far as I can throw them) if you have watched Orlando Cabrera in more than one or two games this year at 2B (don't get me started on his "efforts" at 3B), you would say that his range is limited, his effort is minimal at best, and that he's a defensive liability in the field.

So he's being kept around for what...for clubhouse presence?

The same guy who is complaining about having to platoon with Cord Phelps despite the fact that he has a .496 OPS vs. RHP, lowest in MLB for anyone with more than 150 PA against RHP not named Chone Figgins (who is about to see his role reduced pretty significantly in Seattle)...or the guy who says he doesn't like playing 3B to the media when the alternative is that he would be sitting on the bench, which is where he should be?

Where is the path he's treading that sets an example for the young players?

Is it the pouting to the media, the petulance towards his manager or the overwhelmingly myopic view of his abilities to still play every day in MLB?

While my previous stance was to simply diminish The OC's role to a Utility IF, it's obvious that a demotion of any kind isn't going to be accepted by Uncle Orlando. So at this point, I'd have no problem going with Cord Phelps at 2B every single day with Hannahan at 3B and with Everett as the Utility IF. Please spare me the "clubhouse presence" argument with The OC as his reaction to Phelps' promotion and the trial at 3B have revealed more about his "presence" than anything else was going to and if you want to know why I think that Phelps represents an upgrade over Orlando **RIGHT NOW**, consider that Bobby Phelps has 3 extra-base hits in his 31 plate appearances to date in 10 games played. Meanwhile, Orlando Cabrera has 3 extra-base

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hits in his last 24 games played, which spans 80 plate appearances...seriously.

While some laughable outlets were ready to pull the plug on Phelps ( [being sufficiently eviscerated for it](#) ) after 11 AB, the fact is that Phelps has earned a chance to play every day in MLB and the 2011 performance of Orlando Cabrera shouldn't prevent him from doing so. As for The OC playing at 3B, other than saving my eyes and blood pressure as I watch him look helpless at listless at the hot corner, I'd rather see Adam Everett (or even maybe a healthy Jason Donald soon) playing there from time to time if Jack Hannahan is REALLY going to be playing 1B every so often...which I don't think is necessary either.

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The reason I don't think that Hannahan needs to be playing 1B at all is that I like Marson at C and Santana at 1B while LaPorta's shelved...and truthfully maybe beyond that. Though Marson has his warts (he hasn't hit RHP all year), his defense and handling of the pitching staff has been tremendous and just as unimpressive as MaTola was before his injury, Marson's filling in as the "everyday" catcher has been nearly as impressive.



Truthfully, if Marson and MaTola are both going to represent less-than-stellar offensive options in 2011, I'd take Marson's defensive abilities (and Santana actually looks pretty good at 1B) over the "stylings" of LaPorta at 1B. As much as I'd love to give LaPorta a wide berth to adjust to MLB pitching based on his prospect pedigree, the fact of the matter is that he posted a .192 BA / .222 OBP / .308 SLG / .530 OPS in the 22 games prior to his injury. While that is just 22 games, LaPorta's inability to get on base (he has a .309 OBP) and his continued...um, transgressions in the field make me wonder if a rehab stint in AAA might do his head and his confidence some good.

Obviously, AAA pitching is a completely different animal than MLB pitching but LaPorta looked so lost both at the plate and in the field in the month prior to his injury that it might be better for all parties to have LaPorta spend some time in Columbus to see if he can regain some confidence or at least re-learn how to use the lower half of his body when he swings.



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The beneficiary of that arrangement would be Marson, who has battered LHP (1.011 OPS vs. LHP) while being flummoxed by RHP (.393 OPS vs. RHP) this year. With the Small Sample Size Siren blaring and realizing that I have already called for Orlando Cabrera to never face a RHP again, Marson's career splits aren't nearly that pronounced (although his career OPS vs. RHP is only .532) and his defense and handling of the pitching staff are such that I'd be much more comfortable with Marson in the everyday lineup (warts and all) over many other options...a healthy LaPorta included.

