Michael Brantley really excited us all last year. With Grady Sizemore out for the year, the opportunity presented itself to Brantley and he certainly put himself on everyone's radar.

Sure, he was already on the radar because he was involved in the trade that sent CC Sabathia packing, but this is radar is different. His performance suggested that maybe the hype about him is real and maybe this is our leadoff hitter of the future.

The hitting this season though has been a problem. Michael hasn't produced at the major league level when he's had his two opportunities and everyone needs some answers as to why.

THE SUBJECT - *Michael Brantley*

THE PROBLEM - *Trying to hit Major League pitching*

For the second time this season, the club has sent down Michael Brantley to Triple-A Columbus after the speedy outfielder produced less-than-stellar results at the big league level. Brantley's second stint in Cleveland was a lot longer than his first, but it still would seem as if he needs more of an extended period of time before we start jumping to conclusions about his future.

Brantley made the club out of spring training, thanks in large part to Russell Branyan starting the season on the disabled list. When Branyan was ready, Brantley was the odd man out of the equation and sent to Columbus for more time at Triple-A. In a way, that wasn't such a bad thing considering his age and how little time he spent there last year due to injuries and a late-season call-up.

He was most excellent in that late season cup of coffee, hitting .313 in 28 games and stealing four bases. He was a nice spark to the lineup late in the year and after that, he put the belief in many that he'd be a legitimate option to eventually take over the leadoff role in Cleveland.

Back to this season where the Indians would deal Branyan, enabling Matt LaPorta to take over at first, and with both Grady Sizemore and Shin-Soo Choo shelved, the window was open for Brantley to make his return on Independence Day.

Stint number two ended the other day with the promotion of starting pitcher Josh Tomlin. Austin Kearns' injury issues didn't require a trip to the disabled list, Shin-Soo Choo is back earlier than expected and Trevor Crowe has been hitting to the point where he doesn't deserve to get demoted to backup role, let alone the minor leagues.

The club loves Shelley Duncan and considering they didn't designate Andy Marte for assignment, one can only assume carrying Brantley was carrying one-too-many outfielders. So now Michael finds himself back in Columbus for the second time.

He will most definitely be back in the major leagues this season, for what we should hope is an

audition lasting longer than a month. But before he comes back, he'll need to diagnose his issues at the major league level and get them corrected.

THE EVIDENCE - *Numbers that are important*

2009 - Cleveland Indians

28 GP, .313 AVG/.358 OBP/.348 SLG, 10 R, 0 HR, 11 RBI, 8/19 BB/K, 4/8 SB

2010 - Cleveland Indians, April 5th - April 18th

9 GP, .156 AVG/.229 OBP/.188 SLG, 4 R, 0 HR, 3 RBI, 3/9BB/K, 0/0 SB

2010 - Cleveland Indians, July 4th - July 26th

17 GP, .157 AVG/.231 OBP/.214 SLG, 8 R, 1 HR, 4 RBI, 7/4 BB/K, 2/3 SB

2010 - Columbus Clippers

59 GP, .315 AVG/.391 OBP/.406 SLG, 47 R, 3 HR, 26 RBI, 11/27 BB/K, 11/16 SB

On the scope of things, it is obvious he doesn't have a problem hitting Triple-A pitching. Last year he only hit .267 in a season he dealt with injuries at numerous points. Yet he still held great on-base numbers, getting on with a .350 percentage and striking out only two more times than he walked.

The mediocre numbers at Columbus in 2009 and the great ones here in 2010 can give us two main ideas. The first is that Brantley is actually healthy and that when he is healthy, he can hit well. The second is that there should be a great amount of hope in terms of Brantley "getting it" at the next level of professional baseball.

Injuries aside, Brantley made adjustments at the Triple-A level, something every player pretty much has to do if they want to keep advancing. Brantley did the same in at the Double-A level with Huntsville in the Milwaukee system.

