With the Indians taking the first two games in the Tigers series as Ubaldo begins to show why he has the potential to be a difference-maker in the AL Central this year (and beyond) and while the bronze is being cast in Cooperstown for one Jason Kipnis, the Indians are unquestionably in the thick of a pennant race. While the final 50 games are going to determine how the 2011 season is remembered, it certainly seems as if the Indians have been throwing everything that they can at this 2011 season in an effort to take advantage of a winnable division as they've made moves both internal (Kipnis, Chiz) and external (Ubaldo, Kosuke) to improve this team, which is about to get a BIG boost in the near future with the return of The BLC to the lineup.

However, there is one spot in the Indians everyday lineup that could still use some upgrading…and I don't mean a "Ludwickian" upgrade of making a move for the sake of a move. While most who have become singularly obsessed with Kearns' inclusion on the roster would decry Kearns being used in any situation at any time, the use of Matt LaPorta (injured or not) is something that the Indians should be moving away from, particularly because a more compelling in-house option may exist on the 25-man roster for the stretch run.

While LaPorta has drawn the ire of Indians' observers (particularly recently) with his weak (9th inning) swings and his brain lapses at 1B that have come at crucial times, the issues with LaPorta have been going on all season. Though he was supposed to arrive in the CC deal as the MLB-ready RH bat that the organization so badly needed back in 2008, we find ourselves

winding down 2011 still wondering where that RH bat is going to come from for the Indians short-and-long-term future as MaTola certainly doesn't seem to be the answer. Since more time was spent on LaPorta than most any other player coming into the season, I'm not going to use this as to go in-depth into what Matt LaPorta is and what he is not as those are discussions for down the line.

More urgently is what is happening in the here and now with the Tribe and with LaPorta's inclusion at 1B, even intermittently, as what makes LaPorta's lack of production all the more obvious is how sub-par his offensive numbers are, particularly in the context of his position:

Average AL 1B
.272 BA / .341 OBP / .452 SLG / .793 OPS
LaPorta
.240 BA / .296 OBP / .412 SLG / .709 OPS

In a position of power at 1B, LaPorta's continued struggles at the plate and his second year of injuries perhaps affecting his performance at the plate may mean that the Indians may need to start considering some alternatives to the now-26-year-old LaPorta, who has a sub-.700 OPS in his first 245 MLB games. While the Indians are likely to re-evaluate LaPorta and the future of 1B, with the Tribe in the throes of a pennant race, waiting for the off-season may be imprudent.

Maybe that's seems reactionary and maybe there is a rush to judgment (and I've been the one preaching patience and "finding out what we have in LaPorta" going back to the off-season), but LaPorta hitting HR off of mistake pitches a couple of times a week are hurting this Indians' team that really can't afford to take too many more punches. While it was suggested a couple of weeks ago that perhaps Nick Johnson would represent an alternative while LaPorta would have the opportunity to rehab his ankle injury (that I don't think he's completely over) and get into a groove in AAA, perhaps a more viable alternative exists.

By that I mean, perhaps the answer is just moving some pieces around the infield when you consider how the numbers of Carlos Santana stack up against that same "average" AL 1B:

Average AL 1B
.272 BA / .341 OBP / .452 SLG / .793 OPS
Santana
.233 BA / .353 OBP / .435 SLG / .788 OPS

Ignore BA for a moment (please) and realize that it should be noted that Santana has an .817 OPS in the last 3 months since May 7th and, while his numbers still may pale in comparison to the big boppers that occupy 1B in the AL (Miggy, Adrian Gonzalez, Konerko, Teixeira), LaPorta's inability to find consistency (regardless of the reason) has become a major concern. Realizing that much of Santana's value lies in his offensive production coming from behind the plate, how about this:

Average AL Catcher
.237 BA / .306 OBP / .382 SLG / .688 OPS
Marson

.22 BA / .278 OBP / .319 SLG / .598 OPS

Certainly, Marson's offensive numbers are dreadful and obviously Santana's numbers vastly outpace those of the "average" catcher, but if the Indians are looking to maximize the assets that they have, could the answer be to move Marson to a full-time C spot and slide The Axe Man down the 1B line, particularly while LaPorta's ankle injury has made him even more ineffective than he was when he was fully healthy?

Realizing that Marson's line is still well-below what the "average" C has done at the plate in the AL just as LaPorta's production is well-below what the "average" 1B has done in the AL, the elephant in the room is defense as Santana's defense behind the plate has regressed as the season has worn on as Santana's lazy stabs at balls just out of reach and his tendency to seemingly get distracted has affected the outcomes of a good number of recent games. If Santana's…um, focus is lacking and if this isn't a new issue (remember when Dunn bulldozed a daydreaming Santana in the Strasburg game last year because Santana was inexplicably standing on the plate with the ball in the OF and with Dunn about to score) and one that doesn't look to be going away any time soon, perhaps it would be best to leave Santana out at 1B where he isn't involved in every single play in addition to handling a pitching staff instead of having him behind the plate if his…um, focus is a problem and his defense regresses.

