With the off-season about to officially start, let's resume where we left off...oh, about three weeks ago and get back to looking at the Indians' roster as it is currently constructed and what those pieces and parts might look like for 2010. After the initial trip around the infield as Part I of the look forward, let's bring in Paulie C to help us cast our gaze past the dirt of the infield to the green grass of the outfield and to the rest of the offense.

With the off-season about to officially start, let's resume where we left off...oh, about three weeks ago and get back to looking at the Indians' roster as it is currently constructed and what those pieces and parts might look like for 2010. After the initial trip around the infield as Part I of the look forward , let's cast our gaze past the dirt of the infield to the green grass of the outfield and to the rest of the offense.

Whereas the infield alignment looks mildly settled and before getting into the muddy waters associated with the pitching staff, let's take a look at what is inarguably the strongest portion of the team (the outfield) as well as taking on the ongoing mystery revolving around The Artist Formerly Known as Pronk.

Left Field

The revolving door that has been LF for the Indians (Cordova, Lawton, Crisp, Dellichaels, Francisco...and that's avoiding the likes of Magruder, Wil Cordero, Broussard and your boy Garko, the erstwhile LF) since the "halcyon" days of Dave Justice and Richie Sexson has remained a now decade-long issue for the Indians with none of the parenthetical principals previously listed ever distinguishing himself long enough to be considered a long-term answer. Sure,

Lawton was serviceable (if overpaid) and Coco had some good years in the mid-2000s, but Coco's OPS since leaving Cleveland is .719 (85 OPS+), so even he can't legitimately be considered a potential long-term answer for the riddle that has plagued LF at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario since the late 1990s.

Into that fray steps Mike Brantley, a 22-year-old whose OPS+ of 85 in his brief stint with the Tribe in 2009 matches the number put up by Crisp in the last four years. Sample size difference to be sure (Crisp - 1,667 plate appearance; Brantley - 121 plate appearances), but Brantley's performance in Cleveland (which doesn 't look that much different than what his former fellow Brewers' farmhand Alcides Escobar did as a 22-year-old in a comparable amount of AB this year) gives the first glimmer of hope in a long, long time that the quandary of LF may finally be solved.

Truthfully, as late as August in 2009, I was ready to let Brantley start the 2010 season in Columbus. While subscribing to the idea that Brantley didn't look like he was ready for everyday MLB action (his OPS in Columbus was .711), I believed that the 2010 season could start with LaPorta in LF and Marte or Brown or a FA at 1B, with Brantley at the ready to come up to MLB at some point in 2010, a little more seasoned and a little more ready for MLB pitching.

But, not even getting into the fear that Matt LaBomba may not be able to start the season on the roster as he rehabs his injuries, if Brantley is going to be the LF of the Future, maybe it's time to make the Future and the Present meet. That is, if Brantley's going to be the LF on the team when it is supposed to hit this next window of opportunity and since no other more compelling options are available (put that hand down, Trevor), perhaps it's time to do in LF what the Indians have been so reticent to do in recent years. This off-season might be the right time to tell Mike Brantley that he's the starting LF for 2010 and give him every opportunity (along with a long leash) to prove himself, with the comfort and familiarity of knowing that he's going to be in the lineup every single day.

But wait, isn't this from the same guy that said that Carl Santana should start the 2010 season in AAA because the Indians aren't really playing for anything in 2010 and managing the service clock of their top prospects should be considered?

Yeah, that was me...but the fundamental difference between Santana and Brantley is that Mike Brantley finished nearly a full season in AAA in 2009 after a full year in AA in 2008 and has the taste of from his late-season call-up to MLB to

fall back on. Asking him to REMAIN in MLB after two full seasons in AAA and AA is a completely different animal than Santana making the jump from AA to MLB with no stops in between, particularly for a catcher. That's not to dismiss Santana as a 2010 option, only to differentiate the circumstances surrounding the two of them when the team leaves Goodyear next April.

Whereas Santana's promise is unquestioned, he still has yet to play at any level above AA and Brantley's cup of coffee in MLB last year confirmed what had been said about him as a prospect. The on-base skills apparent in his MiLB numbers (career MiLB OBP of .387) were on display in his 121 plate appearances for the Indians in 2009, boasting a respectable .358 OBP while manning LF. The power certainly wasn't there (.348 SLG) in Cleveland, though it never really has been (career .369 MiLB SLG) and for a player like Brantley, whose game is getting on base and utilizing his speed, the power is secondary, particularly when you consider his age and his bat-to-ball ability.

