



The non-waiver trade deadline has come and gone and Indians General Manager Chris Antonetti was only able to make one minor move, acquiring Marc Rzepczynski from the St. Louis Cardinals. The Indians had some holes, but the exorbitant asking prices at the trade deadline were prohibitive, so Antonetti took a gamble on a left handed reliever nicknamed “Scrabble”. For what it’s worth, the tiles required to make up his name, Rzepczynski, combine to be worth 40 points. Of course, there is only one Z tile in Scrabble, but it would seem obvious why the nickname fits. In any event, like most of Chris Antonetti’s recent deals, this one is not short-sighted, nor is it costly. Because of Antonetti’s recent track record with deals of this type, we should give him the benefit of the doubt.

The Indians wanted a second matchup lefty in their bullpen. The asking price for San Francisco’s Javier Lopez was reportedly Danny Salazar, one of the top prospects in the Indians’ system. Frankly, that was a ridiculous price. Lopez is only signed for two months and reportedly wishes to play closer to his native Virginia in the future. While Cleveland is certainly closer than San Francisco, it would seem that Lopez would look for a multi-year deal in free agency in one of the league’s East Divisions. Another candidate, Joe Thatcher, was traded to Arizona for cost-controlled starting pitcher Ian Kennedy, a middle of the rotation guy with a couple of years left on his contract. Scott Downs, an impending free agent, was traded from the LA Angels of Anaheim to Atlanta for peanuts. No other lefties were traded before Wednesday’s deadline, including guys like Travis Blackley (HOU), Wesley Wright (HOU), James Russell (CHC), Mike Gonzalez (MIL), and Oliver Perez (SEA).

Marc Rzepczynski was available because he had fallen out of favor with the Cardinals. After being acquired in 2011 as part of a big trade between the Blue Jays and Cardinals that included Colby Rasmus, Edwin Jackson, and Octavio Dotel, Rzepczynski failed to meet expectations. He was excellent in the 2011 ALCS and World Series after a rough division series, with nine appearances covering seven innings, allowing one run on three hits with eight strikeouts. He was serviceable in 2012, posting a 4.24 ERA over 70 appearances. Rzepczynski began the 2013 season with the Cardinals, but was sent to Triple-A at the end of April after posting a 7.88 ERA in his first nine appearances with a 2.00 WHIP.

While those numbers are ugly, it's important to realize the context of his appearances. Rzepczynski has held left handed batters to a career slash of .224/.298/.310/.607. Righties, on the other hand, have much better success with a .271/.359/.439/.798 mark. Rzepczynski was pitching in low-leverage situations for the Cardinals this season and faced 14 more righties than he did lefties. While with the Cardinals this season, righties batted .407/.500/.593/1.093 and lefties batted .294/.278/.353/.631.

What determines success for a reliever is how the manager utilizes him. Everybody with an interest in baseball has their ideas on how important a manager truly is. The way he manages his bullpen is the most obvious way to gauge a manager's influence and success, in part because it's the one thing we see the most and have the ability to critique. Rzepczynski was not put in a position to succeed this season. Those are very sharp platoon splits and illustrate a pitcher who should be a specialist at the Major League level. That's what his role will be with the Indians and what his role should have been all along. Rzepczynski actually began his career as a starter for the Blue Jays, making 23 starts over two seasons. They quickly found out that his repertoire is not deep enough to start, so he became a short-inning reliever.

Take away the conventional stats like ERA and WHIP and look below the surface to evaluate Rzepczynski. You have to keep in mind that matchup relievers have very small sample sizes, so their numbers are going to be skewed. What's important to realize about Rzepczynski is that he has allowed 29 percent of inherited runners to score in his career, which is slightly below the annual league average of around 31 percent. Sixty of his 177 appearances have come in high-leverage situations. While his success rate isn't where you would want it to be in those spots, he has pitched in them and did have success pitching in them during the Cardinals' 2011 postseason run. Back to the platoon splits, lefties have a career mark of .221/.298/.310/.608 against Rzepczynski. This is important and the chief reason the Indians added him to the bullpen.

