With the news that SS Choo has been named AL Player of the Week in recognition of him ostensibly putting the Indians' offense on his back en route back to the .500 mark, perhaps it is time to finally acknowledge that Choo no longer projects as an elite hitter because he has arrived as one with his performance since returning to the team in the 2008 season.

If you think back to the 2008 season, as the season went into the tank and CC found his way to the Cream City, the bright spots of the offense came in the form of brilliant 2nd halves of the season for The BLC (and have you noticed how the PD and FOX8 have started referring to him as "Big League Choo") and Kelly Shoppach. Each player ranked in the top 10 in OPS in the AL after the All-Star Break among players with more than 200 plate appearances, with Choo only being outpaced by Teixiera and Melvin Mora
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While Shoppach's productiveness slowed (whether by his own volition or through his usage patterns) in 2009, Choo kept on chugging along at a steady clip as he was the only player in the AL to hit .300 with 20 HR and 20 SB last year. While those represent fairly overblown statistics, take a look at the line that Choo has compiled since his return from the DL in 2008, through Monday:
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305 BA / .400 OBP / .519 SLG / .919 OPS with 69 2B and 38 HR in 1,107 PA

Pretty impressive, right?

Sure, but they become even more so when placed in the context of the rest of MLB, using OPS+ as the ranking statistic for all players from 2008-2010 with at least 1,100 plate appearances
:

1) Albert Pujols – 189
2) Manny Ramirez – 162
3) Adrian Gonzalez – 153
4) Joe Mauer – 153
5) Lance Berkman – 150
6) Alex Rodriguez – 149
7) Prince Fielder – 147
8) Mark Teixeira – 147
9) The BLC – 146
10) Chipper Jones – 145
11) Hanley Ramirez – 145
12) Kevin Youkilis – 142
13) Ryan Braun – 140
14) Matt Holliday – 140
15) Chase Utley – 139

No…seriously, players listed below this grouping of 15 include Miggy Cabrera, Justin Morneau, Ryan Howard, Evan Longoria, Carlos Pena, and Grady Sizemore (still clocking in at #33 despite an injury-marred 2009 season). Since returning to the Indians in 2008, Choo has posted the 9th highest OPS+ in MLB and ranks 8th in OBP in that same timeframe , behind only household names Pujols, Mauer, Chipper, Manny, Berkman, Hanley, and Holliday ahead of both A-Rod and Youkilis.

We're past flash-in-the-pan territory as 1,100 plate appearances since the beginning of 2008 would certainly put forth the idea that this is who Choo is, a late bloomer who has blossomed into a truly elite hitter at the age of 26. Obviously, Choo's performance has been impressive, but just to illustrate how impressive (and more sudden) it has been against the rest of the names on that list, take a look at how many MLB plate appearances each player in the Top 10 of OPS+ had prior to the 2008 season:

Pujols – 4,741 PA
Manny – 8,352 PA
A. Gonzalez – 1,557 PA
Mauer – 1,755 PA
Berkman – 5,127 PA
A-Rod – 8,482 PA
Fielder – 1,391 PA
Teixiera – 3,246 PA
Choo – 220 PA
Chipper – 8,143 PA

How does that old "Sesame Street" song go…which of these things is not like the others?

If you think that's where Choo stands out as the outlier, in terms of success with less experience, how about this comparison among the same 10 when it comes to…wait for

it…salaries for 2010:

Pujols – $16M
Manny – $20M
A. Gonzalez – $4.75M
Mauer – $12.5M
Berkman – $14.5M
A-Rod – $32M
Fielder – $10.5M
Teixiera – $20M
Big League Choo – $461K
Chipper – $13M

The 2nd lowest salary on this list belongs to the eminently "affordable" Adrian Gonzalez, who will earn more than ten times what Choo will be paid this year. And…here's where the hand-wringing begins and the name of Scott Boras is whispered about, right?