Besides the lack of power, one aspect of Brantley's game that did create some concern and (unlike the lack of pop, which was known) flew in the face of what he had done in MiLB was the fact that Brantley posted 19 K to 8 BB in 121 plate appearances for the Tribe after actually walking more than he struck out in the Minors (190 MiLB K to 258 MiLB BB). Again a small sample size applies, but more importantly, this doesn't look to be too much different than what Brantley has done throughout his Minor League career during his first exposure to a new level

Going right down his Minor League numbers, you can see that Brantley's first month or two at a new level often resulted in more strikeouts than walks, but that the numbers went decidedly in the other direction as the season went on and as adjustments to a new level of pitching were likely made:

2009 - Columbus (AAA)

April - 14 K, 7 BB in 69 AB
May through August - 34 K, 52 BB in 388 AB

His entire 2008 season was spent in AA Huntsville (in the Brewers' organization) where he notched 50 BB to his 27 K, but when Brantley was first promoted from Single-A to AA in June of 2007, the adjustment period of that first month or so is again apparent:

2007 - Huntsville (AA)

June - 10 K, 8 BB in 59 AB
July through September - 18 K, 27 BB in 156 AB

Even in 2006, when he had his first taste of Single-A ball, the trend can be seen again:

2006 - West Virginia (A)

April - 8 K, 5 BB in 56 AB
May through September - 43 K, 57 BB in 307 AB

While this doesn't represent a major concern, it will be interesting to see how Brantley makes his adjustments to MLB, considering that the level of pitching is unmatched and is light years ahead of anything he's previously seen. That adjustment period (which may or may not come) is another reason that Brantley should be considered the LF from Day 1 of 2010. He's experienced MLB for the first time and should now be given every opportunity to adjust to it, in light of no other viable alternatives (Crowe...why is your hand still up) and to see if he can finally stop the revolving door that LF has been from spinning.

Center Field

In light of all of this overly exhaustive analysis, let me just sum up the outlook for 2010 at this position with three words - get healthy, Grady...please.

OK, maybe four words.

Seriously though, what can reasonably be expected of Sizemore?

According to Terry Pluto, he's "nearly 100 percent recovered following elbow and hernia surgery" , putting to rest the notion that the Indians were doing long-term damage to their very own Vinnie Chase (who certainly doesn't look like recovering from the injuries have caused him to have any less fun) as he played through pain down the stretch in 2009.

But even if his healthy social calendar remains filled and his arm and g-g-g-groin injury
(sorry, I have to link that as often as possible) are now close to 100%, what can be expected of Grady?

Before getting into that, let's not forget what Sizemore accomplished last year despite his injuries as he ended up ranked 5th in AL in OPS among CF (behind Torii Hunter, Marlon Byrd, Denard Span, and Adam Jones) with the injuries, this after finishing in the top 2 among all CF in ALL OF MLB in 2005, 2006, and 2008. Even in 2007 (his down year), he was 5th in MLB in OPS among CF, so 2009 certainly represented a disappointment.

Do those rankings in OPS represent an elite CF?

Absolutely, but what's disappointing about Grady's 2009 season is that it looked to be a potentially defining year of his career in terms of whether he stayed on the steady path he was on or whether he finally experienced the break-out season that many have predicted for him. Instead, it remained mired in mediocrity (because of the injuries) and broke up this little spell of consistent production that he's compiled since becoming the everyday CF:

2005 - 123 OPS+
2006 - 132 OPS+
2007 - 122 OPS+
2008 - 128 OPS+

2009 was supposed to answer whether those numbers represented what Grady was and what he figures to be or whether he still was on that "Duke Snider/Barry Bonds path"
, where a jump in production is seen as a player matures into his late 20's. Certainly the disappointment of 2009 remains just that, but how he comes out in 2010 (his age-27 season) will start to answer some questions as to whether Grady belongs among the elite in all of MLB, regardless of position, or just among the elite CF in MLB. Being "just among the elite CF in MLB" is nothing to sneeze at, but the potential for Sizemore to become more than what we've seen has certainly always seemed to be there and 2010 should be his opportunity to attain that potential.

On a team in which he's one of the veterans and one of the "known"

quantities, the leadership reins that Grady seemed ready to take in the second half of 2008 needs to found once more.

Right Field

In 2008, SS Choo finished 5th in the AL in OPS (at .946) among players with 350 AB or more. This year, using the same criteria (350 AB or more) he finished 16th in the AL in OPS by finishing with an OPS of .883.

That's 5th and 16th in the AL in consecutive years in OPS.

Want to know how many players ranked in the Top 20 for each of the last two years using that 350 AB mark as the minimum in the AL in terms of OPS?