With the Stars in 2007, he played in 59 games and hit a mediocre .251, but still held a healthy on-base percentage of .353. The next season, his last with Milwaukee and his first full-season with Huntsville, he hit .319 with an even better on-base percentage of .395.

From these numbers we can come to terms with one of Brantley's problems, I say one of because I think there are multiple things that could be at the root of his issues this season when it comes to the major leagues.

One of Brantley's problems and perhaps his easiest to fix, is making adjustments. He clearly made them at the previous two levels when he needed to and now that he's tasted the bitter feeling of failure, he can probably go back to the kitchen and try again.

If Michael Brantley's overall problem is hitting at the major league level, then why exactly does he have many problems that are holding him back? Maybe he doesn't have multiple problems, but perhaps he has multiple reasons that are the cause for his struggles.

I think two of those reasons are out of his control. One is the fact that he actually hasn't had a long run of playing time at the level. Last year was his longest run and he was successful in it. It helped that he came swinging out of the gates and was very electrifying and exciting.

But if you are going to judge someone you need something even bigger than the 28 games he

played in 2009. You need something bigger then a sample size and Brantley simply hasn't received that in 2010 either.

That in a way is out of his control, even if he hits at the Columbus level like he has been. He can only hope there is an opening at the big league level and it's around when he is playing well.

Even then if Austin Kearns is dealt at some point in the next few weeks, pre or post-waiver deadline, then it won't matter how Brantley is doing, he'll likely be the guy in line for a shot.

In a way that reason is in his control because if he were to get that shot, it is up for him to make it impossible for the Indians to take his opportunities away from him. You need to crawl before you walk though and that's essentially what were trying to help Michael do right now.

The other problem that is out of his control is pressure that the Indians and fans have put onto him. I think after 2009, a lot of people expect more of the same and it doubles when Manny Acta isn't hesitant about putting that pressure on Brantley by making him his leadoff hitter.

Acta employed the same tactic with Carlos Santana, fresh off the bus from Columbus, without any major league experience. So in a way it isn't all that crazy when he throws Brantley into a trusting position like the leadoff role, especially since he and many believe that is the spot he should occupy at some point in the future.

The problem is Michael Brantley isn't Carlos Santana. He isn't of the same ilk and he may not have the same personality that Santana has. Maybe he feels the pressure, maybe he sees the trust the team has put in him and he feels he has to try too hard to do something.

That could lead to lack of adjustments and forgetting who you are as a hitter, and those two things lead to the little things hitters do to make them unsuccessful. Those two things right there, those are the biggest reasons that Brantley is struggling.

Brantley on Base

2006 - West Virginia (Single-A): .402 OBP, 71 BB, 51 K

2007 - West Virginia (Single-A): .413 OBP, 31 BB, 22 K

2007 - Huntsville (Double-A): .354 OBP, 29 BB, 25 K

2008 - Huntsville (Double-A): .395 OBP, 50 BB, 27 K

2009 - Columbus (Triple-A): .350 OBP, 59 BB, 48 K

2009 - Cleveland (MLB): .358 OBP, 8 BB, 19 K

2010 - Columbus (Triple-A): .391 OBP, 29 BB, 27 K

2010 - Cleveland (MLB): .230 OBP, 10 BB, 13 K

Brantley on the Bases - Steals and Attempts

2006 - West Virginia (Single-A): 24 for 31

2007 - West Virginia (Single-A):18 for 24

2007 - Huntsville (Double-A): .17 for 20

2008 - Huntsville (Double-A): 28 for 36

2009 - Columbus (Triple-A): 46 for 51

2009 - Cleveland (MLB): 4 for 8

2010 - Columbus (Triple-A): 11 for 16

2010 - Cleveland (MLB): 2 for 3

Now what do these numbers largely represent? The answer is simple because the answer is the player we've been talking about all this time, Michael Brantley.

