Looking at that title, let's be clear about something, no…I'm not thinking about first "place", for that is pipe dream and a lost cause these days as second place is looking tenuous at best, particularly after this weekend on the South Side. Rather, if you figure that I'm not thinking about 1st place, I'm probably thinking about something else with 1st as the descriptive term (hint – rhymes with "place") and I'll get to that in all due time. As we meander our way down that 1st base line, let's realize that this time of year when every team starts to turn their focus on what they need to do next year to put themselves into a position to compete for the playoffs and while the 2011 Indians were improbably in that position as recently as a week ago, most everyone's thoughts have turned towards what figures to be an interesting off-season on The Reservation.

Given that it was only a week ago in this space when the thought (however small that thought may have been) existed that the Indians still could make a move in the AL Central, it is amazing how quickly things turned from "this is a group of players that is coming together and has a chance to be REALLY special for the next few years" (**read this** to feel better about the long-term outlook for the Tribe) to "there are just too many holes to fill with no chance of filling them to even think of competing in 2012" in…oh, about a month. Certainly, the performance of the Indians (and the Tigers) plays a major role in that 180-degree turn towards pessimism, but this Indians team is not devoid of bright spots going forward, much less building blocks to form a strong foundation.

While this isn't breaking any new ground, the 2011 team is/could be flush with young talent up and down their lineup (Asdrubal, Santana, Choo, Kipnis, Brantley, Chisenhall) that was decimated by injuries and though the pitching staff still has some potentially special players at the top of their rotation (Masterson, Ubaldo), the news that Carrasco will undergo TJ surgery and the implosion of Fausto in the Detroit series now seem to have the sky falling on the North Coast as the Indians have quickly gone from a team that looked to be well-positioned for 2012 and beyond to a unavoidably flawed team in the eyes of some. Though that certainly is not a feeling that is felt throughout all of the fanbase, watching the Tigers run roughshod over the Tribe (and their playoff chances) has definitely turned the focus to next year and what the

Indians need to accomplish in the off-season to put themselves (once again, remember) in the mix for a divisional crown…and perhaps more.

While much of that focus for what the Indians "need" has been on adding that "big bat" via trade or FA to sit in the middle of the lineup, one positive development of the last month or so has been that the Indians' bench for 2012 has started to take shape and, if nothing else can be taken from the end of this season, the fact that the Indians' "B" lineup (and **look to see how they've performed over the last month**
) has been able to hang in there as long as they have should be taken as a positive. Between the performances of Donald, Duncan, Hannahan, and Marson, the Indians may finally have a "homegrown" bench that could fill out the role of Utility IF, RH bench bat, late-inning defensive replacement at the corners, and back-up catcher into 2012 and beyond…and for not a lot of money.

That may not have anyone running out to purchase season tickets for 2012, but after watching the Indians comb through the scrap heap for a number of years to fill those roles, that's at least a step towards being able to more efficiently managing payroll, where it isn't deemed "necessary" to add an Austin Kearns or an Orlando Cabrera in an attempt to "buy time" for a young player or to fill out the bench with someone that was known to be flawed and overpriced when signed. Forget the idea that the lineup for next year is pretty easy to envision (except for 1B…but I'll get to that), the bench is actually looking pretty solid as well as those guys stepped up when they needed to step up, even if they're contributions weren't enough to keep pace with the Tigers.

As for that lineup (and that "big bat" and 1B), **Acta admitted on Friday** what many have known all season when he said, "Right now, first base and third base are positions where we should be looking into improving for next year, whether that's within or from the outside…Those are positions that you expect some production out of it. You can get away with one of those positions being a defensive one, if you have a lot of offense coming from everywhere else." If you parse through those (accurate) statements, you can see it as a call to action for a guy like Chisenhall (who responded by hitting 2 HR that night) and LaPorta and an admission that the

Indians are more than comfortable going with Hannahan (the "defensive one") if The Chiz needs more seasoning in AAA at any point next year. While it would seem that some incarnation of Hannahan and Chisenhall will patrol the hot corner for next year (and I'm OK with that), the situation at 1B is foggier, although very little fog is a by-product of the idea that Matt LaPorta is going to be a factor in 2012 as I think that the Indians have admitted to themselves that they need to make plans at 1B for next year (and beyond) without counting on contributions for MaTola.

While **Acta said publicly that** LaPorta "has had issues with using his legs properly during his swing", what's more telling is to read between the lines of Acta's comment that LaPorta has "worked hard" but that "regardless of what you work on, you still have to have the discipline to get pitches in the zone and do some damage." Essentially (and this comes as no surprise to anyone paying attention), LaPorta's issue is with his plate discipline and, placed against what was written by Terry Pluto last week in terms of LaPorta, it doesn't look to be an easily-rectified issue. Last week, **Pluto wrote in his Sunday column last week** (which…you HAVE to remember, comes straight from what the Indians are telling him) that "the Indians have been trying to have LaPorta cut down on being such a guess hitter. He commits too early to his swing, guessing a fastball is coming. They want him to be more disciplined at the plate."

