Talk about this column here ...

Let's face it: Casey Blake isn't very good.

Casey Blake was, in many ways, THE feel-good story of 2004: career minor leaguer finally gets a chance in the bigs after two other stops, produces beyond what could be reasonably expected of him, lands his first multiyear major-league deal. Yes, yes, very nice. And he was productive: he hit .271/.354/.486 with 28 bombs and 88 RBI, all while playing adequate third base, a trouble position for the Tribe since Travis Fryman pumpkinized. There was nobody in the pipe at third (well, nobody likely to be ready any time soon, certainly) and looking around the majors, it's hard to acquire a good third baseman by other means. Sure, there was the sneaking suspicion that You Could Be Casey Blake, but slugging .486 with an OBP over .350 is nothing to sneeze at.

We certainly wouldn't have sneezed at it in 2005, for example. Because what we got from the newly-minted right field version of Casey Blake was a crummy .241/.308/.438: there were still 23 home runs, but let's put this in perspective: that is Desi Relaford's OBP with Rocco Baldelli's SLG. For the uninitiated, Desi Relaford is not known for his getting on base skills, and Rocco is not known for his power. What you get is a lame amalgam of bad with bad, which, not surprisingly, ends up bad.

Of course, Blake was moved to right to make room for Aaron Boone, who was even worse. Let's not dwell on that. My eye is twitching like Herbert Lom's. Let us simply say that Casey Blake was bad in 2005.

Which, fretfully, is what he's likely to be in 2006 as well. Let's face it: the man didn't make the majors at age 29 because of any great conspiracy. He didn't make the majors because he wasn't very good. His 2003, in fact, looks an awful lot like his 2005. Here is the balance sheet:

Many uninspiring minor-league seasons + 2 bad major-league seasons
vs.
One good major-league season

Okay, how far from center to you have to move the fulcrum to conclude that Casey Blake is going to be a good hitter in 2006?

I have spent many hours in other venues arguing that the Indians should trade for Pittsburgh's Craig Wilson. Wilson is a nominal catcher but has spent more times in recent seasons in the outfield or at first base. As a right-handed hitter, Wilson would render new acquisition Eduardo Perez obsolete, unless he plays right while Perez is at first against lefties. Not a bad thing, really, since Wilson crushes lefties, too (.858, 1.123, .912 OPS in 2002-2004). Overall, Wilson has been a remarkably consistent hitter:

2002: .264/.355/.443
2003: .262/.360/.511
2004: .264/.354/.499

His 2005 was short-circuited by a couple of acute (one might say "fluky") hand injuries, but he still posted a .387 OBP. Reports are that his hand has healed, but I'm sure general managers around the league are waiting for him to show it in spring training before offering the Pirates something of substance. And the Pirates are likely to trade him because they've signed Jeromy Burnitz to play outfield and Sean Casey to play 1B (Wilson is not a good catcher, so playing him every day there would be unadvisable: still he *can* catch, so would be a fine "speller" for a team with, say, Victor Martinez on it). He's affordable, versatile, right-handed with power, and expendible by the team that currently has him. Trading an arm (of the Jason Davis ilk) seems effective for both teams.

But if you don't trust the healing powers of Thor's hand, there's another option in the same division. Milwaukee somehow dredged up Corey Koskie from Toronto to play third, has wunderprospect Prince Fielder to play first, and veterans in the outfield. All of this conspires to block Corey Hart, a guy who plays first, third, and the outfield. At AAA Nashville last year, Hart put up a .308/.377/.536 season that was in line with his other stops in the minors. His PECOTA projection in 2006 is a brisk .272/.337/.475 line that wouldn't be great, but would certainly be preferable to either Blake or Boone. He could play third if Marte wasn't ready, and right if he was (Casey Blake is not going to get "more ready" and more than he is going to become "more capable of flight"). And the projections naturally go up from there, as Hart is 24: this is rapidly becoming "shit or get

off the pot" time for the Brewers w.r.t. Hart, so making an aggressive offer now (again in the form of arms) might convince Milwaukee to let Hart get a shot somewhere else. Yes, he's not the "guaranteed major-league producer" Wilson is, but the man has two full 500-PA AAA seasons under his belt, I'd claim that's about as ready as one gets.

And I'd claim that's already more likely than a productive 2006 from Casey Blake.