Conversely, Marson's defense has been a strength this season, begging the question as to whether the upgrade that the Indians would get from playing Marson everyday behind the plate enough to justify the "loss" of offense from LaPorta to Marson in the everyday lineup?

That said, if you look at what LaPorta and Marson have contributed offensively since LaPorta's ankle injury, neither player has contributed much offensively and if defense is the deciding factor behind one of these two playing every day, Marson is clearly the superior defender…but I'll get to that. For now, take a look at the numbers for each since LaPorta's ankle injury:

LaPorta – 24 games

.235 BA / .264 OBP / .383 SLG / .647 OPS with 8 XBH, 19 K, and 2 BB in last 87 PA

Marson – 25 games

.207 BA / .270 OBP / .325 SLG / .595 OPS with 6 XBH, 21 K, and 7 BB in last 86 PA

Hide the women and children, I know…particularly seeing that MaTola has 2 BB in nearly 100 PA. However, realizing that these are equally unappealing lines, with the small sample siren blaring, it is interesting to note that Marson actually has a higher OBP than LaPorta since MaTola's ankle injury.

How much of an impact that ankle injury is having on LaPorta's production is pure conjecture, but if the Indians are looking to make incremental improvements to their team (and Chiz and Kipnis are…Lonnie's growing pains and adjustment to MLB considered), perhaps it's time for the Indians to maximize the pieces that they already have in place and move Marson into a full-time role as C, send Santana up to 1B and rest LaPorta, DL him again so he can get some PA on a rehab assignment, or just pick his spots in an attempt to get him healthy and productive for the long-term.

Now, is Lou Marson riding in on a white horse to save the Indians' offense?
Absolutely not (and Kipnis is already on that steed), but his defensive ability in throwing out runners is well-noted and, while I don't know how much stock to put into a particular catcher's ability to call a game, Indians' pitchers have an ERA of 3.76 when pitching to Marson and a 4.12 ERA when throwing to Santana. Additionally, if the Indians need to be minimizing defensive miscues and may be relying even more on their pitching, the value of having Marson behind the plate on an everyday basis is not a hard sell. Marson is a better defensive catcher than LaPorta is a defensive 1B and if the Indians are looking to tighten up their defense while not (drastically) reducing their offense, giving Marson a longer leash at C is the right move.

One aspect of this is that Marson's defense can make up for other defensive deficiencies that have emerged and he certainly represents a defensive upgrade over Santana. While Marson's throwing prowess is well-noted, he has now thrown out a higher percentage of would-be-basestealers than any other catcher who has been run on more than 30 times this season. He's thrown out 46.5% of the runners that have attempted to steal on him and while I realize that gunning down basestealers is a small portion of what a catcher does defensively, I note that because (while I'm loathe to use any of these defensive metrics that I still believe to be works-in-progress
), here's how LaPorta and Marson compare in terms of the better known defensive metrics currently in use:

Defensive WAR (B-Ref)

LaPorta: - 0.1
Marson: +0.7

Fielding Value (Fangraphs)
LaPorta: - 4.9
Marson: +3.0

LaPorta…the guy with the sub-.700 OPS is actually negatively affecting the Indians with his defense and while Marson may be no great shakes with his bat, LaPorta hasn't been that much better, particularly since he returned from his ankle injury. Going further than just defensive value, if you want to subscribe to the notions of player value or WAR, Marson has a positive value on the season (despite his struggles at the plate), while LaPorta has a negative value from Fangraphs and LaPorta has a WAR on par with that of Shelley Duncan (with Duncan having 1/3 of the PA of LaPorta), according to B-Ref, coming in well behind the value of Marson on both lists.

A by-product of moving Santana down the 1B line for the bulk of the remainder of the season is that it would possibly assist in avoiding any breakdown for The Axe Man from a health standpoint as he would have to worry less about foul tips off of his fingers or enduring the hazards that come from playing C. Whether that would increase Santana's effectiveness at the plate down the stretch remains to be seen (and I'm not suggesting this as a long-term move for Santana as his bat as a C is not lost on me), but it would allow Santana's 1st full season in MLB to be one in which he's not breaking down at the time when the pennant-chasing Indians need him most.

The Indians are going to have to address the LaPorta situation at some point in the off-season as they make plans for 1B going forward, but in the midst of a pennant race, perhaps giving Santana a 1B mitt for the last 1/3 of the season and allowing Marson to don the tools of ignorance could be another step towards putting the team's best collective foot forward.

From this point on, every game is important and any upgrade that the Indians can make (offensively or defensively) should be utilized, regardless of how it affects the perception of a player's standing in the organization or colors the analysis of any particular trade from a couple

of years ago. At this point, playing Marson at C and Santana at 1B represents the Indians' best use of their available assets as LaPorta's role should be scaled back as his health is affecting his production…which really wasn't all that productive to begin with.

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