

A Lazy Sunday Adding On

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Sunday, August 14 2011 8:22 AM - Last Updated Sunday, August 14 2011 9:45 AM



Now into the middle of August, the Indians find themselves not just sticking around the AL Central race but pushing down the accelerator as they posted a .500 record against the three AL divisional leaders and have now ensured themselves of another series victory against the Twins. Just when everything looked to be lost a few weeks ago, it seems as if things are coming together for the Tribe as they begin their journey through the balance of their unbalanced schedule.

The biggest difference that has occurred over the last two weeks has been the resurgence of the Indians' offense, which has averaged 5.2 runs per game in the month of August, allowing them to stare the Red Sox, Rangers, and Tigers down and get through a brutal part of their schedule with confidence growing for the team as they begin to beat up on the lesser lights of the AL. To put some context around that, the Tribe averaged just 3.6 runs per game from their 19-run outburst in Kansas City through the end of July as they went 28-39 in that stretch, so with the offense looking rejuvenated around a top-of-the-rotation that boasts a dominant Masterson and Ubaldo (who has an ERA of 3.09 since June 1st...if you exclude that absurd final 1-inning outing for the Rox), the Indians – quite suddenly – look like a team that is coming together at the right time.

Certainly 12 games in August is still just 12 games in August, but the Tribe has gone 7-5 in the month, with their offense coming together and their pitching staff (after the bullpen implosions in Fenway and Arlington) rounding into shape. While August 1st is still a largely arbitrary date, it is important as it represented the day after the Ubaldo deal and...perhaps even more importantly, the cancelling of The OC. While the moves at the end of July were decried by some as giving up too much (in the case of Ubaldo) or too little, too late (in terms of Kosuke), the Indians were pro-active at the Trading Deadline (and beforehand) as they set the table for themselves for the remainder of the season.

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Now that we're about two weeks away from the flurry of moves that were made and with the Indians' offense showing signs of life, I thought that this comparison might be interesting in terms of how a couple of OF who were traded have performed for their new teams as the need for that OF bat to "save the offense" was the rhetoric leading up to the Trading Deadline:

Kosuke Fukudome – CLE

.241 BA / .262 OBP / .328 SLG / .590 OPS with 5 XBH, 13 K, and 1 BB in 61 PA

Carlos Beltran – SF

.244 BA / .261 OBP / .356 SLG / .616 OPS with 3 XBH, 11 K, and 1 BB in 46 PA

Don't take this to mean that the talent of these two players is on equal footing, but in the context of how much wailing and gnashing of teeth that occurred when the Indians added Fukudome and not that "big bat" like Beltran, it is worth noting that the impact of any addition at this time of year is generally a crapshoot.

Of course Fukudome is a lesser player than Beltran (in terms of potential impact), but with Beltran could be headed to the DL with a hand injury, it's possible (and even likely) that Fukudome will have a larger impact than Beltran will on a pennant race. Of course, nobody knew that Beltran's health would become an issue just two weeks after getting moved to San Francisco, but it speaks to the uncertainty involved in any of these deals.

Now, if we want to include the numbers of the other OF that were moved at the Trading Deadline to see what kind of impact each has had on their new team, these are the other two names that were bandied about, with the numbers for their new teams looking like this:

Hunter Pence – PHI

.327 BA / .362 OBP / .558 SLG / .920 OPS with 6 XBH, 11 K, and 4 BB in 58 PA

Ryan Ludwick – PIT

.278 BA / .395 OBP / .306 SLG / .701 OPS with 1 XBH, 10 K, and 7 BB in 44 PA

What this all means I'm not quite sure, but with the exception of Pence, these players have had a minimal impact on their new teams and with the return of Choo on Friday night, it's worth re-visiting [what was written here about a month ago](#), when it was first intimated that Choo's return may be quicker than it was originally reported:

Buried in Thursday morning's paper is this bombshell (which has some bearing on the whole RF situation), as Hoynes reports that "Outfielder Shin-Soo Choo had the cast removed from his broken left thumb Wednesday. Choo is telling friends he could be playing by the second week in August."

