

Friday, September 17, 2004

Verducci, Chavez, and Colon

Can we talk about Tom Verducci for a second? I can't figure him out. Some weeks, he says the stupidest things imaginable in Sports Illustrated, other weeks he's saying things that no other mainstream baseball writer is saying. Many times, he makes both kinds of statements right in the same column.

In this week's Illy (that's the 9-20-04 issue, with Mike Vick on the cover), on pg. 91, he writes: Yankees manager Joe Torre has a knack for playing the right players at the right spot at the right time, but he stumbled upon one lineup revision that more teams should emulate: Put your best hitters at the top of the order. He talks about how the Yankees have done since Derek Jeter and Alex Rodriguez were made the 1-2 hitters in the lineup, gets Rodriguez saying that he "love[s] hitting second," but then delivers the denouement: Too often teams try to shoehorn traditional table-setters into the one and two spots, moving better hitters down in the order and costing them scores of plate appearances over a full season. The Giants are the worst offenders. They should bat Barry Bonds second or third instead of fourth.

Revolutionary!

Well, not so much, considering that the non-mainstream baseball community (read: Prospectus, Primer, bloggers, etc.) have been advocating this change, specifically for Bonds but also generally for all teams, since the beginning of time.

Of course, this makes you wonder: does Verducci read Prospectus? Does he read baseball blogs? Or has he come up with this on his own? Actually, an affirmative response to any of those three questions would impress me, for different reasons.

Eric Chavez

The same issue has a small feature on Eric Chavez and his improvement versus lefties this year. I'm pretty sure Joe Sheehan hasn't written about Chavez once in the last three years without mentioning his ineptitude against lefties, and, really, it's deserved that amount of attention. If a manager could bring in a lefty and immediately turn the A's \$11 million man into Endy Chavez, Oakland wasn't going to get as much value out of his contract as they might otherwise.

Now that Chavez is hitting .321 against lefties for the year, we have to wonder whether he's for real or if this is a fluke season.

In the article, Chavez is quoted saying, "I wasn't worried about [hitting lefties], because I had pretty good power numbers against lefties even though I didn't have much of an average." Let's check this out.

This year, Chavez has a .321/.430/.526 line against lefties. His average is actually .80 lower against righties, his isolated OBP's are similar (.109 vs. lefties, .142 vs. righties), and so are this ISO sluggings (.205 vs. .269).

Last year, Chavez hit just .220 against lefties, with a .051 ISO OBP and a .183 ISO power, compared to .312, .075, and .255. The 2002 season was similar: .209, .052, .153 vs. .301, .078, and .270. From 2001 to 2003 overall, Chavez hit .229, .049, .166 against .306, .069, .273.

Here's what I make of all this. Chavez's averages are fluky: his average vs. righties is remarkably low, and he'll get back into the .300 range against them next year. His average vs. lefties is remarkably high, but hidden in the random variation is some genuine improvement. His true ability level is something like .250-.270 against them, rather than the .210-.230 range he'd displayed before.

Second, Chavez's newfound strike-zone control is for real and will stick with him against both lefties and righties. In fact, I'd guess that he'll actually decrease the gap between his ISO OBP's by raising his mark against lefties as teams decide that he hits southpaws well enough now that they have to be as careful against him as righties are.

Those ISO slugging's are interesting as well. He's hitting lefties for more power this year, but a left-handed batter with his level of struggles going for that three-year .166 ISO is nothing to hang your head about. I'm guessing that he's hitting a bit over his head for power against lefties, just as with average, and that he'll have something like a .180 ISO against the portsiders from here on out.

One final point: It's interesting that Chavez considered himself to have good power numbers against lefties coming into this season. His slugging percentage was .395 from 2001 to 2003, and he'd hit 22 homers and 21 doubles in 537 at-bats, hardly numbers to grin about from a middle-of-the-order hitter. What Chavez appears to know though, and I take this as more of a reflection of the organization he plays in than of himself, is that those power numbers are pretty good for a guy with a .229 batting average. That he can come to a reporter and say, "I hit for pretty good power against lefties," is a sign of two things, to my mind: The Oakland organization's ability to get a little more nuance in their reading of stats than many other teams, and An affirmative team culture that prefers to point out to players what they're doing right and have them build from something good rather than criticize and tear them down. This could be a by-product of the movement in the corporate world away from tough-love and toward a little more motherly attitude.

Yesterday

Oh, yeah. The A's won yesterday, salvaging a split from the Rangers and keeping their lead over the Angels at two games. Let's not downplay this win, either, because Oakland handed Kenny Rogers a loss at the Coliseum for the first time since 1994. You read that right. Rich Harden and I were twelve years old the last time Rogers went home unhappy from Oakland, and it's not like he's only pitched there three times since that year, because you'll recall that he pitched for the A's for a year and a half, in 1998 and 1999. In addition, he was back in Texas from 2000-2003, so he surely saw plenty of Oakland.

Anyway, the A's will go to Seattle tonight while Anaheim hosts Texas. Bartolo Colon is going tonight for the Angels and he's coming off two pretty good starts against Toronto and Chicago. In addition, his last game against Texas resulted in seven innings of one-hit ball and a 2-0 Angels win.

In other words, Barry Zito has to pitch like it's 2002 again, because I'm taking the Angels as heavy favorites tonight.

Posted by jason in Baseball, Oakland A's at 16:30