You see this is what Michael Brantley is all about. This is why so many think he can be a potent leadoff hitter at the major league level. He does the two things that a leadoff hitter needs to do really well. Get on base and then cause havoc when they get there. Brantley is all about getting on and stealing bases and this is something he did very well in both 2008 and 2009.

We know he has major league speed. Sure, at the next level with players like Carlos Santana behind the dish on a nightly basis, you won't be able to steal 46 bases with such ease. Yet it is worrisome when Brantley, even if it is only 26 games, has only attempted to steal three times. He ran eight times in 28 games last year and that is with Eric Wedge calling the shots.

Wedge was anti-steal, we all know this. Manny Acta is the exact opposite. He's all for setting

runners in motion, putting on the suicide squeeze, dropping down bunts, and trying to play strategic baseball. With Acta as his manager, Brantley has only three attempts at stealing a base?

Sounds to me like someone out of his element, focusing on too much of what he isn't about and not enough on what he is about. This problem is exposed even more when you look at him getting on base.

Of course because he is only on base 23 percent of the time, he doesn't have as many opportunities to steal. But not being on base is just further showing that he isn't playing his game.

Regardless of the level, regardless of how well he was hitting, Michael Brantley, at every level of professional baseball, found a way on base. His on-base percentage has never been lower than .350 until this season in the major leagues.

He's never struck out more than he's walked until this year and last year at the major league level. Last year it was masked by him managing to hit (and the small amount of games, obviously), but now he's not even doing that.

Again, it does go back to him not having a larger amount of plate appearances at this level and the numbers looking kind of skewed, but it has become apparent that Brantley is getting away from his game.

THE SOLUTION - *Getting back to basics*

So how do we get Brantley back to his game? That's a great question, but only Michael and hitting coaches Jon Nunnally and Lee May can answer it. It boils down to Brantley though; he has to stop putting so much pressure on himself to perform when he puts Chief Wahoo on his head.

When I watch Brantley hit, I don't see what I should. I see someone trying to lift balls into right field. It may not be the coolest thing to be, but Brantley has to essentially be a scrappy hitter. Put the bat on the ball and let it find a hole. In the offseason, Brantley said he put on some weight, all muscle, in hopes of adding more power to his game.

At the time, to me it seemed like a positive move. Now, I absolutely hate it.

Brantley should just embrace the role of being a singles hitter and the Indians should encourage it. You can pay players like Matt LaPorta, Shin-Soo Choo and Carlos Santana to hit home runs and doubles off the wall.

You need to pay players like Michael Brantley to put the ball in play and create mayhem on the base paths. A single for Michael Brantley could easily be turned into a double with his legs. Be it a steal or something hit just deep enough for him a player like him to leg out two bases, Brantley's doubles should be coming off his speed, not his power.

Michael Brantley has 16 career home runs in his professional career. That's over 2,000 at-bats and he's only hit the ball over the fence 16 times. Realistically, how much more can you expect if he were to continue to bulk up and attempt to add more of a power stroke to his game?

After you answer that question, answer this one. At what expense do you do that? Not only does the mentality for a player like that change, so does his body. What makes Brantley dangerous? His legs. If you are adding more weight (even if it is muscle) to his upper frame, you are adding more weight he has to carry when he's attempting to steal a base.

Michael Brantley shouldn't try and change his game or change who he is. The Indians shouldn't try to change him or his game either. Does he really need to hit for more power? There are plenty of players in the system and on the team right now that will add pop, it can't hurt to have one guy at the top of the lineup providing a different element to your attack.

Brantley needs to get back to what makes him successful and what makes him successful isn't trying to muscle up on the ball. If he's making adjustments to his swing in Columbus, but they

aren't working in Cleveland, then there may not be adjustments that need to be made. As things often do, it may be a case of the mental part of the game causing Brantley's issues.

The solution to Brantley's problem may not be something overly complicated. It may not take much time at all. For all we know, Michael may just have to execute the game plan he's most comfortable with.