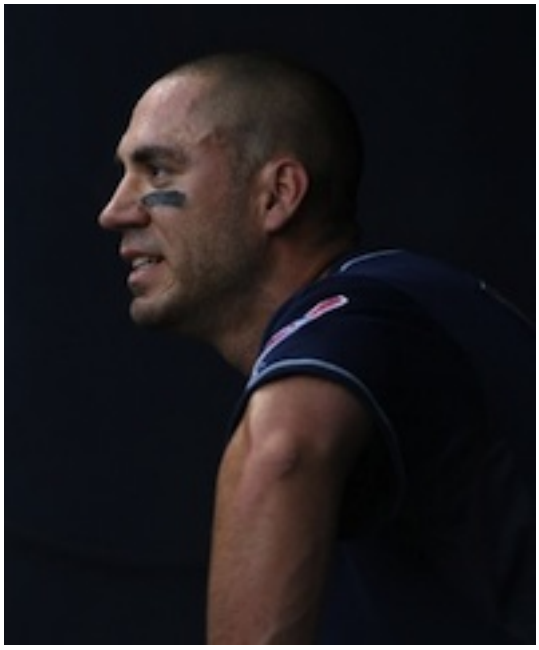

It's the first day of June, and Travis Hafner is hurt again—exiled to the Land of Arthroscopia with the ghost of Grady Sizemore and a harsh dose of reality. For five years, even the most rational of Tribe fans have quietly—almost shamefully—kept their doors of optimism ever-so-slightly ajar; clinging to the pipe dream that a "finally healthy" Hafner could magically transform back into something approaching the Optimus Pronk of old. Aside from the occasional majestic blast off a hanging slider, however, this has never come to pass. And kids, it's finally time to accept that it never will. Your brain, as usual, was smarter than your heart.

With the understanding that Hafner's knee surgery is only technically supposed to shelve him for 4-6 weeks, this is not intended to be a career eulogy. We can save that for when his regrettable contract finally reaches its denouement in October. It does seem like as good a time as any, though, to consider Pronk's current value—not just in terms of his legacy as an all-time Indian great, but as a piece in the complex puzzle of this 2012 ballclub.

Pronk in Perspective

Starting with the big picture, it's mildly depressing to evaluate Travis Hafner's eventual standing in the national baseball consciousness (when he finally does hang 'em up), considering the grand heights he once seemed destined for. For a good chunk of the 00s decade, Travis was every bit the equal of David Ortiz—an elite, left-handed DH who hit for both average and power, racking up 100 RBIs and 100 walks every season, and just generally striking fear into the hearts of all opposing pitchers. Today, the most obvious Pronk comparison points have obviously

changed drastically. As contemporaries go, there's the ex-MVP Justin Morneau, who hasn't played in more than 90 games since 2009. Going back a little further in time, there's recollections of other young sluggers who caught the injury bug and flamed out—Glenn Davis, Tony Clark, Jason Bay. Maybe the best parallel tale belongs to that of the less-than-legendary Kevin Mitchell, who was a similar late bloomer that rapidly emerged as one of the game's most dominant power hitters—only to have his legacy ultimately reduced to a kooky bare-hand catch of a flyball in left field (popularized in every "Baseball Bloopers" VHS tape of the early '90s). Observe the similarities:

First, their peak seasons:

Kevin Mitchell (1989, age 27): 152 G, 47 HR, 125 RBI, .291 AVG, 1.023 OPS

Travis Hafner (2006, age 28): 129 G, 42 HR, 117 RBI, .308 AVG, 1.097 OPS

And now their career digits:

Mitchell: 13 years, 234 HR, 760 RBI, .284 AVG, .880 OPS

Hafner: 11 years, 195 HR, 683 RBI, .279 AVG, .891 OPS

Kinda puts things in perspective a bit, doesn't it?

Both Mitchell and Hafner followed up their crazy monster seasons with solid campaigns in 1990 and 2007, respectively. But from that point on, neither would drive in 100 runs again, and injuries (and fatness in Mitchell's case) would turn them into marginalized figures. Maybe your remember K-Mitch swatting a robust .153 for the Indians in 20 games back in 1997? **As for Pronk, his career became the baseball equivalent of NBC's "The Office"-- highly successful and entertaining from 2005 to 2007, but increasingly unworthy of anchoring a lineup with each passing season; not unwatchable, but rarely must-see TV**
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Now, you could also argue that Mitchell and Hafner's career arcs look like textbook cases of steroid use, and both men have certainly had those accusations loosely tossed in their directions. But being in no possession of any pre-owned Pronk syringes, myself, I'll be glossing over that whole issue entirely from this point forward.

To Haf or Haf Not

Okay, so Pronk will never be elected to anything beyond the National Hall of Adequacy. But what about in the context of Cleveland baseball history? Well, even with the dead weight of five DL-icious years in a row, Hafner has managed to etch his name all over the Indians record book. Have a gander at his ranks in some of these fairly meaningful categories.

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