For all intents and purposes, the Indians off-season is over. Now that the dust has begun to settle, the Indians made a pretty significant changeover in their roster this off-season in signing six free agents and trading for one player. The Indians added 30 million in '07 payroll, and GM Mark Shapiro did so without signing one player who makes more than 4-5 million bucks. In his latest, Tony Lastoria looks at the myriad of possible platoon situations on this roster, and how Shapiro feels that platooning players will provide him the most bang for his buck.

For all intents and purposes, the Indians off-season is over. Now that the dust has begun to settle, the Indians made a pretty significant changeover in their roster this off-season in signing six free agents and trading for one player. Josh Barfield, Keith Foulke, Aaron Fultz, Roberto Hernandez, Joe Borowski, David Dellucci and Trot Nixon are the new names that will adorn the 2007 version of the Indians roster. Only 13 players remain from the opening day roster from last year, so the turnover in players the past 6-8 months on the 25-man roster has been considerable (and rightly so).

Shapiro has said numerous times this off-season that they wanted to accomplish three things: add a long-term 2B, fix the bullpen, and improve the defense. A fourth item was on the list, which was to add a good right-handed bat, but with the pickings being so slim in the free agent and trade market, Shapiro apparently decided that going the platoon route yet again may be the next best way to go if that big right-handed bat they coveted was unattainable.

Over the years, there have been many theories and innovations in baseball in which teams adopt a certain philosophy in the hopes it will give them that edge they need to win a

championship. The most recent innovation, and probably the most popular, is Oakland A's GM Billy Beane's "Moneyball" concept which mostly dealt with finding undervalued talent and using statistical analysis methods (sabermetrics) to re-evaluate the strategies that put wins on the field. While he does use traditional scouting methods in evaluating players, Shapiro is also a reputed fan of sabermetrics, which analyzes baseball objectively (not subjectively like scouting does) with the use of evidence found in baseball statistics.

While the idea of platooning is nothing new, Shapiro appears to be taking it to the next level. In 2006, Shapiro went into the season with Ben Broussard and Eduardo Perez as a platoon at 1B. Both players had severe platoon splits, with Broussard hitting much better against right-handers and Perez much better against left-handers. When Shapiro combined these two into a 1B platoon and thereby using only their strengths (Broussard vs. RHers and Perez vs LFers) and eliminating their weaknesses (Broussard vs. LHers and Perez vs. RHers), the platoon worked magnificently. Before being broken up and traded last year, the "Benuardo" combination at 1B was arguably 2nd in all of baseball only to Albert Pujols in terms of production at the position.

The success of the 2006 1B platoon, along with the inability to find a good right-handed bat to add to the lineup this off-season, looks like it pushed Shapiro back to being a Platoon Leader. Whether by design or not, it is possible that Shapiro is somewhat adapting that "Moneyball" philosophy that dealt with finding undervalued talent, and he has identified players who have severe platoon splits that are not necessarily everyday starters as undervalued talent.

Let's face it, the Indians have a finite budget that probably has a ceiling it can top out at in the coming years of somewhere around $72-77M. Whether the strict budget is because owner Larry Dolan's wallet is like an onion and it makes him cry every time he opens it (a famous Swerb-ism), or it is just the realities of this market (a famous Shapiro-ism) can be debated ad nauseam. But as Geoff Sindelar used to say, "It is what it is."

$70M or so in payroll is not going to go far, especially this day and age. Given the strict budget Shapiro has to work with, he needs to be creative in finding ways to fill positions with potential good productive players but who come at a much reduced cost. This obviously is a big reason you see Shapiro sign so many players coming off injury, as these players are trying to re-establish their market value and the Indians are able to sign them on the cheap. Usually, this

results in a win-win situation for the player and organization.

But, in addition to targeting players coming off injury, Shapiro may now also be targeting players with severe platoon splits at positions he has a hard time filling with an everyday starter via free agency, trade, or from the farm system.

The Indians will go into 2007 with three positions that “on the field” will not have an everyday starter: 1B, LF and RF. Left-handed hitters David Dellucci (LF) and Trot Nixon (RF) will get most of the playing time since roughly 70% of the starters the Indians will face are right-handed, but when a left-hander is on the mound Jason Michaels (LF) and Casey Blake (RF) would replace them. At 1B, Casey Blake has already been tabbed the everyday starter against right-handers, and it will be either Ryan Garko or Victor Martinez at 1B against left-handers since Blake will move to RF. Garko should get the lion’s share of playing time at 1B when a left-hander starts, but Martinez will likely get a handful of starts there as well to keep his potent bat in the lineup when he needs a break from catching.

While “on the field” the Indians will have three platoons, actually, “in the lineup” there are only two platoons. Casey Blake will bounce around between 1B and RF, but he is in the everyday lineup. The true “lineup” platoon really is Dellucci-Michaels and Nixon-Garko.

The Dellucci-Michaels and Nixon-Garko platoons are a clear attempt at Shapiro trying to re-create the magic that the Broussard-Perez platoon provided last year. Dellucci, Michaels and Nixon all have severe platoon splits which make them perfect candidates for Shapiro’s new adopted philosophy. Here is a quick listing of each of their three-year splits:

	Avg vs LH	OPS vs LH	Avg vs RH	OPS vs RH	Last 3-years
David Dellucci	0.185		0.605		0.264
Jason Michaels	0.300		0.829		0.267

Trot Nixon	0.207	0.620	0.297
Ryan Garko	0.333	0.938	0.281

It should be noted that Garko's splits are only for the 2006 season as that is the only data of him as a hitter at the major league level. Although, if you used Garko's splits from Buffalo last year, you can see he tends to hit lefties much better: against left-handers Garko hit .277 with a .922 OPS, and against right-handers he hit .237 with a .718.

When looking at the data, you can see the method behind Shapiro's madness with the Dellucci-Michaels and Nixon-Garko platoons. By using each player's strengths and severely limiting their weaknesses, Shapiro is hoping to get above average production from both platoons. On paper it sure looks good to have a Delluci-Michaels batting average combo of .264/.300 and OPS combo of .875/.829, and a Nixon-Garko batting average combo of .297/.333 and OPS combo of .849/.938. The three-year data says this is possible, so we'll see.

As the season wears on, some of the young outfielders like Franklin Gutierrez, Ben Francisco or Shin-Soo Choo could get into the platoon mix. All of these players, especially Choo, have some significant platoon splits. But, all of these players will likely start the season in Buffalo in a reserve role and used as depth, and at this point there appears to be no reason to trade any of them. The outfield situation in the upper levels of the minors is very crowded, but that may sort itself out as the season plugs along.

Something else to consider with the two platoons is it will help the Indians bench. With two of the bench players (Michaels and Garko) getting regular playing time, it will only help keep the bench more effective when manager Eric Wedge needs to use them. With the utility player also likely to get considerable playing time, three of the four bench players on the roster will get regular at bats. Considering how much Wedge drives his starters into the ground, this may be another reason for Shapiro adopting his platoon philosophy in order to get Wedge to use his bench more often.

Bottom line, the idea to use platoons may be the result of some recent statistical analysis the Indians came up with where they feel they can get above average production in a lineup spot by pairing up two players with extreme platoon splits. It worked last year, and is something they hope they can produce again, except at two lineup spots this time. Shapiro may be onto something, although if this were so easy everyone would be doing it. But, if this works again, it

could result in some sort of following by other GMs and considered the new catch-phrase in baseball and a revolutionary way to get near superstar production at a position for more than half the cost.