

Tipping Their Hand

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Wednesday, August 31 2011 11:00 PM - Last Updated Thursday, September 01 2011 6:41 AM



As the “Little Injuns that Could” continue to chug their way up the mountain despite the smoking engine and the dings and dents throughout their body, the Indians made a surprising move Tuesday when they needed to make room for Jeanmar Gomez’s start against Oakland. While the idea that the Indians would either send Choo off to the DL (he’s out for a while with this side issue) or send the likes of Shelley Duncan or Jerad Head back down I-71 with the idea that either would return in 10 days, after the September 1st roster expansion date and after either had spent enough time in AAA in order to be recalled, the Indians instead sent their Opening Day 1B Matt MaTola off to Columbus.

While the move is entirely justified in terms of LaPorta’s performance, the timing of it is more than a little surprising as the Indians’ current offense resembles that of a AAA team as injuries have laid waste to the Tribe’s position players. At a time when it would seem that the Indians would need any able-bodied position player to be standing at the ready, they sent down LaPorta, who (not all that long ago) was [a Top 30 prospect in all of baseball](#) and was (as if you needed to be reminded of this) the BIG bat that came over in the CC deal from the Cream City.

Regardless of that pedigree and his inclusion in the Sabathia deal, there’s little question that LaPorta has “earned” this demotion, as I wrote [this three weeks ago](#) , suggesting as much: *In a position of power at 1B, LaPorta’s continued struggles at the plate and his second year of injuries perhaps affecting his performance at the plate may mean that the Indians may need to start considering some alternatives to the now-26-year-old LaPorta, who has a sub-.700 OPS in his first 245 MLB games. While the Indians are likely to re-evaluate LaPorta and the future of*

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1B, with the Tribe in the throes of a pennant race, waiting for the off-season may be imprudent.

Maybe that's seems reactionary and maybe there is a rush to judgment (and I've been the one preaching patience and "finding out what we have in LaPorta" going back to the off-season), but LaPorta hitting HR off of mistake pitches a couple of times a week are hurting this Indians' team that really can't afford to take too many more punches.

Since that was written, Kipnis, Hafner, and Brantley all hit the DL (and that's just on the offensive side of things, not to mention Choo, who is out for a couple of weeks with this side injury), with the Indians improbably absorbing these "punches" to stay relevant into September. My suggestion from the piece was to play Santana at 1B every day and for Marson to assume the full-time C duties and that looks to be the direction that the Tribe will take going forward.

If you want to continue with the "since that was written" tract, LaPorta has posted a .603 OPS in the 13 games "since that was written", striking out 12 times in 41 plate appearance, actually striking out (not just making an out) more often than he got on base since August 10th. Maybe some of this is still injury-related and the argument can be made that he probably should have gone to Columbus on a rehab assignment after the ankle injury (I think I made that argument at one time) as since he has returned from the DL, he's posted a .231 BA / .256 OBP / .372 SLG / .628 OPS line in 129 PA, striking out 32 times in those 129 PA...or about 1/4 of the times he strode to the plate.



If you'll remember, when LaPorta came off of the DL, the team was short-handed at the time back then and his return allowed some level of normalcy to set in for a team in need of an offensive spark. Certainly, LaPorta didn't provide that spark (as you look at those numbers above again), and what's striking about this demotion is that LaPorta heads down to Columbus when the team is even MORE short-handed offensively than they were when he came off of the DL in June, which brings us to this overwhelming feeling about this move, in that it would certainly seem to suggest that the Indians are not counting on Matt MaTola for much of anything, this year or beyond.

Maybe the argument can be made that the Indians are trying to send LaPorta a message, that

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nobody on the roster (regardless of prospect pedigree or what trade you were involved in) is above being demoted, but in light of their unprecedented need for offense right now and the fact that the Indians are...you know, IN A PENNANT RACE, his demotion speaks volumes about the faith that the have in LaPorta right now and how much (or how little) hope that they might have for LaPorta going forward.

Though LaPorta's been under the microscope than probably any other current Indian in this space, you want a stunning fact?

Matt LaPorta's career OPS coming into 2011 was .694 in 623 plate appearances.

In 349 plate appearances in 2011, he has a...yep, .694 OPS.

Lest you forget, MaTola turns 27 in January and now has a fairly consistent track record of posting a sub-.700 OPS (.694, to be exact) over 972 plate appearances in MLB. Those days of thinking that LaPorta was the "answer" at 1B (much less an upgrade over Garko and Broussard) seem like they were long, long ago.

For some perspective on where LaPorta has fallen in terms of standing within the organization, let's remember again that when the Indians needed to send someone to Columbus for 10 days, they kept Jerad Head and Shelley Duncan on the team over Matt LaPorta. For all intents and purposes, they could have sent Lonnie Chisenhall down for 10 days given the way Hannahan is playing, but instead they dispatched LaPorta. Yes, the Indians need OF and LaPorta hasn't played LF since he broke his toe in Fenway last year (which may be why he's not playing LF anymore), but the fact that Head and Duncan – who are both older than LaPorta and are non-prospects (even if Duncan is a useful piece) and have options – start to bring into clearer focus how damning this move is in terms of the long-term future for LaPorta in Cleveland.

Even more than LaPorta going down instead of Head and Duncan is the idea that LaPorta would be sent down in the midst of a pennant race for this team, which has been making moves to maximize this roster for 2011 since they called up Alex White months ago. Seriously, if you think about the moves that the Tribe has made to make a push for 2011 (White's call-up, Chiz and Kipnis call-up, Kosuke, the Ubaldo deal, Thome) all season long, you start to really get the idea of how much they consider LaPorta to be "helpful" to this team at this point. That said, nearly all of the moves that they've made all season have been just as much about the future as the present as they've started the adjustment period for guys like Kipnis and Chisenhall and added a top-of-the-rotation starter that helps today and tomorrow.

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