



Well Tribe fans, it's that time of year again. The MLB Rule 4 Draft is set to take place this Thursday evening, and your Cleveland Indians hold the 5th pick in the first round. Because of MLB's asinine rules artificially tying draft picks to free agents, the Indians will not pick again until #79 overall, having forfeited their "competitive balance" sandwich pick as well as their 2nd round pick with the signings of Michael Bourn and Nick Swisher. But you didn't come here for (another) rant on the Collective Bargaining Agreement; you came here to learn about the player the Indians could potentially end up with at #5 overall in the draft.

Much like the past two seasons, this will be part one of a two-part draft miniseries. Today, we'll take a look at some of the options that the Indians will consider with their pick. Tomorrow, I'll put up my mock draft of the first 10 picks in the draft. Because let's be honest, very few of us care who Oakland selects with pick #24 in the first round, right? So without further delay, here are 11 players that the Indians might be thinking about with their first pick in the draft come Thursday night.

Mark Appel, RHP-Stanford

Appel was a lot of peoples' pick to go #1 overall in last year's draft to the Astros. He was a consensus top-5 guy in last year's class, but due to his agent (Scott Boras) and expected bonus demands, he slid to Pittsburgh at #8 overall. The Pirates took a pretty good run at signing him, offering him an over-slot bonus of \$3.8 million, but ultimately couldn't pay him enough to play in the Steel City. So here we are again with Appel a heavy favorite for the top pick, and the Houston Astros weighing the merits of drafting (and paying) him.

Appel has top of the rotation potential. He's a big kid at 6'5" 215lbs, and leverages that frame to generate a fastball that sits comfortably between 93-97 and touches 99. He commands the pitch well, and generates good plane making the pitch especially difficult to handle down in the zone.

He complements the heater with two plus secondary offerings in his slider and changeup. Both have a future-70 grade on them, and both can flash at that level already. The slider sits between 85-87 with impressive life and tilt, while the changeup is a very deceptive pitch that just fades down and away from righthanders. He has a very smooth, clean, easily repeatable delivery that helps with his command and allows him to go deep into games.

Combining that impressive arsenal with his size and strength, and you can see why Appel is considered to be the top talent in this year's draft. The wildcard is his agent and bonus demands, much as they were back in 2012. If a team drafts Appel and doesn't sign him, he'd have to go pitch in the independent leagues as he has no further college eligibility. That would seem to put the leverage on the side of the team selecting him. But if a team drafts a player in the top-10 rounds and he doesn't sign, the team loses the bonus pool associated with that pick. So that gives Appel a little leverage after all. If it were any other team besides Houston selecting #1 overall, I'd say he was a sure thing to go 1-1.



Jonathan Gray, RHP-Oklahoma

Like Appel, Gray is a big, strong RHP who makes his living off of his impressive fastball. The 6'4" 240lbs Sooner can touch triple digits on the radar gun, and was sitting comfortably between 94-97 MPH this spring. He compliments the fastball with a slider that already grades as a plus pitch, and should round out to a plus-plus offering. It looks almost exactly like his fastball coming out of his hand, showcasing very impressive late action and tilt. The best professional comp I can think of for the pitch is Randy Johnson; not saying Gray is at the Big Unit's level yet of course, but the fastball/slider combo is similar to what has Johnson headed to the hall of fame. Gray was able to buzzsaw through most collegiate lineups with just his fastball/slider

combo, so his changeup lags behind those two offerings. The change has good potential, but his command of the pitch isn't where it needs to be to succeed as a professional. Repetitions and experience will help make the pitch more consistent, and there's no reason why it couldn't mature into a potential out pitch for Gray.

Gray's delivery is smooth and consistent, but he does land a bit stiff on his front leg from time to time. It's not a major red flag, but when he does it his control suffers, so it's something to keep an eye on. He's a good athlete and experience with a professional pitching coach should be able to handle the issue with little difficulty. He does a great job maintaining his stuff deep into games, and the coaching staff at Oklahoma has done a fine job protecting his talented right arm by limiting his pitch counts.

Gray threw a bit of a wrench in this process when he tested positive for a banned substance (Adderall) prior to the draft. Some think that means he will fall out of the top-3, and some think that now Houston is more likely to take Gray because the positive test means they can secure his immense talent at a discount at 1-1. His overall ceiling might even be higher than Appel's, but he's also less of a sure thing. He's one of the top 3 talents in the draft, and could go anywhere from #1 overall to #6 as an absolute floor. I don't see him getting past the Indians if he's on the board at #5 though.

Trey Ball, LHP-New Castle High School (Indiana)

The top prep player in the state of Indiana, Ball is one of the best lefthanded pitchers available in the draft. The tall, lanky southpaw can run his plus fastball up to 97 MPH, and sits comfortably in the low to mid 90's. The fastball comes at hitters on a steep downward plane, and they tend to beat it into the ground when they do make contact. It's a two-seamer with nice arm-side run, and has the potential to be a plus-plus pitch at the major league level. He compliments the fastball with a curveball that's raw but promising and a changeup that flashes plus. Both secondary pitches are inconsistent at this stage of Ball's development, but he has the potential to have three pitches that grade at plus or better.

Ball is a very good athlete, and some teams are even looking at him as a hitter in this draft. I don't see that happening, as 6'6" lefties who throw in the high-90's have a tendency to stick on the mound. His delivery is repeatable but has a little bit of herky-jerkyness to it, which helps him hide the ball well and create deception for the hitter. He weighs in at right around 180lbs, and there's plenty of room on his frame to add strength and have his fastball velocity tick up another

notch or two. His long arms and legs keep him slow to the plate, and he hasn't shown off much of a slide step. He still needs to shore up his command and work on his consistency, but it's an enticing package that's likely to come off the board in the first 10 picks of the draft this year.

Kohl Stewart, RHP-St. Pius X High School (Texas)

Stewart is from a football-rich area of Texas, and has a full scholarship to play QB at Texas A&M. A&M will have a decent QB under center for the next two years though, so Stewart might want to consider giving this pitching thing a try. The 6'3", 190lbs righty sits between 92-94 with his fastball, and touches 97. The pitch has nice arm-side run, and is especially tough on righties. He has an impressive slider, and is developing both a curveball and changeup. The fastball and slider could be plus-plus pitches at the professional level, and both the curve and change should be at least average.

Stewart has some issues with his delivery that affect his command, but nothing serious that can't be fixed with additional experience and a professional pitching coach. He's an excellent athlete and should be able to make adjustments as needed. He's not a finished product by any means, and there's a lot of risk involved in an arm as raw as Stewart's. But there's also a lot of upside in there, as much as any pitcher in the draft. Someone is going to pull the trigger on Stewart in the top half of the draft in the hopes that his immense potential can someday headline the top of a major league rotation.





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