--snip--

Maybe Choo is being overly optimistic to "friends", but the second week of August is really only about 4 weeks of baseball from now (with the All-Star Break removing 3 days of games from the schedule in there) and if Choo's timetable for return is really in 4 weeks, how involved should the Indians be getting in acquiring that OF bat that seems to be at the top of everyone's list?

Perhaps the Indians were aware of Choo's timetable for recovery and were hoping (no, praying) that he really would return to the team with six weeks of baseball left to play. While Choo's return certainly counts as a major surprise, what many people have forgotten about

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Choo (because of his slow start in 2011 and the DUI) is the body of work put forth in the three years prior to 2011 and how it measures up against the rest of MLB.



From 2008 through 2010, Choo compiled a 144 OPS+, [a measure used to compare the effectiveness of a hitter](#), taking into consideration the league and the park in which the player hits. If that really doesn't mean that much to you, how about looking at [where The BLC ranks compared to all other MLB hitters with 1,500 or more plate appearances over the three-year timeframe](#)

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- 1) Pujols – 184 OPS+
- 2) Votto – 152 OPS+
- 3) A. Gonzalez – 151 OPS+
- 4) Miggy – 150 OPS+
- 5) Mauer – 147 OPS+
- 6) Youkilis – 147 OPS+
- 7) Fielder – 147 OPS+
- 8) Choo – 144 OPS+**
- 9) Holliday – 142 OPS+
- 10) Morneau – 142 OPS+

That was meant for everyone's eyes without the last name of Boras, but that's an elite hitter and one that sustained a level of excellence and consistency over 1,500 plate appearances. While Choo struggled out of the gate in 2011 (in case you forgot), he actually was starting to show signs that he was "reverting" back to his former self. Over the last 147 PA that Choo had before he went on the DL, he had a .740 OPS and while that may be a downgrade from what Choo put forth from 2008 to 2010, what's more important here is to compare THAT level of production to what Choo is going to be replacing in the Indians' lineup for the last six weeks.

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With Choo returning (even if he's hitting around that .740 OPS level), his presence figures to represent a marked upgrade from Kearns (.589 OPS this season), Zeke (.541 OPS this season) or even what Brantley has done since the middle of June (.640 OPS, with an OBP of .281 in his last 200 PA) as Choo's track record of success puts him in elite company as he becomes an "addition" for this team for the stretch run. Of course, it's possible that Choo will take a while to get comfortable at the plate and it is just as possible that Choo rushed back too soon in an attempt to get back into a pennant race (and maybe try to save his 2011 stats...for arbitration purposes), but Choo coming back represents a huge boost for the Indians' offense for the mere reason of who he will ostensibly be replacing in the lineup.

Since Kearns has taken probably too many hits from the media and fans (many deserved based on his production, or lack thereof), I'm going to hold off on any kicks toward a man who is already on the ground, but suffice it to say that the exclusion of Kearns from the outfield rotation is a welcome sight...though not as welcome as Choo back in the everyday lineup. Now with Choo joining Brantley (assuming this wrist thing doesn't continue linger longer than it already has) and Fukudome (whose addition looks more and more of an acknowledgement that [Size more may not really be coming back](#)), the Indians outfield is starting to round back into shape, with Zeke and D. Shelley Duncan in roles that suit them best (as a speedy 4th OF/pinch runner and a RF PH option) and with a consistent OF rotation that doesn't inflict pain and suffering. With the return of Choo, there is the sense that the Indians' offense is actually starting to round into shape...a thought that would be considered laughable and outlandish less than a month ago.

Obviously, a huge factor in that feeling is the early performance of Jason Kipnis, [whose .950 OPS ranks 6th in the AL for players with more than 75 PA](#) and whose arrival on the North Coast may have represented that "big bat" that everyone had been searching for. Similar to the Choo situation, Kipnis improving the team simply by virtue of replacing his predecessor would have been reason enough to celebrate his arrival, but since The OC was sent out to the Bay Area and Kipnis has been given the reins at 2B on August 1st, Kipnis has posted a .348 BA / .412 OBP / .739 SLG / 1.151 OPS with 8 XBH in 51 plate appearances. Go back and look to see how that compares to what Pence has done for the Phillies...



