As we all celebrate the news that Asdrubal is back and The BLC looks to be close on his heels to rejoin the Indians' lineup at end of the week while envisioning a top-to-middle of the lineup that features Cabrera, Choo, Santana, and LaPorta, the question becomes not where Cabrera and Choo figure to return to (as that's fairly obvious), but rather which players will find themselves out of the lineup as a result of their return.

Starting in the infield, with Cabrera returning to SS, it seems that the question of whether Jason Donald should have be given the 2B job with Jayson Nix evolving into a Utility role or whether Nix should keep his 2B job with Donald going to Columbus because "he's going to play every day...somewhere" found an answer as Donald (rightfully) will move to 2B and Nix will stick around in a Utility role.

What I find interesting in this discussion is the lack of including 3B in the mix specifically as Nix has played 3B in his career and (maybe this is because Ive been the lead cheerleader for Jason Donald since Spring Training) I see no reason that the Indians couldn't go forward with a more defensive-minded infield that follows the move Donald over to 2B to accommodate Asdrubal's return by having 3B handled by Nix.

Before you utter the name that appears to be misspelled, consider this:

Jayson Nix (as an Indian) – 2010
.265 BA / .322 OBP / .542 SLG / .864 OPS in 91 PA over 21 games

Jason Donald – 2010
.276 BA / .326 OBP / .423 SLG / .749 OPS in 178 PA over 49 games

Jhonny Peralta – 2010
.252 BA / .314 OBP / .403 SLG / .717 OPS in 350 PA over 84 games

Despite the fact that I think that all of these measures of a player's defense are wildly divergent and can't assert any conclusions definitively, anyone want to take a guess where I think the weakest link is among these three in the field?

If Nix's offense is an aberration (and I think that it is), maybe the door opens for Peralta or it's possible that the Indians could even give Andy Marte a chance to linger around the periphery of the 25-man roster. While I certainly understand Peralta's track record and his contract situation, which of the three players legitimately figures into the 2011 and beyond mix?

Here's a hint – it isn't the player who has had Lasik...

If we were living in an ideal world, the Indians would find somebody interested in Peralta and move him, return notwithstanding. While Jon Heymann asserts that Peralta has "very little value", the Padres are allegedly interested in Miguel Tejada (who Heymann says has "limited value" in the aforementioned piece), so there is some interest in powerless, defensively-challenged 3B out there. It may just be a matter of whether the Indians accept a lesser offer and cover some of Peralta's salary to move him from the 2010 team.

While that action may be seen as rash by some, have we already forgotten what the removal of Branyan from the roster accomplished as it opened opportunities for young players who do project as contributors past 2010?

Though we are in July of the 2010 season, every move that the Indians should be making should be not for this week or next week or even next month as (5-game winning streak duly considered), we're looking past the 2010 season from this point forward.

With that in mind, with Choo returning soon, the Indians could certainly go back to their old OF arrangement of Kearns-Crowe-Choo and send Mike Brantley off to Columbus again as his performance, even since his demotion, more than justifies him heading back down I-71. Not to pile on a 23-year-old Brantley here, but his cumulative OPS from his two stints with the Tribe is .442. That .442 OPS is the 2nd lowest in all of MLB for players with 100 PA or more, ahead of only Brandon Wood. His OPS is 72 points lower than Louie V and 88 points lower than Blue Lou Marson, both of whom are now plying their trade in the capital city of Ohio.
Seriously…

Lest you think the performance of Brantley has been appreciably different from his first and second stint, here are numbers for each stretch of games:

Pre-demotion

.156 BA / .229 OBP / .188 SLG / .416 OPS in 36 PA over 9 games

Post-demotion
.169 BA / .219 OBP / .237 SLG / .456 OPS in 64 PA over 13 games

That knowledge firmly in hand however, I'm more inclined to give Brantley a long leash (knowing that he may hang himself with it) and simply move him out of the leadoff spot because he is unquestionably more obvious to the future of the team than Crowe or (certainly) Kearns would be. By allowing him to ingratiate himself to MLB pitching at the bottom of the lineup, he may be able to adjust to better pitching without the self-imposed pressure that would come from batting leadoff every day.

The obvious answer would be to move Kearns (and now is not a real good time for Kearns to go day-to-day with an injury
) as keeping him around accomplishes as much as keeping Peralta around does...regardless of what some hack thought two months ago
.

While the cry may go out that Kearns has played a role in the "burgeoning" (term used loosely) offense for the Indians and that he's a middle-of-the-order "presence", consider that in Austin Kearns' last 58 games, he has seen his OPS drop from .980 to .764 by virtue of him posting a this line:

Austin Kearns – 2010 since May 8th
.243 BA / .331 OBP / .362 SLG / .693 OPS line over 248 PA in 60 games

Want some perspective on that?

Trevor Crowe – 2010
.263 BA / .317 OBP / .355 SLG / .672 OPS over 248 PA in 57 games

Maybe Kearns has the better overall track record in his career and maybe Kearns elicits more confidence than Crowe does, but (and I say this as a founding member of the "Trevor Crowe is barely a 4th OF in MLB Club") there's no reason to keep Kearns on this team because of performance or "veteran presence" or even because Manny Acta likes the cut of his jib.

If the Red Sox are kicking the tires on Cody Ross , why not have them take a look at Kearns and tell them that a single-A arm or a low-level OF is all that the Indians are looking for in return? If the Braves have a similar OF need, the Indians should dangle Kearns and ask about one of their minor-league arms?