While the "plate discipline" seems to be the talking point on LaPorta from all of the Tribe higher-ups, this admission from the Indians that MaTola is essentially a "guess hitter" is terrifying to me as it means that his problems aren't mechanical or related to injuries or something that are easily fixed, particularly because a "guess hitter" with LaPorta's power can crush AAA pitching while looking foolish against the better pitching in MLB. Unsurprisingly, the "guess hitter" LaPorta has a .953 OPS in 483 AAA PA and a .694 OPS in 972 MLB PA with the threat persisting that the only way that LaPorta can truly adjust to not being a "guess hitter" is that the necessary adjustments for him need to come in MLB. That is, if LaPorta heads back down to AAA and crushes the ball again, but relies on his raw ability and continues to "guess" at pitches, feasting on AAA fastballs, there is little room for growth as it doesn't improve his approach…it only reiterates the idea that he is a talented player, if not a fully-developed hitter. Sadly, the only thing that will challenge him to change his approach will come against MLB pitching, against whom he's posted a sub-700 OPS in nearly 1,000 PA.

So what are the Indians to do at 1B for next year if this may be who LaPorta is?
Surely, they won't just hand him and his .694 career OPS the keys to 1B again next Spring Training as they can simply send MaTola to AAA for 2012, as he does have an option left, in the hopes that it provides a wake-up call and he forces himself to make adjustments that other highly-touted power prospects have as they eventually carve out a niche for themselves. But in terms of adding a piece (which is necessary), what's to say that the Indians' targeting a top 1B prospect from another team (like Cincinnati's Yonder Alonso, blocked by Joey Votto) won't fall into the same downward path that LaPorta seems to be treading?

For as much talk as there is about Yonder Alonso as a trade chip for the Reds to dangle, **he had a lower OPS and fewer HR than Cord Phelps did in the International League**, with each spending their 2011 season in AAA as 24-year-old players. That's not meant to

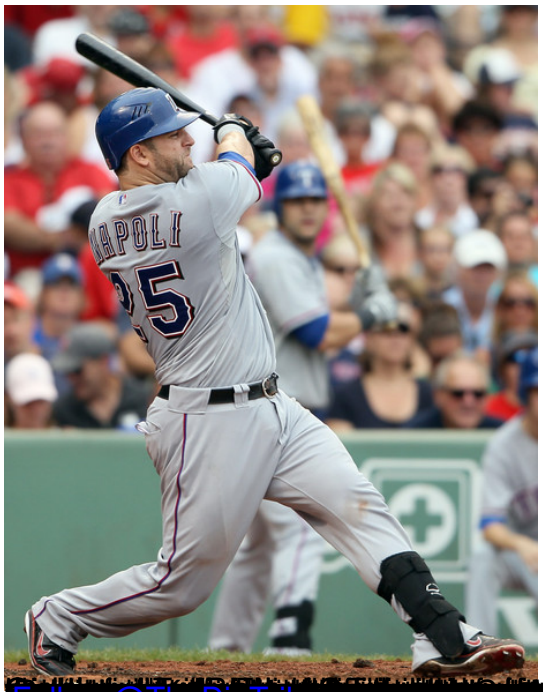
make any grand pronouncement on the future of Alonso or Phelps, but it's easy to forget that **LaPorta was the 23rd highest rated prospect prior to 2008** and had a first half of 2008 that put him at the very top of some mid-season prospect lists in 2008 (and go look at **these** two **lists**) and was still seen as **a Top 25 prospect in baseball as recently as mid-2009**.

Now, we're left to wonder whether MaTola can even be a useful piece as his power is tantalizing, but his plate discipline is holding him back from penciling his name into the 1B spot for 2012 (much less a 25-man roster spot) while he provides a cautionary tale to any idea that the Indians can just find another "blocked" prospect from another organization to acquire because, as we've all found out from Matt LaPorta, "top prospect" status is no guarantee of future stardom or even future usefulness. Additionally, if the thought exists that the Indians should be looking at guys like Alonso (and I'm just using him as an example), realize that Kipnis and Chisenhall figure to spend the majority of 2012 in the Cleveland infield and supposing that the 2012 team can contend with three players that are essentially rookies patrolling the infield is a difficult leap to make.

So what are the Indians to do at 1B?
Given the LaPorta "concerns" and with the idea that Santana is going to head back behind the plate (where his bat is more valuable), it certainly seems pretty likely that they're back to adding a 1B, but as "easy" as that may sound in theory, even if they were to find next year's version of Casey Kotchman, a good glove guy who had struggled offensively to a certain point in his career and who was able to find some consistency when given the chance this year, I can't imagine that adding a "scrap heap" guy like Kotchman (who has no power) would do much to assuage fears that the Indians were going to attempt to fill the 1B hole next year by "outsmarting" the rest of MLB.

[redacted]

[redacted]



Follow @TheDiaTribe [redacted]