Is that just 51 plate appearances?

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Of course and the small sample size siren is blaring...but Kipnis has 42 total bases in those 11 games since August 1st (11 singles, 3 doubles, 5 HR, and 5 BB and (to provide some context here) Uncle Orlando had 40 total bases in his final THIRTY games (17 singles, 2 doubles, 2 HR, and 7 BB) on the North Coast, so the Indians essentially took their least productive spot in the lineup and turned it into one of their most productive spots.

That may be fairly obvious, but the level of production for Kipnis is one of the huge reasons that the Indians have made this offensive turnaround and while [The OC showed his true colors on his way out of town](#) (and he's posted a .544 OPS since he became a Giant, which is somehow WORSE than he hit as an Indian), the Indians seem to have found a potential "core" player in Kipnis, whose hustle and determination are infectious. Anyone who saw Kipnis going full throttle around 2B in the Tigers' series, attempting to go from first to third on a hit understands that Kipnis "looks" like a special kind of player.

While "looks" can be deceiving and realizing that MLB is full of players that exude hustle and determination, Kipnis actually seems to have the talent to back it up and (though this certainly could be getting overly excited about a rookie who arrived "hot") to become a cog in a lineup that no longer induces groans or nausea. With news that [the Rox wanted to hold out for Kipnis in the Ubaldo deal](#) (only to be rebuffed), it is fascinating to consider how different the Indians would have looked over the last two weeks and how the feeling about this team would be dramatically different if Kipnis was included in the Ubaldo deal, given the impact that Kipnis has had on the lineup in his brief time on The Reservation.



What's happened over the course of the last month is that the Indians have called up their top

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prospects to shine light on their lineup's dark places and, now with Choo returning, are starting to get their own pieces back, as the idea that this lineup may be close to hitting on all cylinders is no longer a punch line. Perhaps Fukudome didn't have the impact that people were looking for in a mid-season acquisition, but it's possible that the Indians felt that the biggest boosts they were going to get were going to come from Kipnis' promotion and from Choo's return as they made the move from Fukudome as insurance for the worst-case scenario for Grady.

Though it would seem like the Indians have fired all of their bullets in terms of roster augmentation – both internal and external – let's not forget that we're not far away from rosters expanding on September 1st, meaning that the Indians can add to their bullpen with guys like Putnam, Judy, and Hagdone (who are all on the 40-man roster) or even a CC Lee (who is not on the 40-man ...though there is plenty of flotsam and jetsam that could be moved to get CC Lee onto that 40-man roster) as the Indians can still attempt to see if they can continue to milk some effectiveness from their bullpen or keep the bullets in the arms of their current relievers for more important moments than blowout games in mid-September.

The sense that all hands are already on deck (or are coming) finally feels like it has settled in. Though there have been some slow on-ramps to that road of reality (as Chisenhall and Kipnis remained in Columbus while the Tribe's offense was stuck in a rut) and some bumps on that road (Choo and Grady...and those are just the most recent injuries), the Indians' roster looks as close to ideal as one could have thought a mere month ago...much less at the beginning of the season. The Tribe is fronted by two aces in their rotation, backed up by talented arms that provide the depth that is the envy of most other AL teams. Their bullpen seems to have re-found its footing after the rain-delayed game against the Tigers and – most importantly – the offensive pieces finally start to look to be in place to the point that the Indians' lineup looks deep and (dare I say) at times, dangerous.

It is mid-August, the [Indians have the only positive run differential in the AL Central](#) (by the by, the Twins have the 3rd worst in MLB), and hold their destiny in their own hands. With the addition of Jimenez, the emergence of Masterson, Tomlin, Cabrera, C. Perez, Kipnis, and now the return of Choo, it would seem that those "hands" are the right ones for the Tribe as they turn the final corner and head into the final stretch of the season, as healthy and potent as they've been since their hot start.

The difference between that hot start and what we've seen since the beginning of the Boston series however is that the doubt over whether this team is "for real" disappears a little more with each passing game...