No question, but first let's just all take a look at the absurd notion that two Yankees are on that list, with $52M being paid to those two players this year, allowing me to point your eyes to this absolute must-read from Joe Posnanski on the disparity of MLB revenues
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Getting back to Choo and the salary issue, there was the wailing and moaning and gnashing of teeth when Choo hired Boras as his agent. However, let's all remember that the only aspect of Choo's contract status that his new agent really changes is that he's unlikely to sign a long-term deal that would simply buy up his arbitration years (which end after the 2013 season) or buy out any of his Free Agent years. In fact, Anthony Castrovince has a piece up that puts forth that the Indians "approached him (Choo) and his new agent, Scott Boras, about a contract extension" as the "club attempted to sign him through 2014 with an option for 2015."

While Choo and Boras rejected those overtures, let's not forget perhaps the most important part of the equation here as Choo is still under contract with the Indians through the 2013 season (assuming this Military Service issue is rectified) and in July of that 2013 season, SS Choo will turn 31 years old.

Starting this coming off-season through the off-season prior to the 2013 season, the Indians may find themselves embroiled in arbitration hearings or exchanging numbers with Boras, attempting to find contractual middle ground to avoid said arbitration hearings. Even if Choo does go to arbitration every year until Choo's contract is up (and if he's going to, let's see him earn that high arbitration number that Boras is going to throw out there), the Indians hold his rights until he's 31 years old.

While Indians' fans are quick to tab Choo as the next Indian to take the fast train out of town, realize that he's the Indians' property for all of this season, next season, in 2012, and in 2013. Perhaps the Indians try to extend him again (as they already did) or buy out some of his arbitration years at set dollar amounts (as Boras did with another one of his clients, Prince

Fielder, a few years back), but the idea of locking him up much further out than 2013 may not be a prudent avenue to travel for a team like the Indians.

Why is not prudent?

Again, Choo will be 31 when his contract expires and does anyone remember another late blooming slugger among the league's elite hitters that was extended by the Indians as he was entering his 30's?

Lest anyone forget, Travis Hafner signed his current contract when he was 30, coming off of a 3-year stretch in which he compiled an OPS+ of 170 and a line of .308 BA / .419 OBP / .611 SLG / 1.030 OPS from 2004 to 2006 and while there is certainly a difference in positional value (a RF vs. a DH), let's not be too eager to assume that Choo's production is going to continue into his early-to-mid-30's, much less his late 30's.

Looking past the idea that every player is not going to fall off the proverbial cliff like Hafner did, teams like the Indians aren't going to become consistent winners by paying players salaries dictated by the market when they're 31 and over in this current economic system in MLB. Rather, the way that they're going to stay competitive is by benefiting from having as many players as possible like Choo – young(ish), productive, under club control, and cheap – on the roster.

That's not to say that Choo becomes less useful once he enters his arbitration years, as production at the level at which Choo has provided it for the equivalent of two seasons now will still be a bargain (relatively speaking) as he goes through the arbitration process for the next three off-seasons. Rather, the reminder on Choo's age and the Indians' current…um, standing in MLB should be recalled as the Indians traveled down the "lock-up-our-own-players" at market prices back in 2007 with Hafner and Westbrook (29-years-old when he signed his extension) and the last two years have borne out how that strategy plays out in a market like Cleveland.

Manny Acta may be right in a sense when he says that Indians' fans should "enjoy him while he's here" in regards to appreciating The BLC when he's donning a Cleveland uniform as the idea of signing him past the expiration of his current contract may not be in the Indians' best interests. Don't confuse the two discussions of the Indians locking in Choo's arbitration years (the preferred path) as opposed to signing him past 2013 (not so much), just realize that him being under contract through 2013 doesn't preclude anyone from "enjoying him" and marveling at the transformation that he's made from a middling OF prospect in the Mariners' system to an elite middle-of-the-rotation order just hitting his prime in Cleveland. However, that enjoyment shouldn't result in any sort of idea that the Indians' best chances of competing in 2014 include Choo because, as we've learned all too regularly, past and even current performance does not guarantee future results.

So, enjoy the current performance and even some of the future results because it's not going away anytime soon, just don't fall under the spell of the idea that locking up a 31-year-old Shin-Soo Choo until he's 36 or 37 is the best path for the Indians to travel when, not if, the negotiations between the Indians and Boras become contentious and public.

Even when they do and with that subtext always simmering below the surface every time Choo excels over the course of nearly the next four years, “enjoy” The BLC not “while he’s here” but instead, **because** he’s here.