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Interestingly, the struggles of LaPorta and Santana in the early going are probably a pretty big reason why the Indians have a new hitting coach. While some misinterpreted Acta's comments a couple of weeks ago that some players on the team were too talented to go through these prolonged slumps as the manager calling out his team, it's now pretty apparent that Acta was actually calling out his own hitting coach. Truthfully, I don't really know what to make of the Nunnally firing as hitting coaches and pitching coaches (most obviously) are often lightning rods for both praise and criticism, deserved or not. Remember how Carl Willis was crucified for Lee's 2007 and Carmona's 2008 but was given very little credit for Carmona's 2007 and Lee's 2008?

As much criticism as these coaches take, they're not the ones standing in the batter's box or toeing the slab and they're at the mercy of performances that they can only control to such a degree. Was Nunnally responsible for Asdrubal's tremendous hitting so far...what about Choo's struggles?

Perhaps the firing was the result of a build-up of frustration between Nunnally and Acta or maybe one unknown singular event or disagreement and nobody outside of the locker room or Front Office really has much of an idea and [Acta explained his reasoning for the move to B-Pro's John Perrotto thusly](#) :

*"We've been scuffling for a while, and we feel we needed a new voice...We underachieved a little last year, and it's been going on for a month or so this year. We thought it was an appropriate time to do it. It wasn't easy. It was the toughest day I've had in my two years as the manager here. But it was something we felt needed to be done."*



That's the first time I've heard anyone in the organization say that the team "underachieved" last year, but I think some of that goes back to the failure of LaPorta to develop into a consistent

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hitter (including in 2010) and the fact that Santana seemed to fall off in terms of power and production after his blistering start last year. Interestingly, [a scout had this to say B-Pro's Perrotto](#) on Santana prior to

Nunnally's firing:

*"I'm kind of at a loss to explain why he (Santana) hasn't hit better. He has good at-bats, and he takes walks. I think he's real close to breaking out and having a real big second half. He's swinging the bat better than his stats would indicate."*

Do you think that perhaps the Indians thought the same thing or that their own scouts were saying that something was amiss with Santana's approach...other than the famous toe tap?

That said, how much control did Nunnally really have when his star pupil and personal reclamation project – Travis Hafner – go down to that oblique injury, laying waste to the whole lineup?

Whether Hafner's absence sent the team into a psychological funk or if the lineup REALLY needs Hafner that much, his impact is stunning, even if you just look at what the three best hitters on the team have done from last Friday (Hafner's return) through Wednesday night's game:

The Axe Man - .421 BA / .520 OBP / .947 SLG / 1.467 OPS with 3 HR in 25 PA

The BLC - .350 BA / .480 OBP / .400 SLG / .880 OPS

Hafner - .294 BA / .429 OBP / .706 SLG / 1.134 OPS with 2 HR in 21 PA

You'll see that I didn't include any HR numbers for Choo and while that isn't that disconcerting that he didn't hit a HR in a 6-game stretch, did anyone know that Choo still hasn't hit a HR since May 13th and has only that one HR since April 29th?

Of course, those are just 6 games and you can only glean so much from that, but Hafner's presence is apparently huge (as they head off to play 9 games without in the lineup) and when he was missing, the team struggled at the plate, resulting in Nunnally finding himself on the wrong side of the ax. Whether the change in hitting coaches will make that much of a difference remains to be seen, but given that new hitting coach Bruce Fields was the Minor-League Hitting Coordinator prior to his promotion, you can bet that he knows quite a bit about what makes Carlos Santana and Mike Brantley and Cord Phelps and (hopefully) Matt LaPorta successful as the young, ballyhooed position players that are on the Indians right now need to continue to develop for the Indians to remain viably in the AL Central race.

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As the Indians head out West to see if they can continue their success against the NL without their best hitter in the lineup remains to be seen. What will be seen around these parts is the Blonde Bombshell cans making their way out of the fridge...