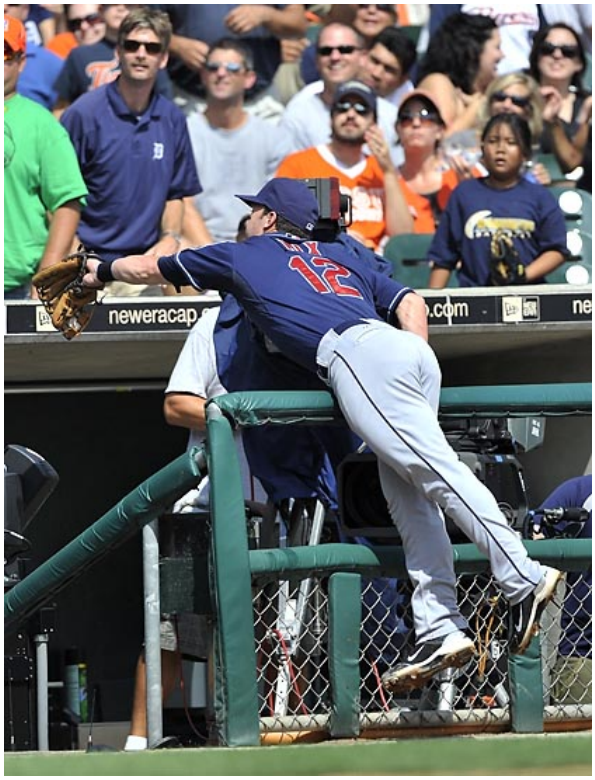


Since the off-season thus far has been filled with visions of Manny Acta in a winter hat and an innertube, memories of Andy Marte toeing the rubber, and watching former Indians receive generational wealth from various MLB teams that don't call the corner of Carnegie and Ontario home, perhaps now represents a tremendous new wrinkle to what we do here. While most of the pieces that you will read on the Indians represent one viewpoint or a specific expert answering questions presented to them, one exploration of the Indians that has always been lacking on front pages and in main articles is discourse and disagreement between two people who think far too much about the Indians.

With that in mind, I'm pleased to announce a new feature here with a back-and-forth conversation between myself and Jon Steiner of WFNY . While I'll stop short of saying that we're attempting to replicate the old "Rob and Rany" days when Neyer and Jazayerli would wax poetic on their Royals, the concept is the same as we may agree on a given topic or may take wildly divergent approaches to a particular aspect of the Indians. After this initial run-through, I'm hoping that you find it as thought-provoking and enjoyable as we did as it attempts to crystallize specific viewpoints and serves as the back-and-forth banter that many enjoy…just at a little higher level of obsession and expertise.

That all being said, the first topic that Jon and I decided to delve into is the oft-discussed 3B "issue" for the Indians (which has been covered nearly ad nauseum and nowhere more in depth than by TCF's own Steve Buffum, who is now up to 8 pieces JUST ON THIS TOPIC, all of which you access on his writer page on TCF ) , with Jon taking the stance that the Indians don't necessarily need to add anything significant to their 3B mix and me standing at the other podium.

Enjoy…

JON: I just don't see the point in adding a third baseman. It's not that we don't need one--we certainly do. Rather, I'm not sure what appreciable good a "stopgap" does us during the nadir of a rebuild. So sure, K-squared might be able to shore up the defense at third (though I'm not totally sold on even that), but to what end? This seems to be one of those "marginal improvement" type moves that doesn't really get us any closer to where we need to be, but rather throws the masses a bone so that they stop griping about Nix et al. If we both feel--and correct me if I'm wrong--that the future third baseman is already in the system somewhere--then why add Kouz? I would argue that Kouzmanoff might add a win or two. If we were a fringe-playoff team, by all means, go for it.

But we're not. So I say keep the spot semi-open so that if--and it's a big if--Phelps or Chiz or even Goedert take off this spring, we have major league at bats for them to continue developing. Perhaps I'm snake-bitten, but these non-impact signings scare me. There are images of Trots and Jasons and Davids dancing through my head.

PAUL: I suppose that the impact over "marginal improvement" to me would come solely in the form of defense and would have more of an effect on the pitching staff, as opposed to strictly whose in the lineup as the 3B. With the glut of groundball pitchers (and young ones at that), I'd prefer to see the Indians load up their infield defense with great gloves (and maybe get Asdrubal on a running track to see if he can find his "great glove" among the cinders on the track) and I see the leader in the clubhose - Nix - as being more of a detriment to the development of the young pitchers. Admittedly, some of that is based on an unfairly small sample last year, when Nix was essentially playing out of position, but I'm going to have to be shown that a Winter Ball excursion at 3B is enough to make us think of him as a "2B playing 3B" on most plays to the Hot Corner to think that Nix is even a suitable "stop-gap".

