Paulie C checks back in with us to start off the new year, and pens a fantastic piece in doing so. Paul's thinking 2008 Cleveland Indians baseball, and found all of Bill James (Sabermetrics God to some) '08 projections online at fangraphs.com. Paul takes the Tribe's position players, lists the Bill James offensive projections for next season, and makes his own comments by player as he runs them down. Happy New Year everyone.

As the cold wind blows and the world slows down for a holiday week, it is finally time to delve into some statistics and crunch some numbers to keep our minds sharp for the day when the Tribe arrives in Winter Haven.

In the past decade or so, the baseball world has been turned on its collective ear regarding the use of statistics and the use of those statistics to predict the performance of individual players for an upcoming season based on similar players (in terms of age and statistics, just to name a few) throughout history to project what an upcoming season holds in store for a particular player. While this use of numbers and stats known as Sabermetrics was regularly eschewed for what "my own eyes tell me", the movement is not only gaining steam but finding recognition as the Godfather of Sabermetrics Bill James draws a paycheck from Yawkey Way and the Indians' hiring of Keith Woolner (who invented a complicated and useful measurable known as VORP) last season shows that the Tribe brass not only buys into the philosophy, but are willing to pay for it as well.

Now, for some background, lest you think I love crunching numbers, the only reason that I didn't drop the Statistics class (required Math) during my freshman year in college was because the hot girl (who thought that I was the "bee's knees") that sat in front of me (and after 4 years of all-boys Catholic High School this cannot be discounted) was always looking for help in this confusing

world of numbers. I, obviously, was more than happy to oblige, studying harder for the class than the ones I actually enjoyed (English, History, etc.) so I could maintain that level of confidence and said girl would think I was somewhat smart...meaning she HAD to like me (did I mention that the all-boys High School made me incapable of handling girls in class in college?).

Regardless, the romance never got off the ground and numbers became background noise again to me as I try to wrangle my way through all of these Sabermetric categories and projections. In fact, I'm more of the school of Todd Snider, who says that,
"64 percent of all the world's statistics are made up right there on the spot - 82.4 percent of people believe 'em whether they're accurate statistics or not".

But dive headfirst into this we will, because these numbers and projections are obviously being used at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario and because...well, Spring Training is a long way away. For the 2008 projections listed below, the resource used was the Bill James Handbook 2008 (BJH2K8) from the school of the aforementioned Bill James with statistics compiled for public consumption by Fangraphs.com
(where, as other men can lose an afternoon in a Home Depot, I can lose an afternoon).

Most of the statistics are easily recognizable, except for the RC/27 stat that will be listed at the end of each line. RC/27 estimates the number of runs a player contributes to his team over the course of 27 outs or a 9 inning game.

A strange stat?

Sure, but easy to compare the likes of Grady Sizemore to Jason Michaels in one quick stat.

Since, frankly, this is a pretty time-consuming endeavor; I'm going to break it up into two parts for the purposes of space and my sanity.

First up, the position players -

Victor Martinez

.302 BA / .381 OBP / .482 SLG / .863 OPS, 21 HR, 102 RBI, 6.77 RC/27

The BJH2K8 sees a 2008 very similar to Victor's rock-steady 2007 (.301 BA / .374 OBP / .505 SLG / .879 OPS, 25 HR, 114 RBI, 6.71 RC/27) with a marginal power decline, but a higher overall RC/27. Considering that The Stick was the solid fixture in the 2007 lineup that allowed the (relatively speaking) down years of Sizemore and Hafner, and this should be cause for jubilation if it comes to fruition. Essentially, James sees another business-as-usual year from the shockingly consistent Tribe backstop.

Kelly Shoppach

.256 BA / .318 OBP / .460 SLG / .778 OPS, 8 HR, 30 RBI, 4.96 RC/27

Looks like much of the same for Shoppach with a low OBP (lots of Ks and few BB) and power when contact is made. Shoppach's 2007 line reads as .261 BA / .310 OBP / .472 SLG / .782 OPS, 7 HR, 30 RBI, 5.15 RC/27 - so his 2008 projection almost looks like a carbon copy. Those hoping for a breakout year for Shoppach which would increase his trade value or allow the Indians more flexibility to move Victor around at 1B should (at least according to these projections) take Shoppach for what he is - a good defensive catcher with poor plate discipline and power...or an ideal backup C.

