

Choo-sing the Next Step on A Lazy Sunday

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Sunday, June 26 2011 8:30 AM - Last Updated Sunday, June 26 2011 8:52 AM



As the Indians ready themselves for the national spotlight that comes by being featured on Sunday Night Baseball tonight in San Francisco, they take the stage without one of their lead actors as Shin-Soo Choo was felled by a characteristically wild pitch from the Giants' Jonathan Sanchez. After dropping to the ground and being led off of the field, the news has come down that the worst fears for the injury (which even looked bad at the time) have come true as The BLC is likely to miss 6 to 8 weeks with the thumb injury. If you're not looking at a calendar, that puts Choo out of commission until mid-August on the optimistic side and perhaps not even until the end of August or beginning of September.

As even Manny Acta admits, to say that this is a blow to the tied-for-1st place Indians is an understatement...

While it is true that Choo's season-long numbers have dipped significantly from his performance of the past few years (and his OPS was just .687 when he went down), the fact is that Choo had finally started to heat up (.981 OPS in the 8 games prior to the injury) and – despite his struggles this year – he represented one of the only players on the Indians for whom a track record of recent production existed. Though some would assert that the Indians have been “missing” Choo (as we've known him from years past), the fact is that the Indians with Choo are a far more formidable opponent than the Indians without Choo.

That may be fairly obvious (and you really don't need to hear that...I know), but remember how the Indians' lineup looked completely different with Hafner in there last week versus a lineup without Hafner?

Get ready for the next 6 to 8 weeks (and more pointedly until they can get out of these NL parks as now BOTH Choo and Hafner will be missing) as the Indians look to try to hold their ground in the AL Central without one of their best players, and certainly the player who had

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performed at the highest level in the previous few seasons.

Reportedly, [the Indians' initial plans](#) involve using “Austin Kearns and Travis Buck in a platoon situation in right field” with the linked piece reporting those plans including the truth that “Acta added that the struggles of Kearns and Buck likely stemmed from their sporadic playing time” with Acta even admitting that “It’s kind of tough to ask either one of those guys to produce when neither one of them has ever been a bench player.”

So...the idea that both will suddenly thrive in sporadic playing time when they have not comes from where?



Presumably in this “platoon” Kearns would face LHP and Buck would face RHP, although the fact that Kearns faced the RH Matt Cain on Saturday already brings into question what the Indians are going to do here. Regardless of this planned “platoon”, here’s the problem that I see – the plan includes Austin Kearns, who hasn’t hit anybody this year, regardless of handedness. Kearns’ struggles this year are well-known and the object of scorn everywhere, but which part of this player looks like a candidate for a platoon?

Kearns vs. LHP (2011) - .551 OPS

Kearns vs. RHP (2011) - .566 OPS

His inclusion on the roster as a RH bat looks good in theory, until you actually look to see that he’s simply a poor hitter at this stage of his career, regardless of the pitcher he’s facing. Maybe you think those are based on small sample sizes that don’t show a discernable platoon split and

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if you think that the non-platoon split is unique to this year, consider this:

Kearns vs. LHP (Career) - .788 OPS

Kearns vs. RHP (Career) - .762 OPS

What that means is that Kearns has historically hit LHP and RHP nearly equally and seeing as how his OPS against both LHP and RHP are nearly identical again, I'm not sure where this idea that Kearns is going to thrive as a platoon member is coming from. Perhaps you could make the same argument about Buck as his splits this year have been nearly as atrocious, if at least separated by handedness:

Buck vs. LHP (2011) - .321 OPS

Buck vs. RHP (2011) - .666 OPS

Again, underwhelming numbers to be sure, but the number vs. LHP is based only on 13 plate appearances this year and Buck's career splits show that he, like Kearns, has a history free of a discernible platoon split:

Buck vs. LHP (Career) - .714 OPS

Buck vs. RHP (Career) - .742 OPS

Maybe they think that Kearns is going to somehow miraculously pull out of his 2011 tailspin, but while Kearns has been far from an MLB player since he was traded to the Yankees last year – regardless of whether he's facing LHP or RHP – the thought that Buck could actually revive his lost career with regular plate appearances at least has the aura of a well-thought-out Plan B. Back when Hafner hit the DL, Buck did actually post a .783 OPS in the 16 game stretch that he played 13 games in when he was the de facto replacement for Hafner, so the notion of handing him the keys to RF for a month certainly would have more logic behind than platooning the two or going out and adding a player like a Ryan Ludwick (who has a .677 OPS in his last 134 games and whose OPS in the NL is a full 100 points higher than it is in the AL) to see if it might represent an upgrade over an in-house option.