While the outfield alignment of Crowe-Brantley-Choo (with an intermittent dose of Shelley Duncan mixed in) may not remind anyone of the 1995 outfield, you're playing 3 players who likely will be on the 25-man roster next year and who, with the assumed return of Grady Sizemore, are likely to patrol 2 of the 3 OF spots with the other player occupying the 4th OF role on the 2011 team.

This all may seem very logical to you and I realize that I'm probably preaching to the choir, but there seems to be a movement afoot to keep Austin Kearns (and Westbrook, by the by) in the name of "veteran leadership", which should be roundly ridiculed and put into its proper place at any opportunity. Perhaps I bring all of this up ad nauseum because I made the mistake of listening to some mind-numbing post-game radio on the flagship home after the game on Sunday in which the host suggested ADDING pieces to this team, but the idea that the remainder of this season should be dedicated to anything more than developing the players that factor in PAST this year is tantamount to the type of thinking that lead the Royals to hang onto their soon-to-be-FA veterans in a lost year, season after season in a cycle of ineptitude.

To that end, this notion again that Westbrook should be given his chance to play out his contract and that he's earned the right to finish what he was never able to really start goes against everything that this team SHOULD be doing, regardless of the "veteran presence" or the "mentoring" that is allegedly taking place. Not to bring up old news, but after moving nearly every prospective FA over the last two years (and two players who were under contract for a year and a half), this team is going to get sentimental with players NOW, with Jake Westbrook of all players?

Being all for sentimentality and having nothing but respect for the way that Westbrook returned from injury and his body of work as an Indian, let's be honest about the real reason that Westbrook might stick around in the second half of 2010 (other than a couple of reports that teams aren't that interested in him...and he does have an ERA of 5.10 and a WHIP of 1.41 over his last 8 starts), as it finally comes from Ken Rosenthal , who reports that:

Westbrook will receive a $2 million bonus if traded, and his salary would increase by a pro-rated portion of $1 million, according to a copy of his contract obtained by FOXSports.com.

Thus, if Westbrook is traded on July 31, he would be owed nearly $6 million — approximately $2.3 million in trade bonuses and the remaining portion of his $11 million salary, which would be approximately $3.6 million.

--snip--

The bonuses in Westbrook's contract seemingly would make it more difficult for the Indians to trade him to clubs that have payroll concerns. The Mets and Dodgers — two of the teams looking for starting pitching — fit that description.
The Indians could include cash in a trade to help reduce their trading partner's obligation to Westbrook. If they agreed to such a provision, they would expect better prospects in return.

While I think that the Indians should be willing to cover a portion of this money, the bonuses in his contract would certainly seem to represent the real reason that the activity on Westbrook has been slim and none. Forget all of this "great relationship" and "he wants to fulfill his contractual obligation to the Indians" and "the Indians want to keep him on to mentor a young staff" stuff that's come out over the last month or so...he's owed a substantial amount of money because of his contract and the Indians are having trouble balancing the idea that they're going to give him away for peanuts AND eat a portion of his salary and are out in front of this story

with about a week and a half before the Trading Deadline.

By all means, if a team shows interest in Westbrook, then he should be traded post-haste and the team should throw some money in to cover those provisions that Rosenthal reports. According to a piece from John Harper at the New York Daily News , a “Mets person” had this to say about Jake:

"He’s a veteran with a reputation as a gamer, so you have to think he’d be revitalized by getting out of Cleveland and getting into a pennant race. His sinker-slider type stuff would get a boost coming to the National League, too."

I’m hoping this “Mets person” answers to Mr. Minaya…

Seriously, now that we know why he’s not garnering much interest in the Trade Market, it has to be asked why he’s seen as one of the starters that should be handed the ball every five days for the Indians, who need to answer questions about Laffey, Huff, Carrasco, Gomez (suddenly), and maybe even Josh Tomlin going into next year and beyond. We know what Jake Westbrook brings to the table and he’s not under Indians’ control for next year, so the purpose of him toeing the rubber for the Indians accomplishes what?

Perhaps the Indians are considering Westbrook as a veteran FA signing for 2011 but (and I’m not sure how many times this needs to be repeated) whether Westbrook finishes the 2010 season in a Tribe uniform has little to no bearing on whether the Indians will be able to re-sign him after this year.

Given their recent performances, I’m not sure that Peralta, Kearns, and Westbrook are necessarily the best players to be out there RIGHT NOW, much less that any of them should be taking time away from even guys like Nix, Brantley, Duncan, and the gaggle of unproven arms that represent the layer below Cleveland.

At this point, I’m past the idea that the Indians should be getting Three or Four Star Prospects for these guys and this declaration to continue the youth movement shouldn’t be misconstrued as a call to simply dump more salary. Instead, it falls in line with the idea that 2010 shouldn’t be about anything more than making every move an eye past this season.

Squeezing one or two more victories out of a team that might have some veterans on it or to allow certain players the opportunity to complete their “unfinished business” are hollow victories and whether the Indians can net a few more lottery tickets in terms of prospects for the likes of Peralta, Kearns, and Westbrook is as much of a part of the discussion as answering questions about players that factor in past 2010.

Today, those veterans do not factor in past 2010 and if the Branyan move started the dominoes, I’d prefer to sit back and watch them all fall as the team gets younger and the future composition of this team becomes clearer, not cloudier.