Eight - Alex Rodriguez, Kevin Youkilis, Miguel Cabrera, JD Drew, Carlos Pena, Evan Longoria, Justin Morneau, and Big League Choo.

In a season of disappointment, The BLC proved that his 2008 season was no fluke and his consistency in 2009 all but guarantees that he'll be patrolling RF for the Indians for 2010 and likely beyond as the likelihood of the Indians buying up some of his arbitration years (2011, 2012 and 2013) increased as the season wound down.

Designated Hitter

Rather than intoning some variation of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and making jokes about albatrosses around necks, let's focus instead on Travis Hafner and what he legitimately figures to bring to the batter's box in 2010. Of course, the first question relevant to that topic is not what he figures to bring to the batter's box, but instead how often he figures to be in the actual batter's box in 2010.

After the cloak-and-dagger affair regarding Hafner's injuries and what exactly the issue was/is (and if anyone can get a definitive answer on this, I'm all ears), the rhetoric from the offices at Carnegie and Ontario that Hafner is now a year-and-a-half removed from his surgery and that he is getting healthier sound eerily similar to what we've heard for about two years now. Pardon us if we've grown a little tired of waiting for Pronk to re-appear, but from the time that Hafner came back from a stint on the DL on June 5th of 2009, he posted a pedestrian line

of .273 BA / .352 OBP / .455 SLG / .806 OPS...but that's not the most disconcerting part about those 77 games that he played to finish the season. No, that would fall to the fact that he started in 6 consecutive games twice from the beginning of June on, once in mid-July and once in mid-August. Outside of those two 6-game stretches, Hafner did not appear in the lineup on an everyday basis, despite the fact that his physical exertion was confined to simply swinging.

How often will Hafner play this year...75% of the games, 80%?

Does anyone even want to venture a guess?

More importantly, in that percentage of games that Hafner doesn't figure to play in because of rest needed or for whatever reason, who figures in for those at-bats at DH?

Would the Indians be content to simply let everyday players take days at DH, opening spots in the lineup for what would figure to be the bench (Crowe, Marte, Donald, Toregas, Gimenez, etc.) ostensibly taking those AB?

With the additional news that LaPorta will be out until 4 to 6 months (which means February at the earliest, April at the latest and Opening Day 2010 is April 5th...ahem), is it more feasible that the Indians go out and get that 1B/DH type to fill in at 1B and spell Hafner when he needs a break?

I suppose the Indians could find some AB for the guys like Marte or Jordan Brown, who figure in (somehow) as 1B/DH/etc. options, but would the Indians consider signing a veteran bat (preferably RH) to add to the mix?

The pickings are undeniably slim, and looking at this list , I can't say that a name really jumps out as even a reclamation project who could sit on the bench and wait for random AB...Matt Stairs, anyone? Eric Hinske? Kevin Millar?

Seeing as how there's no chance that signing one of those guys is the best use of available assets or playing time, we're back to the idea that the Indians have to hope that Hafner stays relatively healthy and effective enough while healthy (he did have a .910 OPS when he went on the DL at the end of April this past year) that he doesn't become a middle-of-the-order "presence" who weighs down the lineup instead of anchoring it. If Hafner still needs his rest, the AB probably go to Marte or Crowe or Jordan Brown (assuming any or all of them are

on the 2010 roster), giving the starters a day to DH.

If Hafner is "healthy" and continues to post an OPS around .800?

Wake me up at the end of the 2012 season so I can contribute a portion of the $2.75M necessary to buy out his 2013 option.

Bench

From the likes of Wyatt Toregas (until Santana arrives), Jason Donald (assuming he's not the starting 2B), Chris Gimenez (still having value...just not as anything close to an everyday player), Andy Marte (still RH and still cheap), Jordan Brown (although a LH bat on a team that is flush with them may preclude his presence on the roster) and Trevor Crowe (who needs to show that his speed and defense are for real as a 4th OF), the Indians have the makings of a potentially strong, if inexperienced bench that should fill out the roster for the league minimum. None of the players figure to legitimately force their way into plans (except Donald), but most of these players have played the part-time role in MLB already and the success of the 2010 season certainly doesn't hinge on any of their performances.

_____

The uncertainty around DH and the "wet behind the ears" look of the bench shouldn't diminish the fact that the Indians, led by their outfielders' continued maturation, should be a good offensive club in 2010. It will not always be smooth sailing as young players adapt to MLB (like Brantley) or attempt to re-capture former success (like Sizemore and Hafner), but the combined efforts of the offensive pieces in place should put the Indians in position to win a number of games in 2010.

Whether the 2010 pitching can keep them in that position to win games is an entirely different story...