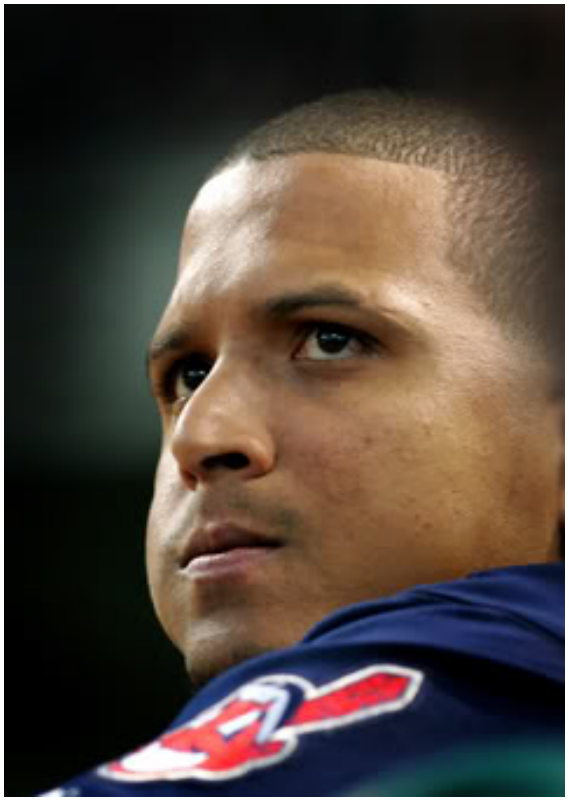
In case you missed it in the midst of a nice couple of days of reprieve from Cleveland Indians baseball with the All-Star Break, Victor "El Capitan" Martinez made the declaration in St. Louis that he wants to "retire as an Indian". This has inspired some interesting debate on our message boards amongst fans. Can we realistically keep Victor in Cleveland? Does it make sense with tens of millions tied up in Travis Hafner and with prospects Matt LaPorta and Carlos Santana close to big league ready? Paulie C weighs in with his thoughts ...



In case you missed it in the midst of a nice couple of days of reprieve from Cleveland Indians baseball with the All-Star Break, El Capitan made the declaration in St. Louis that he wants to "retire as an Indian" ...and suddenly, just when I thought it was time to take a load off for a couple of days, we're off in that direction talking about some very serious topics regarding the future make-up of this team.

Firstly, let's get the emotions related to this idea right out in the open - Victor is El Capitan, he is quickly becoming the "face of the franchise" and perhaps the most popular player on the team (at least among fans not in the 18-25 female demographic who have another favorite), he has become the linchpin in the Indians' batting order, and he has done all of this while growing up and maturing as a Cleveland Indian before our very eyes.

Victor is awesome...Victor is the embodiment of the Cleveland Indians...in the ultimate gesture of acceptance, he's graduated to the one-name universe on the

North Coast, known simply as "Victor".

OK, all that is out on the table right?

Now clear off that table and let's remove emotion from this discussion and talk about extending Victor Martinez in very real, tangible terms as to how he fits on this team past his 2010 contract and what extending would mean, monetarily, to the Indians.

Take away emotion?

But he's Victor!

I know, but let's look at this situation rationally without getting all tied up in the emotional aspects (which do play a role, but not as large a role as other factors) when examining the prudence of extending Victor past 2010.

With emotion removed from the equation, the biggest factor in extending Vic past the 2010 season is position and the players that are currently in the organization that would seem to be jockeying for the C or 1B position that Victor would almost certainly play. This is relevant because, inarguably, the Indians' 4 best position player prospects playing at AA or above are:

Carlos Santana - AA Catcher
Matt LaPorta - AAA 1B/LF
Mike Brantley - AAA LF/CF
Nick Weglarz - AA LF/1B

Obviously, these names represent prospects and prospects are just that, but the positions that they play may hold the key as to how prudent it is to extend Victor seeing as how all four of these players figure into 2011 plans at the very latest and each impacts a position that Victor could find himself playing.

That is, if Santana starts 2010 in AAA and works his way up to the parent club at some point next year or stands at the precipice when 2010 ends, one would think that he's our starting catcher in 2011, which is the year that Victor is presently no longer under contract with the Indians.

If Santana's behind the dish (and yes, a lot can go wrong between now and then),

then the logical move is to put Victor at 1B, where he has already started to slide, right?

Absolutely, at least in the short-term as LaPorta's ability to play LF certainly gives the Indians some great flexibility there as to where he ends up and an outfield of LaPorta, Sizemore, and Choo is certainly one that everyone can get behind (like a month ago) with Victor logging much of the time at 1B or bouncing back and forth between C and 1B.

But the eventuality of a Santana-C, Victor-1B, LaPorta-LF equation is not as simple as it looks when you factor in the arrival of Brantley and, later, Weglarz to play either LF (as Sizemore and Choo aren't going anywhere) or LF/1B in Wegz's case. When either of those two arrives, LaPorta's flexibility to man 1B suddenly opens a spot up for either to play LF on an everyday, but it also takes 1B out of the equation for Martinez in the long-term.

Assuming then, that the development of Santana, LaPorta, Brantley, and Weglarz continue, you're talking about four players for three positions (C, 1B, LF) with two of those positions being the ones that Martinez would figure to play. Of course, the giant caveat in this is that prospects are not 100% guaranteed to continue to develop, to meet expectations, or even to stay healthy and on their current career path.

That being said though, the Indians have to weigh the potential and projectability of these players (taking into account their affordability as young players at the same time) when determining whether committing more years and dollars to Martinez past 2010 is a sound baseball and financial decision.