Of course, the very real possibility that Buck may crash-and-burn as an everyday player exists, but it's a near-certainty that fostering a platoon with Kearns and Buck will surely end poorly, with the Indians' manager essentially coming out and saying as much – that both players have struggled because of sporadic playing time.

So let's solve it by giving them sporadic playing time?

However this "platoon" idea plays out (and it won't be good if they actually do employ it...trust me), the manner in which the Indians approach the loss of Choo in the coming weeks and months is going to be more than a little telling in terms of how they perceive this created opportunity in the AL Central race. Certainly they can rely on these internal options (and again, if we're going that route, I'd like to see Buck playing everyday to see if he can get into a rhythm) for a time, but the sense of urgency surrounding the loss of Choo and attempting to replace his production (albeit diminished) is going to be the canary in the coal mine when looking at what moves the Indians are/aren't going to make to augment this team going forward.

To that end, [Anthony Castrovince had a nice piece on Carmona](#) (and the Fausto topic is one I'm coming back to) that accurately painted the picture for the Indians as they currently

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exist...and this was written before Big League Choo went down:

But if this keeps up, something's got to give... assuming, of course, that the Indians remain serious about remaining in contention (and last week's dismissal of Jon Nunnally was certainly serious)...Given their ample issues in the lineup, the Indians are a fragile club with little wiggle room.

The “assuming, of course, that the Indians remain serious about remaining in contention line” is the money shot there and while AC's piece was about how long the Indians could realistically put Carmona out there every 5th day, the line is wildly applicable to what just happened with Choo and the likely internal replacements. With Choo out (seemingly unable to show us all how a frog leaps forward after dropping back...and [read this if you haven't](#)), the Indians will turn to Buck and Kearns and maybe Duncan (and I'm hoping just Buck) to see if they can hold the line in Choo's absence.

But what if they can't?

The Indians are entering the final week of June still in 1st place, having endured extended DL stints from Hafner, Sizemore (2 of them), Carrasco, and Talbot, and are still in the midst of waiting for Al White to return. Now, the injury to Choo puts them in a difficult situation as, unlike at their other positions of “need” (2B, 3B, SP), the Indians don't have a stud prospect sitting in Columbus waiting for an opportunity that they can run with.

Sure, Zeke Carrerra has the potential to be a very nice 4th OF though he offers little long-term upside past that of a 4th OF, but Chad Huffman and Jerad Head are roster filler who should realistically fall far below Travis Buck and even Austin Kearns in terms of internal options...and it is here where I note that [Buck outperformed both Huffman and Head in his brief time in Columbus](#) . With Choo out conceivably until rosters expand (and that's a LONG ways away), the Indians may be forced to examine the trade market to augment the team...just not at the spot they thought they were going to have to.

While much of the talk about an addition has revolved around a RH bat, the idea was that the RH bat would perhaps play a corner infield position seemed to carry the day, evidenced by the rumor that the Indians had contacted the Dodgers (prior to the Choo injury) about Casey Blake. Looking through [the list compiled by SI.com's Jon Heymann last week regarding the hitters that might be available via the trade market](#) , the Indians might have an interest in Josh Willingham (although he just hit the DL as well), Mike Cuddyer, Luke Scott, Melky Cabrera, the aforementioned Ryan Ludwick, David DeJesus, and...gulp...Jeff Francoeur.

There may be flights of fancy about the Indians adding that HUGE bat to replace Choo, but the greater likelihood is that they're going to give either Buck or Kearns a long leash to claim the every day RF (and, again...I'm hoping that leash is connected to Buck) for about the next month. If RF becomes a black hole in Choo's absence, the Indians will have no choice but to add a player via a trade...assuming they're still hanging around in the AL Central, which seems pretty likely as no team has taken the division by the horns to this point since the Tribe came back to Earth.

