Why is there no “De-fense” (clap clap) chant in baseball? It would seem that those guys need some encouragement from time-to-time as well. We encourage pitchers when they face a 3-2 count with runners on base and two outs, but we never seem to cheer on the defense. We get behind a hitter who is facing a 2-2 pitch with two men in scoring position, but, we never get behind the defense.

Obviously, the above point is made in jest, but playing good defense is extremely important. Players put the ball in play in 78 percent of their at bats in 2012, which means that fielders were called upon 128,825 times last season. With 42,063 hits and 3,008 errors (and with the exception of hits turned into outs by the batter trying to take an extra base, like extend a single into a double and getting thrown out, for example), fielders successfully recorded at least one out on 65 percent of the balls in play. Clearly, fielding is a big part of the game.

For the Indians, fielding was a big part of the problem in 2012. The Indians committed 96 errors last season, which ranked right at league average. With advanced fielding statistics at our disposal, errors are not the best way to evaluate team defense. To commit an error, you have to be able to get to the ball and then attempt to make a play. The Indians struggled at getting to a lot of balls put in play. Baseball Info Solutions had the Indians ranked dead last in the American League last season in defensive runs saved. They were 19 runs behind the Detroit Tigers, who most people laughed at because the left side of their infield consisted of Miguel Cabrera and Jhonny Peralta.

Defensive Runs Saved (DRS) is based on range – the ability to get to a ball and make a play. A more detailed explanation can be found here , but I’ll try to simplify it if you’ll bear with me:

Baseball Info Solutions, creators of the defensive runs saved metric, tracks every ball put in play. Humans enter the plays into a computer that tracks direction, speed, distance, and type of batted ball (ground ball, fly ball, line drive, etc.). The field of play is broken down into areas called “vectors”. Using these vectors, and the other factors, Baseball Info Solutions determines a percentage of times that play should be made.

Say a ground ball is hit in the hole between short and third. The shortstop has to range eight feet to his right, get it on the backhand and make the throw to get a runner with average speed. It’s a play that any average shortstop should make more often than not. Baseball Info Solutions has determined that this specific play is made 75 percent of the time.

This is the confusing part: Defenders earn defensive runs saved by making a play that another player at that position did not make at an earlier point in the season. Similarly, defenders would cost their team runs if they failed to make a play that another player at that position made at an earlier point in the season. Since nearly every type of play has been made or missed by a fielder at every position, nearly every fielding play can count positively or negatively toward a player.

When a play is made, the percentages convert to decimals. A play that should be made 75 percent of the time becomes .75. The defender gets a +1 or a -1, depending on if they made the play or not. The percentage of times the play should be made is then subtracted from the +1 or -1. A play successfully completed as a 75 percent play counts for .25 defensive runs saved. A play completed 75 percent of the time that the fielder fails to make counts as -1.75 runs saved.

These are running totals and every play made or not made factors into the likelihood an average fielder makes that same play. As you can see, not making a routine play drastically affects the player’s DRS. Making a play with a high degree of difficulty, a play that is made five percent of the time, for example, counts as nearly one full defensive run saved.

For stat-keeping purposes, the sum of the decimals is rounded to the nearest integer. A player who has -3.5 defensive runs saved would have a DRS of -4. A player who has saved 8.25 defensive runs would have a DRS of 8.

For DRS, the average fielder would be at exactly zero. An above average fielder would be at

five DRS after the season. Anything above 10 is considered great and anything over 15 is considered Gold-Glove Caliber.

The leader for the Indians in DRS last season was Jason Kipnis with three. Kipnis, if you'll recall, is a converted outfielder playing second base. In 2012, 18 Indians were above zero in DRS. Eight of them were pitchers. Five of them, Vinny Rottino, Ezequiel Carrera, Jason Donald, Jose Lopez, and Cord Phelps, played less than 120 innings. Aaron Cunningham played 168. Carlos Santana, at both catcher and first base, and Johnny Damon joined Kipnis as the only frequent regulars to have a positive DRS.

