With news that Matt LaPorta is headed off to Columbus to make room for Andy Marte (apparently fully recovered from the ingrown hair on his stomach), he does so due to losing playing time to Austin Kearns, Rusty Branyan, and recently to Shelley Duncan. Lest anyone forget, two of those players were signed to Minor League deals in the off-season and Branyan was signed to a one-year deal with an option for a second year in a contract that most people found puzzling at the time as it ostensibly placed Branyan at 1B, a position that was thought to be LaPorta's eventual landing spot on the team.

While LaPorta was coming off of off-season surgeries to his hip and his toe, the intimation that LaPorta would bounce back and forth from 1B to LF while occasionally getting some time at DH as one of the only RH bats on the 25-man roster ruled the day when Spring Training broke. With the "emergence" of Kearns and the continued AB given to Branyan, LaPorta has found himself buried deeper and deeper on Manny Acta's bench. Certainly his performance when given the chance to play has been a factor as he's sitting on a line of .218 BA / .290 OBP / .277 SLG / .567 OPS with just 5 extra-base hits in 131 plate appearances.

However, a more disturbing development (other than just a young player, coming off of injury, struggling to succeed in MLB) is at hand here when you look at the frequency in which LaPorta was used, particularly recently...and, by the way, I'm using "played" to mean that he started the game and played a decent portion of it and doesn't include a pinch-hitting appearance:
Games 1-3: Played
Game 4: DNP
Games 5-10: Played
Game 11: DNP
Game 12: Played
Game 13: DNP
Games 14-18: Played
Game 19: DNP
Game 20: Played
Game 21: DNP
Game 22: Played
Game 23 DNP

Game 24-25: Played
Game 26: DNP
Game 27-28: Played
Game 29-31: DNP
Game 32-35 Played
Game 36: DNP
Game 37: Played
Game 38: DNP
Game 39: Played
Game 40: DNP
Game 41: Played
Game 42: DNP
Game 43: Played
Game 44: DNP
Game 45: Played
Game 46: DNP
Game 47: Played
Game 48: DNP
Game 49: Played
Game 50-51: DNP
Game 52: Played
Game 53-54: DNP
Game 55: Played

Just to parse through that, LaPorta has not started consecutive games since mid-May and started 15 of the 27 games in May. At first blush, given LaPorta's off-season surgeries, one would think that the Indians were simply protecting a still-recovering LaPorta, unable to convince him to go on the DL to fully heal, rest, and rehab. That thought – that perhaps LaPorta's lingering injuries have prevented him from playing on consecutive games – now looks to be tested as the idea that LaPorta will go to Columbus to get "more consistent at-bats" is the new organizational stance, as stated by Acta :
We just don't think there are enough at-bats for him…The way that [Austin] Kearns has swung the bat, and the way that we arranged for Russell [Branyan] to play about five games a week, it's not fair to the kid. We feel like he should be down there playing every day until we can find enough at-bats for him.

Just to be clear, the players that are blocking LaPorta (who was unquestionably struggling) are all over the age of 30, with two of them being signed to minor-league deals in the off-season. Particularly glaring is the fact that Shelley Duncan has started 5 games of the last 14 games while LaPorta has started 6. While results certainly play a role here, Acta continued in his explanation by saying, "we did give him an opportunity at the beginning, and he was getting some at-bats… He needs to go down there, get at-bats, improve and then, later on, if anything happens up here, he can come up and play every day. Right now, with Kearns hitting third, Branyan being one of our threats and Travis [Hafner] being our DH, at-bats are not there for him."

There's certainly something to be said for veteran presence in a lineup, but there's also something to be said for giving consistent AB to players (particularly those that are now 25) that are were highly-touted prospects as long ago as 2 years ago. If this were an aberration or simply an instance where a young Indians player might benefit from taking a break from MLB pitching to gain more confidence, then a benefit of the doubt would be in order. Additionally, if the LaPorta's injuries prevented him from playing every day, the idea that they were playing him as often as his health would allow and that they wanted him to learn and compete at the Big League level while getting healthy could buy some organizational goodwill.

However, you don't have to look further than LaPorta's usage last year when he was called up (only to mire on the Cleveland bench before being sent back down, starting only 12 of the 20 games he was on the 25-man roster in May) to see an instance of a young, potential "core" player who found themselves playing sporadically or not at all, blocked ostensibly by roster filler.

Lest anyone forget, LaPorta didn't receive consistent AB last May because the Indians were playing Ben Francisco (now a 4th OF in Philly) and Ryan Garko (who recently passed through waivers and is on Texas' AAA team) as the club made one last "effort" in May and June while LaPorta, fresh off of half-of-a-season terrorizing AAA pitchers, waited patiently for his turn. Upon his return, he posted a .273 BA / .315 OBP / .489 SLG / .805 OPS before ending the season with an injury in LF in Boston.

Perhaps Matt LaPorta goes to Columbus and finds his stroke while the Indians "showcase" Austin Kearns and Russell Branyan to net better prospects…but to what end?

At what point will a player like Matt LaPorta (assuming health, which is not a given) be given an extended chance to show that he belongs or that he has the ability to adjust to MLB?

Does the quality of the prospect that the Indians figure to get for either Kearns or Branyan make up for LaPorta missing 2 months of MLB plate appearances if Matt LaPorta truly is still supposed to be the middle-of-the-order RH bat that is so sorely needed in the Indians' lineup past 2010?

While this story may eventually have a happy ending, with LaPorta re-establishing his confidence and his stroke in AAA while getting fully healthy and able to "play every day" coming back up when Kearns and/or Branyan make their way off of the roster. However, the scary underside of recent history has told us that it is just as likely is that he toils in Columbus as other highly-touted prospects (much younger than him) have done.

With only 329 MLB plate appearances to his credit, the Indians head into mid-June with a Columbus lineup that looks closer to what most people thought the mid-June lineup would look like in Cleveland as the 25-year-old who was supposed to be the near-MLB-ready bat in the Sabathia deal heads down I-71 in an attempt to force his way into a real chance on the parent club, something that has eluded him to date.