There is an old saying that “if the shoe fits, wear it” that conveys a level of self-realization that escapes many. The off-season for the Cleveland Indians has been quiet as they have pointed to the fact that they have made an almost-nauseating number of moves over the past 30 months that they need to shake out to determine where they are in their next quest for contention.

Rather than exploring (or even pretending to explore) the FA market, the Indians' activity has been relegated to Minor-League deals, which has drawn either howls of disapproval or overall apathy from their fanbase...the latter being the more troubling. Regardless, the Indians have stuck to their guns, knowing where they are in their “contention cycle” and putting forth an air of self-awareness that may turn off many fans, but likely represents their best strategy for this off-season.

Like the Indians, Austin Kearns went into the off-season likely not expecting much, self-aware enough to know that he wasn't going to get a multi-year deal or even a guaranteed starting spot from any team, despite resurrecting his career with a 2010 season that showed (at the very least) that his career was not completely over.

Consider what happened on Monday to be akin to finding that old pair of slippers in the back of the closet and slipping them on as Kearns is returning to the North Coast to assume the role of

the RH OF that the Indians had targeted in the off-season, coming back to the Tribe on a $1.3M contract with incentives. Lest anyone forget, Kearns posted the 3rd highest OPS+ among qualified Indians' hitters last year
before he was flipped to the Yankees for 22-year-old RHP Zach McAllister, who led the Eastern League in ERA in 2009 and who figures to start 2011 in AAA Columbus.

Now, Kearns returns and given that the Tribe's assumed OF and DH are all LH hitters, Kearns should be able to find AB around the diamond as needed to fill in for Sizemore, Choo, Brantley, and Hafner on a as-needed basis. While it was suggested that the Indians should target a RH OF who could double as a quasi-platoon partner for Hafner at DH (meaning he would have to crush LHP...because Hafner doesn't anymore), Kearns' splits don't really represent that much of an improvement over Hafner, in terms of facing LHP:
Kearns vs. LHP (2010)
.252 BA / .345 OBP / .395 SLG / .740 OPS in 168 PA

Hafner vs. LHP (2020)
.272 BA / .342 OBP / .364 SLG / .706 OPS in 111 PA

Although Kearns' career OPS vs. LHP is .798, neither of them have ANY power against LHP, but it could be that the Indians have different ideas in terms of protecting Hafner against LHP – maybe having Santana move to 1B and having MaTola DH against particular LHP?

Nevertheless, having Kearns around as insurance for Sizemore's injury recovery and in case Mike Brantley struggles once more represents a nice depth move which should work out for the Indians as Kearns will offer the same versatility and offense that he provided in the first half of the 2010 season. Adding Kearns nearly certainly saves us from “Trevor Crowe – Erstwhile 4th OF, ill-equipped MLB player” in 2011 and could actually result in Crowe's usefulness to the team coming to an end.

It was an under-the-radar signing that worked for the Indians last year and is likely to have the same result as Kearns knows what he's getting in his 2011 situation and the Indians are familiar enough with what Kearns brings to the table as a RH OF. The money isn't big (Rick Ankiel inked a contract with a higher base salary) and the move won't cause any recalibration of AL Central expectations, but it improves the Indians around the periphery of the young group of players that are going to be the ones counted upon to bring the Indians back to contention.

Plus, it is a homecoming of sorts of Kearns in more ways than one as he now makes his off-season home in Cleveland... no, seriously .