The Indians finally made a "significant" foray into the FA market as they signed Russell Branyan to a one-year deal for $2M with another $1M in incentives and a $5M mutual option. He returns to the Indians after posting career highs in HR and RBI in 116 games with the Mariners last year, which he spent exclusively as a 1B. Branyan's modus operandi is well-known and he's a polarizing figure for nearly everyone who has watched him blast majestic HR and emulate a windmill in consecutive AB.

Everybody knows what the Indians are getting in Branyan, a guy who strikes out a lot, a guy who walks a lot, and a guy who hits the most awe-inspiring HR you've ever seen when he makes connection with the ball - all of this is known. Where the cloudiness starts to emerge is when you start to examine what Branyan's role projects to be with the 2010 Tribe as the initial talk this off-season was that the Indians were looking for a veteran bat that would play the role of a reserve/bench player to complement the young lineup by being able to move around the diamond and outfield.

Despite this being the Indians' stated desire, Branyan allegedly chose the Indians over the based on the idea that he was going to get more playing time with the Tribe. Seeing as how Tampa had a tailor-made role for him, as the LH complement to Pat Burrell as a DH, it makes me wonder how often Branyan is going to find himself in the lineup for the Indians...or at least how his role was presented to him in any negotiations that led him to believe that he'd see more playing time in Cleveland than he would in Tampa. If you believe what Ken Rosenthal reports , Branyan was sold on Cleveland with the idea that the Indians intend on getting Branyan "everyday at-bats at multiple corner positions" while "the Rays had less playing time to offer. They would have used Branyan mostly as a DH, and also in right field."

"Everyday at-bats at multiple corner positions" causes a bit of a problem though, as it can be questioned as to whether Branyan can legitimately be considered a corner OF or even a 3B anymore at this point in his career, particularly in light of his back issues that caused him to miss the final month of the 2009 season. Just looking at Branyan's recent usage in the field, he's played 100 games at 3B over the course of the last four seasons in and has played LF in 34 games since the 2003 season, yet the idea is that he's being considered as an option for 3B and the corner OF positions in 2010 for the Tribe?

Perhaps the Indians envision using him in a 4-corners role (1B/3B/LF/RF) as well as using him as a DH and maybe he's just taking Marte's "spot" (if that ever even existed) on the roster, but a closer look starts to reveal how the Indians figure to use Branyan and how the dominoes would fall around him.

While the Indians may be selling that 4-corners role idea, I'm just not buying Branyan at 3B (where the Indians have every reason to play Peralta everyday, if for no other reason than to attempt to increase his trade value) or in the outfield, where he has never excelled and has only played in 13 games over the last three seasons.

What does that leave him with, outside of a sporadic start (maybe) at 3B or in LF?

Ultimately, we're talking about Branyan as a 1B and as a DH...or at least DH insurance.

Follow the line of thinking that Branyan is being brought on with the very real possibility that he's the Indians' 1B (at least to start the season), a notion backed up by Buster Olney :

The Indians were expected to try Matt LaPorta at first base, but there is concern that he may need more time to be groomed at the position.

Branyan presumably will have a shot at being the Indians' regular first baseman, and be part of what is expected to be a good offense.

If you're following this, that would mean that LaPorta would be platooning with Branyan (please Lord, no) at 1B, or would head off to LF, which doesn't seem to be his long-term position given the presence of Brantley, for ½ of a season or a season before returning to 1B or would begin the 2010 season in AAA as a 1B because "there is concern that he may need more time to be groomed for the position". Maybe the concern is there that LaPorta's injuries will prevent him from starting the season healthy and effective, but he's been cleared for full workouts after hip and toe surgeries recently and, if a concern exists about LaPorta's health, wouldn't 1B be a position that would cause less strain on any injuries, the same way it would Branyan's back?

If Branyan is the sudden 1B (and sometime DH perhaps), mainly because that seems to be his only logical fit on the roster, particularly given the idea that the Indians sold him on "everyday AB", it would certainly seem to represent a death knell for the idea that Mike Brantley's going to be handed the starting LF job out of Spring Training. Of course, there's no smoking gun to point to that Brantley is unquestionably ready for the lineup, much less the top of the lineup, as his AAA numbers last year were still underwhelming (.711 OPS) and while he made a nice

impression on the Indians in his cup of coffee with the parent club last year, more time in AAA may benefit him.

It's possible that the Indians are looking at Branyan as a first-half 1B (and occasional DH) with the idea that they'll start the season with Branyan at 1B, LaPorta in LF, and Brantley in Columbus, but the issue that I have with that is the idea that LaPorta (who "may need more time to be groomed" as a 1B) is suddenly being bounced around the diamond to accommodate Russ Branyan. If nothing else, the Indians should be determining which position LaPorta eventually projects to and allow him to develop at that position, instead of allowing the presence of a guy like Branyan to be a major factor in the LaPorta's 2010 position in the alignment.

If Branyan is that first-half 1B (while providing insurance that Hafner's shoulder still isn't right), maybe the idea is to play him everyday in MLB, start Brantley in AAA with the idea that he needs to "force" his way onto the team instead of being handed the LF job. The end game may be play Branyan for that first half to see if Brantley is indeed ready for MLB and, if so, the Indians could flip Branyan (assuming he's playing well), moving LaPorta back to 1B and with Brantley ascending back to LF. The idea that Brantley needs to "earn" that spot is not the troubling one, rather it's the notion once again that LaPorta (who is now 25-years-old) could still be bouncing around the diamond, attempting to master two positions during a season in which he'll be trying to establish himself as the middle-of-the-order hitter he was purported to be when the Indians acquired him.

How this all shakes out and who's still standing when the music stops in this game won't be answered until Spring Training fleshes these questions out and innings and at-bats start being divvied up. Brantley could suddenly be the odd man out to start the season and LaPorta could be bouncing around the diamond as he attempts to find a toehold in MLB, all to add Russell Branyan to the mix. The upside with Branyan is there, but so is the confusion regarding how his presence on the team affects players that do figure into the Indians' plans past July of 2010. All told, Branyan arrives in Cleveland as a LH hitter in a LH-laden lineup as a likely 1B (and insurance for DH) on a team that is looking for some level of stability at the position. Whether his presence helps to stabilize the lineup or throws it into a greater state of flux is another question in a season that figures to be full of them.