



When trades are completed, it's not very often that the player to be named later winds up being the best player a team receives. That is the result of the CC Sabathia trade in 2008 to the Milwaukee Brewers. The Indians received Matt LaPorta, Zach Jackson, Rob Bryson and a player to be named later.

A lot of things fell into place for the Indians with that fourth piece of the trade. The trade stipulated that if the Brewers made the playoffs, the Indians could pick the player. If the Brewers missed the playoffs, they would decide who to send to the Indians. The speculation of who was on the list includes names like Jonathan Lucroy, Taylor Green, Mat Gamel, and Michael Brantley, a light-hitting outfielder in Double-A Huntsville. With Sabathia's help on the final day of the season, the Brewers beat out the Mets for the wild card spot by one game. The Indians, as we all know, chose Michael Brantley as the PTBNL. Lucroy has been solid, but Green and Gamel have not amounted to much of anything.

If you're looking for a reason why the Indians have been mostly irrelevant since 2007, you can look back at this trade as a big reason why. Matt LaPorta (note how he has three A's in his name – ironic, no?) never panned out, battling injuries and the inability to hit a slider. Rob Bryson is still toiling in the Indians minor league system. Zach Jackson managed -0.6 WAR in 63.1 innings with the Indians, was traded to Toronto, and has never been heard from again.

By default, Brantley has become the shining star of this trade deal. While he is admired by Cleveland fans for his ability to put the ball in play and play an above average left field, the advanced statistics tell of a player that is below average offensively and is essentially replacement level. Sabathia was worth 4.9 WAR to the Brewers after the trade, going 11-2 with a 1.65 ERA. Brantley, in parts of five Major League seasons, has accumulated 3.8 WAR thus far.

On the surface, if we look at the trade as Brantley for half a season of Sabathia, which is exactly what happened since Sabathia took a lucrative free agent deal to pitch for the Yankees, it's not a bad trade, even with Brantley's performance to date. One would have to wonder if the compensation draft picks would have panned out for the Indians. The Brewers selected Kentrail Davis and Max Walla with their compensation selections in the 2009 draft. Davis is 25 and still in Double-A, with a .770 OPS in his minor league career, while Walla has not managed to go above Single-A in five minor league seasons. Who knows what would have happened with the Indians' draft picks.

Brantley is kind of a rare player in today's MLB. He doesn't strike out, but he also doesn't walk. Of the 260 players with at least 1,500 plate appearances from 2008-13, Brantley ranks 42nd in lowest percentage of plate appearances ending in a strikeout. He also ranks 89th in lowest percentage of plate appearances ending with a walk. Of those 260 players, Brantley ranks 215th in WAR. In other words, he's a replacement level player.

Sabermetric stats like WAR, wOBA, wRC+, and others are going to be critical of Brantley because the value of a player is defined by not making outs. While Brantley hits for a reasonable average, with a career mark of .275, his on-base percentage is just .329. Furthermore, Brantley doesn't hit for a whole lot of power, with a .377 slugging percentage and a .102 ISO, or isolated power. Only 24 of the 260 players fitting the above criteria have a lower ISO than Brantley.

We've come to appreciate Brantley's consistent approach at the plate and the fact that he has consistently hit for a high average with men on base. For his career, Brantley is a .248 hitter with the bases empty, but a .317 hitter with men on, and a .300 hitter with men in scoring position. His slugging percentage also jumps nearly 100 points with men on base. Again, back to the 260 players with 1,500+ plate appearances since 2008, Brantley has the 51st-best outside zone swing percentage (chase rate) at 23.3 percent. Even though Brantley doesn't walk, he swings at strikes. By percentage, Brantley has the fourth-fewest swings and misses of the sample size I've been citing.

An in-depth look at Brantley reveals a player that sabermetricians view as below average and traditional observers view as above average. Not only does that make him a somewhat difficult player to evaluate, but it makes contract negotiations difficult as well. The Indians were reportedly [talking about an extension](#) during Spring Training with Brantley, as well as Jason Kipnis.

As I've already discussed, sabermetricians view Brantley as below average and comparisons to other left fielders would render the same conclusion in that regard. Hitting with men on base generally seems coincidental and can change greatly from year to year, but Brantley really does have a knack for hitting with men on base and there's a big enough sample size to prove that. His approach seems to change and there's value in that.

It's hard for me to even begin to forecast the kind of money Brantley might receive in a contract extension. The Indians front office is very progressive when it comes to advanced statistics and the changing philosophies in baseball. The advanced stats tell of a below average offensive player, but Brantley tends to look different to the eyes. He probably fits the profile of a seventh or eighth place hitter, but he has been moved all throughout the lineup during his Indians tenure. He drives in a good amount of runs for a guy with very little power and hits well in big situations.

Some people have advocated shopping Brantley on the trade market and seeing what his value is. It probably depends on the philosophy of the front office and what their specific team needs are. Ultimately, with no immediate help in the minor leagues and no viable starting outfielder options on the bench, Brantley probably means more to the Indians than his trade value would be.

These contract negotiations will be especially interesting to me as more of a new school thinker with baseball statistics. Brantley better fits the profile of somebody with old school baseball philosophies. What we know for sure is that Brantley, for better or worse, is a big part of the Indians lineup and will have to continue to be for the team to have a chance at October baseball.