Ryan Garko

.277 BA / .348 OBP / .467 SLG / .816 OPS, 22 HR, 81 RBI, 5.59 RC/27

A bit of a downtick for Garko-my-God-did-you-see-how-far-he-hit-that, with a slight drop in OBP (.359 in 2007 to a projected .348), SLG (.483 in 2007 to a projected .469), and RC/27 (6.26 in 2007 to a projected 5.59). Interestingly, the only number that sees a substantial increase is his RBI (61 in 2007 to a projected 81), which may simply be a by-product of what would be seen as more run-producing opportunities within the Tribe lineup. Outside of those small reductions and variations, the folks at Bill James seem to think that the Garko that established himself as a viable (if not tremendous) 1B in 2007 is the Garko that will appear in 2008. It's hard to argue with as Garko seems to be one of those "is what he is" players, not projecting out too highly or going through extended struggles

that would compromise his consistency.

Asdrubal Cabrera

.283 BA / .345 OBP / .401 SLG / .745 OPS, 6 HR, 42 RBI, 4.86 RC/27

Similar to Garko, the projections for AstroCab would indicate that BJH thinks that the Cabrera that thrived in the latter portion of 2007 is what will be showing up at AL ballparks next summer as his RC/27 is nearly identical to that of the Asdrubal v.2007 (4.88 in 2007 to a projected 4.86). Interestingly, the projections cover only 110 games, which explain why the RBI totals look a little on the low side. Another stat that jumps out is the 15 projected SB, as (because Asdrubal didn't steal any bases with the parent club) it is easy to forget that he swiped a combined 25 bases in Akron and Buffalo last year before getting called up to the Tribe. For a 21-year-old player, still adapting to MLB (though doing so very quickly), the projections are wildly positive as his progression as a player and his readiness to contribute consistent AB to the Indians are justified by the numbers.

Josh Barfield

.273 BA / .315 OBP / .385 SLG / .701 OPS, 5 HR, 33 RBI, 4.21 RC/27

It couldn't all be positive, could it? While Barfield's projections are...shall we say, underwhelming, it actually is encouraging as it represents a rebound (of sorts) from his nightmarish 2007 season. The numbers actually slot pretty evenly in somewhere between his 2006 season with the Padres and last year. Apparently, BJH thinks that the real Josh Barfield falls somewhere in the middle of those two seasons; which, in a way, is positive as at least it indicates that the player that we saw man 2B in an Indians' uniform last year was not as good as it gets for Barfield. That being said, his OBP is still embarrassingly low and the 2008 projection of 15 BB only reminds us that Barfield has all of 44 BB in his 1,022 plate appearances in MLB. Oof.

Jhonny Peralta

.276 BA / .348 OBP / .445 SLG / .793 OPS, 20 HR, 79 RBI, 5.51 RC/27

Back on the positive side of the ledger, BJH sees a nice improvement for Mr. Lasik. All of his peripherals are up as Jhonny moves closer to the 2005 form

(though not quite in the same stratosphere) that quickened pulses around town. After 2007 and this projection, it would seem that Peralta projects to a consistent .280 hitter with an OPS around .800, about 20 HR and 80 RBI. In this time when numbers are (allegedly) no longer inflated, that's a pretty nice RH stick in the bottom ½ of the order.

Casey Blake

.258 BA / .331 OBP / .429 SLG / .760 OPS, 16 HR, 59 RBI, 4.71 RC/27

The Beard is (not surprisingly) not one of the favorites of the number-crunchers, and these projections are a pretty good indication why. While the numbers are not dreadful, they are simply average and are thought by most to be about what a very average MLB player can do. A .260 BA, 15 HR, and 60 RBI over the course of a full season almost fits the textbook of an "average" player and points to the reason that Blake evokes such a big chasm between his critics and his supporters. His supporters see a solid, if unspectacular, player whose versatility and ability to fill in where needed make him a valuable asset. My buddy C-Badd is so enamored with Blake that he believes that he can present a convincing argument that Blake is "the best ATHLETE to ever don a Tribe uni" (yes, you read that right) because of his jack-of-all-trades ability. On the other side, the naysayers will point out that Caasey Blaake (that's AAAA) is nothing more than a glorified AAA player who has been given full MLB seasons to post his mediocre numbers. The troubling trend that seems to have found some footing is that Blake is penciled in to play every day (perhaps at the expense of higher-ceiling youngsters) and, if his 2007 2nd half is any indication of what 2008 holds for the 34-year-old, the downward spiral has begun (.835 OPS in 2006, .777 OPS in 2007, projected .760 OPS in 2008). Recognizing the drop-off before Blake already has one foot off the cliff will be vital to the continued development of the Tribe as failing to do so will take AB away from young players who project as more than a simple "solid" MLB player.