While weighing the potential of those young players, it's important to note that Martinez's value diminishes somewhat as a 1B, mainly because his bat is exceptional as a C but becomes merely average as a 1B if you're talking about comparing it to the AL average for the two positions:

2009 AL Average - 1B

.272 BA / .356 OBP / .488 SLG / .844 OPS

2009 AL Average - C

.251 BA/ .312 OBP / .403 SLG / .715 OPS

Why is this relevant?

Victor Martinez

2004 - .283 BA / .359 OBP / .492 SLG / .851 OPS
2005 - .305 BA / .378 OBP / .475 SLG / .853 OPS
2006 - .316 BA / .391 OBP / .465 SLG / .856 OPS
2007 - .301 BA / .374 OBP / .505 SLG / .879 OPS
2009 - .294 BA / .374 OBP / .485 SLG/ .859 OPS

I've excluded his 2008 injury-riddled and other than seeing that Victor is frighteningly consistent in terms of production and has put up quite a body of work over the last six years, see how those numbers are about average for a 1B in the AL, but spectacular among C in the AL?

Of course, it's possible that his numbers would improve greatly if he became a full-time 1B and was able to avoid the wear and tear of catching everyday...but it's also just as possible as the "wear and tear" of those years of catching simply taking their toll on Victor at this point, making the transition negligible in terms of production.

Regardless of whether his numbers would improve as a full-time 1B, the other mitigating factor in the possibility of Martinez being extended is the lack of DH as an option for Martinez (or any of these other players) to eventually slide into in terms of where he could go once (or is it if) this young talent arrives from the farm is blocked by the presence of Travis Hafner on the roster, both in terms of him being only able to DH and the fact that he's signed through 2012 at some pretty big numbers.

In case you forgot, the Indians are still on the hook for these numbers for Hafner after Martinez's contract runs out:

2011 - $13M
2012 - $13M
2013 - $13M club option ($2.75M buyout)

Those dollar amounts are relevant not only because they more or less guarantee

that DH is out of play as an option for Victor if the youngsters arrive ready to contribute, but also to illustrate the downside of extending players past their arbitration years, regardless of recent performance.

In case you forget, prior to signing that deal when he had just turned 30 a month earlier in 2007, Hafner had compiled a three-year line of .308 BA / .419 OBP / .611 SLG / 1.030 OPS from 2004 to 2006.

Since signing that deal (and I'm including the whole 2007 season even though he signed the extension in July of 2007), Hafner's posted a line of .254 BA / .368 OBP / .438 SLG / .806 OPS from 2007 on as the large dollar amounts kicked in for the Indians' DH.

This isn't brought up to pour salt in open wounds that everyone's aware of or to pile on Hafner, for whom injuries have certainly played a role in his downturn. Rather, I put them out there to illustrate the fact that Hafner's performance prior to his extension was elite among all MLB, certainly justifying Hafner's contract if the assumption is that Hafner would continue on the path he was walking, even if it were with slightly diminished returns as he aged. The idea being, when Hafner was extended, that Hafner would solidify the middle of the lineup for years, providing stability for the team to build around in the lineup.

How does that look just 24 months later?

And that's where this comes back to the wisdom in extending Victor, who will turn 31 this December, the same 31 years old that he will be when his contract expires at the end of the 2010 season. Let's say for a moment that the Indians decide to extend Victor at a dollar amount like $8M (which would be below market value), which means that (with Hafner) the team would have more than $20M tied up in two players, in their 30's, whose best positions at that point are going to be 1B and DH with the very real possibility that Hafner's contract becoming more of an albatross than it already is given the still-burgeoning uncertainty about his health. If the extension were to add another three to four years to Martinez's deal, the Indians are now paying for the production from Victor ages 32 through 35 at a much higher rate and with the knowledge that players do not typically "peak" during these years.

Ultimately, the prudence in extending Martinez is certainly not an open and shut debate given the depth behind him and the dollars already committed on this

roster to a defensively limited player with a track record that justified guaranteeing more years and dollars to "one of their own".

Does that mean that Victor should be traded now?

Not unless you think that Shoppach, Garko, and LaPorta can hold the fort down until Santana and Brantley arrive and thrive in MLB with no significant drop-off in production in Victor's absence if he were to be traded.

But given the Indians' depth on offense (and particularly at the positions that Martinez figures to man going forward), the Indians may be best served to use that depth at C/1B/LF to net some arms that are sorely lacking in the organization at some point in the near furture, particularly at the upper levels.

Would that "depth" include Victor?

Certainly, but it could just as easily mean one of those other names listed above (like Weglarz), though it would represent a sharp departure in strategy in going with the higher-dollar, older player over the younger, under-club-control player, particularly with other glaring holes on this team.

But bringing the emotion back into the equation, a "sharp departure" from thinking could be what keeps Martinez around under an extension, given his unquestioned importance to the organization and his leadership to the team, with the Indians using some of the depth that could be considered replacements for Martinez's bat in the lineup as fungible assets to inject the system with more arms.

How big of a role emotion plays into the decision remains to be seen as we've all learned that memories are a great thing, but that creating new memories are even better and that past results do not guarantee future performance.

If you're dealing with emotion out of the equation, extending Victor doesn't make a lot of sense for the Indians, particularly if they hold onto the players below Martinez on the depth chart.

If you're factoring in emotion, fan reaction, the idea of rewarding Victor for past contributions and hoping that he can continue to remain relatively healthy and productive, the decision is not as cut and dry.

Plus...it is Victor, after all.