

J.D. Martinez, Real Live Major League Hitter
By Neil Weinberg

It's safe to say that no matter what happens from here on out, the flyer the Tigers took on J.D. Martinez during the offseason has paid off. Really, the only thing he could do to ruin that is if he pushed Miguel Cabrera down a flight of stairs and knocked him out for the season. Even if he regresses heavily in the second half, it was a good signing. But could it be something more than that?

Over the winter, only the most dedicated minor league free-agent chaser knew Martinez was retooling his swing and working to improve, but no one expected anything close to this level of performance. Not even Martinez's family and friends think he's *this* good. But whenever you see a player performing much better than ever before in conjunction with a noticeable change in the way they operate in the batter's box, you have to explore the idea that it's real.

Let's first consider who Martinez was before the 2014 season. In 975 major league PA, Martinez hit .251/.300/.387 which was good for a .301 wOBA. Mix that with below average defense and baserunning and he had been worth -0.5 fWAR in about two seasons worth of playing time. Martinez was basically the definition of replacement level, or worse. He walked in fewer than 7% of his trips to the plate and struck out in more than 23%. He hit 24 HR, but 24 HR over two seasons with no other skills isn't a useful player.

A lot of people are mocking the Astros now for saying they didn't have room for him because they were starting to be successful, but you can't look at Martinez's career prior to this year and see a whole lot of promise. When the season started, Steamer projected a .304 wOBA based on his performance to date (both minor and major league). Steamer didn't know he changed everything about his swing, but everything pointed to a below average bat with nothing around it.

The Tigers took a flyer because they clearly saw some potential. It's hard to get demonstrably better at hitting, but Al Avila thought Martinez might be one of the lucky ones who could. I'm confident he didn't expect this and even if Martinez turned out to be a .320 wOBA hitter, getting him in the clearance section for pennies on the dollar made it a fine move.

But Andy Dirks got hurt and Rajai Davis, Austin Jackson, and Torii Hunter all struggled after a few good weeks to start the season and the Tigers called up a red-hot Martinez who was *slugging* .846 in Toledo.

Again, at the time, the mood around Martinez was that he was tearing up the minors and the Tigers needed an outfielder so it was time to see if that retooled swing was worth its mettle. His first forty or so plate appearances looked pretty typical, hitting .200/.256/.286, good for a .243 wOBA. Then, of course, the light went on and he hit .357/.388/.736 (.477 wOBA) over the next

139 PA. You could make the case that only Mike Trout has hit better than Martinez since May 18th in the entire league.

Which raises the question, how much stock can we put in just 140 trips to the plate? For all this talk about a new swing, it's still only been two months. It's fair to say that the Martinez who projects to have a .300 wOBA is gone and it's also fair to say that he's probably not going to maintain his .426 wOBA either, because that would make him essentially the best hitter in the league. The truth is somewhere in between, obviously, but where?

Let's start with the basics and go check out the updated Steamer projection, which factors in Martinez's old numbers and his new numbers from this year. Steamer thinks he's a .337 wOBA hitter going forward, which is pretty amazing if you think about it. In three months of baseball, Martinez has gone from a .300 wOBA projection to a .340 wOBA projections. Over the course of 600 plate appearances, that differential is good for two wins. He's gone from basically useless to a true talent level of major league average. That's terrific.

And there's some reason to think the projections could be underselling Martinez a little bit as well. I would caution you against looking at a .420 wOBA and a new swing and declaring it legitimate, but if you want to say that the old data is a little less relevant to Martinez than to the average player I won't argue. We know this isn't simply BABIP luck, considering that his BABIP was fine before, and because things like hard-hit ball data back up what you're seeing with your eyes. He is hitting the ball much harder when he makes contact and his contact ability, while lacking, isn't getting worse as he swings more often and with more vigor.

I talked to a rival advance scout last week who verified this impression. Martinez is crushing the baseball in all parts of the zone and seems to be a much improved player. Does this mean we bet on .340 wOBA? .360? .380? There's no way to be sure, but let's consider some history. What's the best a player can do with his strikeout, walk, and contact profile?

I looked at all player seasons from 2009 to 2014 with at least 150 PA and selected only those players with walk rates of 8% or lower and strikeout rates of 23% or higher and returned 227 player seasons. Right now, JD Martinez has the second highest wOBA in the group at Devin Mesoraco (2014) at number one and Jose Abreu (2014) at number three are both due for in-season regression. No other player has finished a season with a wOBA higher than .369 during this span and only 24 had a wOBA of .350 or higher. On average, the group tended to sit in the .305 to .310 wOBA range and their ISO settles back into the .160 range rather than Martinez's current .317.

When it comes down to it, this is both encouraging and discouraging news. The optimistic way to look at this is that the Tigers got 200 PA of .430 wOBA from a player they signed for nothing and will probably get .340 to .350 wOBA from him going forward. That's tremendous. But the disappointing part is that it reminds us that Martinez is going to come back to Earth. There's essentially no way to sustain this kind of performance with this type of strikeout and walk profile

and on average players who control the strike zone the way he does are well below average hitters. I'm not just saying it's unlikely, I'm saying there isn't one example of it during the last six seasons. .370 is the ceiling and .340 looks more likely.

That's not a star, but a .340 wOBA from a corner with below average but not horrible baserunning and defense is a useful player all the same. Maybe that's a fourth outfielder or a fringe starter. That's much less than Martinez is right now, but it's much more than we could have possibly imagined in January.

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