David Dellucci

.250 BA / .344 OBP / .425 SLG / .769 OPS, 6 HR, 22 RBI, 4.94 RC/27

If one can honestly call a .769 OPS projection a prediction of a "bounce back" year, here it is. While BJH2K8 certainly is no fan of The Looch, at least it sees an improvement from his 2007 to the tune of 90 points higher in his

OPS. The HR and RBI numbers look very low, mainly because they're based off of 43 games (here's hoping that they know something we don't), so as long as you figure he'll play twice as many as part of a platoon (allegedly) and 12 HR and 44 RBI from ½ of an OF isn't too bad. Is it worth the too-long contract given his prior to last year? Certainly not, but if Dellucci can rebound somewhat and start hitting RHP again, the Indians will (at the very least) have a LH hitter to break up their RH-heavy bottom of the lineup.

Jason Michaels

.278 BA / .353 OBP / .415 SLG / .768 OPS, 6 HR, 30 RBI, 5.02 RC/27

The "Tour of Mediocrity" continues as Michaels numbers look alarmingly like the ones that we've seen for two years now as it seems that...wait for it...Jason Michaels is a decent platoon OF and probably best suited as a 4th OF. Actually, the projected numbers would constitute Michaels' best year in a Cleveland uniform while it is still far from Michaels' 2005 season that somehow convinced the Indians that he was ready for a full-time gig in the AL. As long as he is simply being counted on to constitute ½ of the Artist Now Commonly Known as Dellichaels, Michaels will do fine to face LHP and serve as a defensive replacement. However, seeing as how he may be the more expensive version of a redundancy on the Indians' roster (The Ben Francisco Treat being the cheaper version), it wouldn't be too surprising to see Michaels return to the NL via a trade where he may be more suited as a RH OF off the bench.

Grady Sizemore

.285 BA / .384 OBP / .504 SLG / .888 OPS, 26 HR, 80 RBI, 6.73 RC/27

Those expecting that big "breakout" year from SuperSizemore one of these years will again be disappointed if the BJH projections hold true. Disappointed, that is, until you remember that a 25-year-old is projected to post a .888 OPS with 25 HR-25-SB ability is slated to play Gold Glove CF for the Tribe. With a lower projected OBP (.390 in 2007), a higher projected SLG (.462 in 2007), it would seem that BJH thinks that Sizemore will increase his XBH (though not quite to his fabulous 2006 season of 92 XBH) while slightly lowering his propensity for K (projected 23.3% K rate in 2008 vs. 24.7% K rate in 2007). For Sizemore, the projection looks very much like his 2006 campaign, with a little more power in play...for a top-of-the-order, that's about all you can ask for.

Franklin Gutierrez

.275 BA / .334 OBP / .445 SLG / .779 OPS, 13 HR, 45 RBI, 5.16 RC/27

Those looking for an Alex Rios-type year from Frank the Tank may just need just a little patience...patience. But there are certainly positives in the projections, most importantly a higher OBP (projected .334 vs. a .318 OBP in 2007), a lower K rate, and a higher BB rate. For a young player still finding his way, those are extremely positive things (if they come to pass) and while his power numbers would appear to trend slightly down (.445 projected SLG vs. .472 SLG in 2007), the 13 projected HR and 45 projected RBI are only the product of a projected 115 games. Factoring those numbers over 162 games, those numbers would fall closer to a 18 HR, 65 RBI season for a 25-year-old player (in February) with all of 444 plate appearances heading into the 2008 season.

Travis Hafner

.290 BA / .405 OBP / .543 SLG / .948 OPS, 33 HR, 115 RBI, 7.85 RC/27

According to BJH2K8 (at least), I'd like to be the first to welcome Pronk back into the fold. I don't know who that imposter was in the #48 jersey last year or who this "Hafner" guy was, but a projected .948 OPS is a full .101 higher than 2007 with 9 more HR and 15 RBI. While it doesn't forecast a return to the 2004 (.993 OPS), 2005 (1.003 OPS), or 2006 (1.097 OPS), at least it would represent a move back in the right direction. Before getting too excited, it is important to remember (obviously) that these are merely projections, but the thought of seeing the "real" Pronk stride menacingly to the plate makes me wish it wasn't December.

Unfortunately, some of the younger players did not have projections done by BJH2K8 - Andy Marte, Ben Francisco, Shin-Soo Choo - which are posted on Fangraphs, which is too bad as it would be interesting to see how Marte would compare against Blake, The Frisco Kid against Michaels, and the BLC against Dellucci. But, we'll play the hand dealt to us and wait for Baseball Prospectus' 2008 edition for the complete listing.

Without knowing those, though, the results are still intriguing for the Tribe. Victor, Grady, and Peralta are thought to have comparable years to 2007 with Hafner rebounding nicely back into form. Garko, Asdrubal, and Gutz look to build on their

first taste of success by establishing some consistency and Blake, Dellucci, and Michaels form the "meh" brigade. Not too far off what many were thinking as 2007 ended, but interesting nonetheless to see it validated (somewhat) by people who have taken the time to crunch the numbers and make projections for 2008.

Up next - the Pitchers.