Kenny Lofton or Steve Finley?

It's not quite A-Rod vs Papi or 'Tastes Great' vs 'Less Filling', but the question of who's a better defensive center fielder seems to be vexing San Francisco Giants fans these days. In many ways, they are very similar players: Lofton picked up four Gold Gloves in the '90s, while Finley has five, including one in 2004, and now they're both many years removed from their primes.

So it's not exactly the most important question in baseball these days, but it turns out that it frames a lot of the arguments against statistical fielding analysis. From 2002-2005, Baseball Prospectus has Lofton at 24 Fielding Runs Above Average (FRAA), while Finley is at -6, even though Lofton has had substantially less playing time over the last four years.

Giants fans, who've had both Finley and Lofton patrolling center field late in their careers, don't think this matches up with what they see with their own eyes. If you watch a few games, you can see that both Finley and Lofton are reasonably fast runners, but Lofton has a weak arm, while Finley has one of the strongest and most accurate in the league. A strong arm gets you on more highlight reels, so Finley tends to win out in the minds of most fans.

So why then do BP's numbers favor Lofton so much? Outfield Assists are a poor measure of arm strength, so BP has little to gauge Finley's stronger arm. On the other hand, Lofton gets a huge advantage because he gets to a lot more balls in the center field:

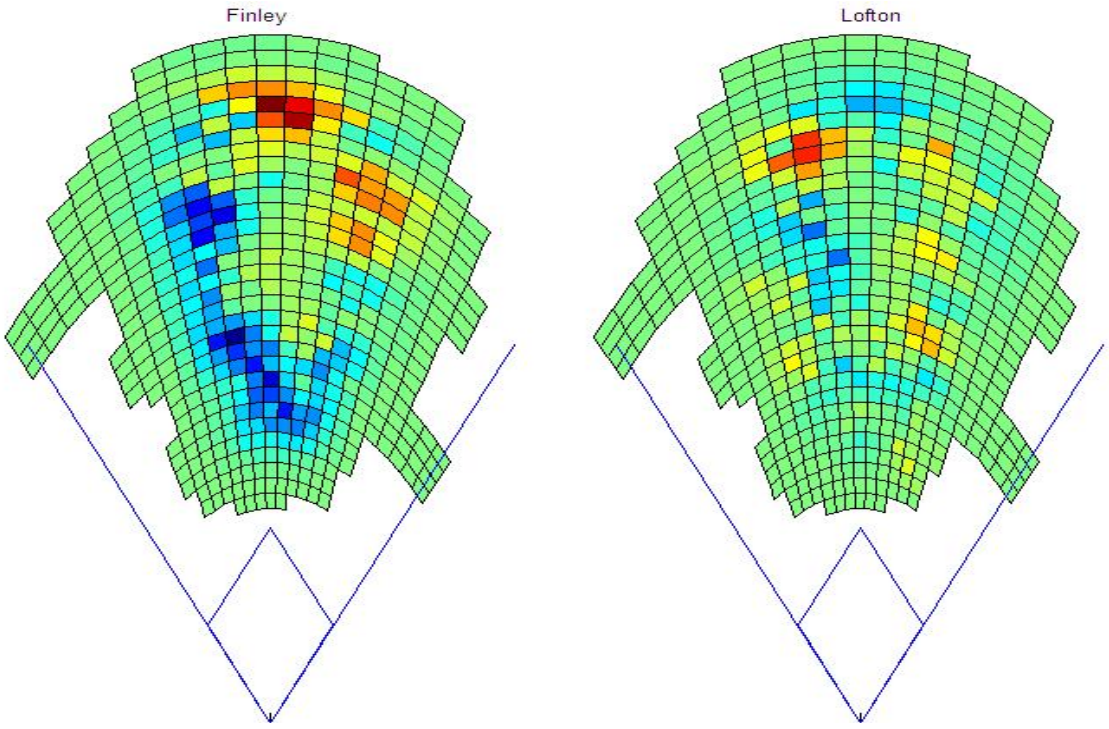
PO/9 Inn	2002	2003	2004	2005	Total
Finley	2.44	1.99	2.34	2.67	2.34
Lofton	2.78	2.34	2.71	2.44	2.55

So BP effectively says that Lofton is better than Finley because Lofton has a better range factor. Hence the difficulty with using traditional fielding statistics – they just don't give you enough information about what a fielder does. PROTRADE has already shown that Finley's arm is substantially better than Lofton's, so let's move on to comparing their range in the outfield:

POAA	2002	2003	2004	2005	Total
Finley	-4	-24	-15	-15	-59
Lofton	3	-21	0	4	-14

Here, 'POAA' stands for Put Outs Above-Average, which is calculated by dividing the outfield into quadrants and determining how many plays the average center fielder made in each quadrant. What Finley and Lofton did in the outfield was then compared to what an average outfielder would have done had he handled the same batted balls in the outfield. Both Lofton and Finley have below-average range by this metric, but Finley is substantially worse.

But what does this mean? Can we figure out what Finley and Lofton actually do in the field? The plots below show how each of them did relative to the league average in each outfield quadrant from 2002-2005:



Blue regions indicate below-average performance, while Green is average, and Yellow and Red above-average. While Lofton's chart shows no obvious patterns, it's clear that Finley plays very deep and is not very good at fielding balls in front of him and to his right. You might think that Finley's performance was distorted by playing 40% of his games in Arizona's hitter's park, where he had to play deep to avoid extra-base hits. But the chart looks the same whether we adjust for park effects or leave out his games in Arizona entirely.

So who's the better outfielder? Does Lofton's range advantage outweigh Finley's strong arm? For every single play during the baseball season, PROTRADE determines the expected outcome, and compares that to what actually happens. Based on play-by-play data, we divide credit for the difference between expectation and reality to the pitcher, hitter, baserunners and fielders. This lets us take into account both arm strength and range for outfielders, and assign an Expected Run (ER) value to Lofton and Finley's performance:

ER	2002	2003	2004	2005	Total
Finley	3	-3	-12	-13	-25
Lofton	-2	5	1	11	15

Overall, we don't differ that much from BP when we compare these two players, though Lofton was 40 runs better than Finley in our system, compared to 30 in BP's. But to answer the question, no, Finley's arm doesn't come close to matching the value of Lofton's range, no matter how you analyze the problem.