The only real cause for the K2 Train (with me throwing coal into the engine, apparently) is that he has somehow evolved into a competent defensive 3B (according to metrics I don't trust and the Fielding Bible panel, which I do trust) and I think that if he's non-tendered, he fits the profile of a guy that they can get on the cheap to stick in there until The Chiz is ready. If Kouzmanoff is going to cost $3M to $4M a year, then you move onto the "Blake/LaRocca/Selby" derby redux in Spring Training with Nix and Phelps and whatever other AAAA guy that they can find that has a slick glove to throw into the mix so the Tribe can bide time until The Chiz is ready. If there's a guy who is Brooks Robinson with the glove, but can't hit a lick, somewhere in the Minors, I'd bring him in and give him a legit shot to improve the infield defense, which is at the crux of the crusade to upgrade 3B. Trust me, I would never want "images of Trots and Jasons and Davids" to enter anyone's head unnecessarily and I see a Kouzmanoff non-tender (assuming he's non-tendered) more in line with the Kearns deal last year that essentially bought Mike Brantley (and the team) time to allow things to flesh out.

Another factor in this 3B situation is that most people just assume that Lonnie Chisenhall will follow the Carlos Santana path to be in Cleveland in 2011. But what if he isn't?

The fallback options are Nix (whose better suited to be a super-utility RH bat with some pop) and Phelps (who last played 3B at Stanford...and we all saw how Nix adjusted there), so are you really all that confident in Nix and Phelps to hold down the fort if - knocking firmly on wood - Chisenhall doesn't dominate AAA to force himself up the I-71 corridor to Cleveland next year?

JON: I actually agree with you on most counts here. Let me plagiarize them one at a time:

Infield defense benefits our pitchers, and K2 should be an upgrade.
Yes to the first. Probably yes to the second. Though if we're talking about helping our pitchers, are we talking about making them "more confident" or "demonstrably better"? I'm dubious about these sorts of claims, though I suppose anything's possible.

K2 (or whoever) could come in at about $3 to $4 million if he's non-tendered. Probably, yes. And it should be said, $4 million dollars is about the going rate in free agency for a win. I tend to think this is an inefficient use of resources, especially for a team that's not likely to contend.

If we had an internal, defensively strong 3B, this is a different story.
Sure thing. I agree that we do not.

Chiz might not be ready: don't let Carlos Santana warp your perception of an MLB learning curve.
Indeed. I think we all were spoiled by that debut. But I would also say that I don't like the FO telling me that Santana's "defense wasn't ready" when they really meant that they wanted an extra year of control. Perhaps they'll want to manage some service clocks (something that can be done with Nix), but I don't like the run-around. And anyway, if we're going all-in on Chiz at some point, how much does it matter when we do it? We've given LaPorta a long leash because we believe he (has to be?) is the answer. At some point, you'll have to do the same with someone at third.

But regardless, I'm talking about building a contender. And, at least to me, it's clear that any short-term addition won't be part of that contender. Rather, he'd be a band-aid. Now, you might say that we have to stop the bleeding. I guess that's true, but I'm not sure why it would be. To me, the upside of a defensive stopgap at 3B is a couple wins in 2011; the downside is the hindered development of players that, rightly or wrongly, we're going to have to sink or swim with for the next decade. I'd rather throw my chips in on the latter bet, no matter how unlikely it might be that an addition would hurt them. It's just not a risk I want to take.

Does the advantage of an addition boil down to this: our pitchers will develop some confidence and we might win a game or two more next season? If that's the case, I don't want him. If there's more, my ears are open.

PAUL: Let's be clear as K2 at $4M is definitely not something that I'm interested in (and I'm not convinced he gets that on the open market if he's non-tendered) as it is certainly represents the "inefficient use of resources" that you assert. My argument hinges on the development of those pitchers that "rightly or wrongly, we're going to have to sink or swim with for the next decade" in that I'm more concerned about those guys finding MLB success as soon as possible and putting a credible infield defense behind them goes a long way to achieving that goal.

Could we have The Chiz up here on Opening Day to play 3B? Sure, but if he struggles out of the gate, we're back to the Nix and Phelps show, with Chisenhall going to AAA to build up some career momentum again. Sure, LaPorta has struggled (and they haven't really given him much of a long leash), but he's a solid 5 years older than Lonnie, with a prospect pedigree that Chisenhall will probably never touch.

I think that we're both talking about building a sustainable contender, and I guess that gets to the final question of adding a player allowing "our pitchers (to) develop some confidence" resulting in a extra "win or two more next season" as I see the long-term effect of upgrading that infield defense, even for half a year, could have a greater impact than simply a win or two next season because of that confidence gained. Again, if the price tag for that is going to be $3M or $4M, I pass...but I think that the Indians can find a player that would upgrade the left side of their infield defense for less than that and provide the insurance (and another external option) to allow Chisenhall to at least taste AAA.

JON: And yeah, I should be clear too: avoiding an acquisition is not my way of suggesting that Chisenhall--or any other minor leaguer--should start the season in Cleveland. In my plan, Nix is the primary option (what a terrible way to start a sentence!), with full knowledge that at least three guys might be able to give him some competition by June.

If, on the other hand, we sign an external guy for anything more than $2 million, the front office will likely feel the need to play that guy, regardless of whether the smarter thing to do might be give some of the younger guys some exposure/time to adjust to big league pitching.

PAUL: Let's say that Nix is the primary option then if you're not bringing in anyone significant. Do you basically given Phelps and Nix a shot at a two-man race in Goodyear with the idea that it's Nix's job to lose? Or do you bring in the Bill Selbys and...gulp, Casey Blakes (v. 2003) of the world to press these guys?

If it's the former, I sure hope his 3B glove hasn't left his hand this Winter...