The worst fielder on the team by DRS was Shin-Soo Choo, who was -12 runs. Lou Marson was second-worst at -8. Asdrubal Cabrera was the next lowest position player at -5.

It's important to realize the implications that these numbers have on the ability to win. A -51 rating, like the Indians had in 2012, may not seem like much, but 51 additional runs allowed could impact a lot of games and turn wins into losses or deficits into bigger deficits to overcome. When you add in the struggles of the pitching staff and the third-worst scoring offense in the American League, then it's really a lot to overcome. Furthermore, the Indians were 19 runs worse than the next lowest team, the Tigers. The next lowest team, the Yankees, was 10 runs better than the Tigers, putting the Indians 29 runs behind them. The best defensive team, the Toronto Blue Jays, was plus-59 in DRS, making a 110-run gap between the best and worst team. That's substantial.

As a group last season, mostly because of Choo's team-worst -12 DRS, the Indians outfield was -16 in DRS. Since 2010, new center fielder Michael Bourn has saved 17 runs. As a left fielder, Michael Brantley has saved 11 runs in 81 games at that position. By comparison, in 281 games in center field, Brantley is -21 runs. Drew Stubbs is -3 in DRS since 2010, but he will be moving from center field to right field, which should improve his numbers. Nick Swisher, who should see a fair amount of time in the outfield, was -5 in DRS over the last three seasons, which is part of the reason why the Indians added Bourn, to move Swisher to the infield and Mark Reynolds to the designated hitter.

The Indians had an issue defensively in the outfield and they answered it. Even though the pitching staff will still feature a good amount of ground ball pitchers, the outfielders will get to more balls in the gaps and make a lot more plays than their predecessors.

The infield defense is still a worry. My TCF colleague and friend, Brian McPeek, said in his Weekend Wrap on Sunday night that “the infield defense will be mediocre at best, but if they make the routine plays, they should be fine”. Without the statistical analysis that I’m about to provide, McPeek’s simple assessment is pretty accurate.

As I said above, Jason Kipnis led the Indians in DRS with three. Even Casey Kotchman, who was lauded for his spectacular glove, was minus-1 run saved. The concern for the Indians is on the left side of the infield, where Lonnie Chisenhall and Asdrubal Cabrera both have the same problem. Chisenhall, -5 DRS in just 30 games in 2012, and Cabrera, -5 DRS in 136 games, both struggle with lateral mobility. Cabrera is fairly big to play the position, while Chisenhall reportedly bulked up to 216 pounds over the winter.

Nick Swisher had his best defensive season at first base last year, saving five runs. Over his career, he has saved one run at first base. With Kotchman not showing up well in the metrics, Swisher should not be much of a downgrade, if at all. Kipnis should progress at second base as he continues learning the position. His athleticism has really helped him with the adjustment and he will continue to be serviceable, if not above average, at second.

From the catcher position, it’s hard to determine a catcher’s true fielding value using DRS. Lou Marson was the team’s second-worst defender in DRS, posting a -8. Half of that was from stolen bases allowed, which Marson had little control over since the pitching staff was terrible at holding runners. Marson allowed 67 stolen bases in 69 games and only threw out 11 runners. Carlos Santana was able to make up for 54 wild pitches/passed balls with 25 caught stealings. Like Marson, he got little help from the pitchers, allowing 70 stolen bases. It’s hard to say if either catcher will improve on his defensive metrics. It all depends on the pitching staff and their ability to hold runners.

Rome wasn’t going to be built in a day with the Indians’ defense. Going from being 51 runs below average defensively to turning defense into an asset is nearly impossible. By improving their outfield defense and their lineup, the Indians are better equipped to handle some of their defensive shortcomings on the infield. It won’t turn the Indians defense into a strength, but it shouldn’t be as much of a detriment as it was last season and, therefore, shouldn’t hold them back from being a contender for the postseason.