However, their activity to improve the roster is likely going to come in other forms prior to that

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July 31st Trade Deadline as the Indians are going to have start making every improvement (as incremental as each may be) to this team in Choo's absence. No longer should Orlando Cabrera's bat, glove, and grouching be tolerated, as the Indians need to start valuing talent above all else at every position, as the Choo injury may have just put the accelerator down on some moves that may have been planned...just not for a while.

Most of those moves are going to involve the talent in Columbus and (while it may not include The Chiz or Kipnis...yet) it was late on Thursday night, as I was attempting to coax a small child back to sleep, when I caught a bit of the replay of the Clippers/Mud Hens contest on STO. During the victory for the Clippers, the Mud Hens play-by-play guy said that the Columbus team was "stacked", but that since the Indians were doing so well...that he imagined that the Clippers – as they're currently constructed – would remain more or less intact.



Well, if the thought was that the Clippers would remain intact for just a little while longer, that's about to change as the rest of AAA may be celebrating a breaking up of the juggernaut Clippers very soon. If I'm picking up that phone, my first call for a player to arrive from Columbus would be Nick Johnson and while [Johnson's not exactly tearing it up down in AAA](#), he has a track record of success in MLB that would eclipse most players (and certainly LaPorta) currently on the Indians' roster. Health is important here, but remember how the LaPorta injury forced the Indians to play Lou Marson more frequently, even against the RHP that have crushed him this year?

Realizing that I JUST wrote that I have no problem with Marson playing everyday (even with his struggles against RHP), the Choo injury puts the sense of urgency back in there for the Indians to maximize every asset that they have right now to get as much offense as they possibly can out of the organization. Seeing as how Johnson's a LH bat, I wouldn't be upset to see this shake out...very soon:

Defense vs. LHP

Santana at 1B

Marson at C

Defense vs. RHP

Johnson at 1B

Santana at C

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How soon is “very soon”?

I wouldn't be surprised at all if he's actually added by the end of the week as, if you'll remember, he has an out clause for July 1st. If that seems alarmingly soon, it's because it is, but if you start to look at the schedules for the Indians and Clippers for the coming week, you can start to see how this actually might shake out. By that I mean that while the Indians are out on the West Coast, everyone realizes that the Indians have an off day/travel day on June 30th, right...the day before Johnson's out clause?

And the team is flying from Arizona to Cincinnati after the Diamondbacks on Wednesday night, right?

Coincidentally, [the Clippers finish up a series with the Mud Hens in Columbus on Wednesday afternoon](#), meaning that Johnson could finish the Wednesday (6-29) game with the Clippers, shoot down I-71 to Cincinnati and meet up with the Tribe for the Reds' series that starts on July 1st, being added to the roster on June 30th and beating the deadline for the opt out by a day.

What about Matt LaPorta, whose progress from his injury seems to be on the fast-track?

Frankly, the Matt MaTola that we saw in the month prior to his injury is not one that I'm all that anxious to see again on the North Coast and his continued presence at the bottom of the lineup leads me to believe that the Indians felt the same way, meaning that they could proceed cautiously with MaTola. Whether that means rehab stints to ensure that he's not only healthy but...you know, hitting or whether that means that the Indians advise LaPorta to take it slow, the best course of action with LaPorta is to wait for a productive LaPorta (not MaTola) to arrive. Because that guy in the #7 jersey, with the .309 OBP in his first 220 plate appearances...that guy's not helping make up for any lost production in Choo's absence.

Is that to assert that Nick Johnson is the savior for this team in light of the Choo injury?

That's pushing things more than just a little bit and it is true that the addition of Johnson makes an overly LH team (which hopefully includes Buck playing every day in RF), but that's where the other obvious move comes in to add a RH bat to the mix by promoting Jason Donald to the parent club to take over 3B. Realizing that I'm the guy who has been so protective of Supermannahan because of his incredible glove behind the groundball-inducing staff and given that Jason Donald's first foray at the hot corner was...um, interesting, if the team was ready to break camp with Donald at 3B, a time should arrive when they are ready to hand the reins back over to Donald.

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