A change of scenery and being used the proper way should benefit Rzepczynski. If nothing else, he is an upgrade to our current bullpen in regards to facing left handed hitters. Here are the 2013 and career breakdowns of Indians relievers against left handed batters.

Pitcher

2013

Career

Rich Hill

.177/.306/.283

.201/.320/.333

Joe Smith

.239/.342/.478

.250/.351/.388

Cody Allen

.220/.264/.444

.227/.301/.445

Bryan Shaw

.256/.337/.405

.288/.364/.404

Matt Albers

.242/.356/.355

.261/.366/.425

Vinnie Pestano

.275/.367/.493

.262/.349/.450

Nick Hagadone

.196/.288/.304

.179/.275/.276

Mark Rzepczynski

.294/.278/.353

.221/.298/.310

Leaving out Chris Perez for obvious reasons, the primary Indians setup men have poor platoon splits. The biggest difference between the lefties and the righties is slugging percentage against, with the Indians' right handers giving up a lot of extra base hits to lefties. Rzepczynski has faced 365 left handed hitters in his career and they have a total of 17 extra base hits.

Jeff Sullivan at Fangraphs put together a [great analysis](#) of the Rzepczynski trade. In it, Sullivan might have determined one of the reasons for Rzepczynski's lack of success:

A thing to acknowledge: there's a reason Rzepczynski had been pitching in Triple-A. He's never been all that successful against righties, and, statistically, he's gotten worse against lefties. Through 2011, he struck out 28% of left-handed bats. Since then, he's struck out just 21%. In Triple-A this year, he struck out 15%, and one is free to wonder whether he really represents an upgrade over what Hagadone might offer. In Triple-A, Rzepczynski struck out a higher rate of righties than lefties.

And this drop in strikeouts is correlated with a drop in Rzepczynski's slider usage. Used to be, almost half his pitches to lefties were sliders. The last two years, that's dropped to three out of ten, and that pitch has been his swing-and-miss weapon. He hasn't been able to throw the pitch as often for strikes, so he's had to cut back, and that's made him more hittable.

But remember the sample sizes we're talking about. As recently as 2011, Rzepczynski was something of a stretch-run and postseason hero, and since then he hasn't even thrown 60 innings in the bigs. The quality of his raw stuff hasn't diminished, and even though every situational lefty feels like he's 36 years old, Rzepczynski's just 27. He's actually under team control through 2015, with two more years of arbitration eligibility. The Indians got this guy for nothing, and his numbers are unremarkable, but if they can help him to find his slider, he could be a piece now and for the next two years. Even now, he can get most lefties out, and with a little improvement, he's a weapon. He's been real good before, and we know relievers are volatile. The ingredients are there.

With what Mickey Callaway, Terry Francona, Kevin Cash, and the rest of the Indians staff have been able to do with the pitching staff this season, they should be able to help Rzepczynski get back to being an effective reliever. Talent helps with guys like Justin Masterson, Corey Kluber, Scott Kazmir, and others, but the adjustments and suggestions that Callaway and Company have made have undoubtedly paid dividends. Kluber's increased use of the cutter. Masterson's devastatingly good slider, which according to Fangraphs, is the most effective slider in baseball this season. Zach McAllister's new split-fingered pitch that gave him a lot of success before the disabled list stint. Convincing Ubaldo Jimenez to be more of a pitcher than a thrower. The progression of the pitching staff is the main reason why the Indians are where they currently are in the standings and a lot of the credit goes to Callaway. I have a lot of confidence in him to get Rzepczynski's slider and confidence back.

Another point I have not mentioned up until now that was included in what I posted from Sullivan is that Rzepczynski is under team control for the next two seasons as well. If he bombs, the Indians can easily jettison him. If he's effective, he gives the Indians a solid LOOGY (Lefty One-Out GuY) for the foreseeable future. All it cost was Juan Herrera, a guy who was not even listed in our own Al Ciammaichella's Top-61 Prospects Countdown prior to the season. The Indians are rich in middle infield depth in the minors and Herrera was a very reasonable price for two-and-a-half seasons of Rzepczynski.

The sad casualty of the Rzepczynski trade is that it required an unpopular roster move. The Indians sent Vinnie Pestano to Triple-A Columbus to get some things worked out. To Pestano's credit, he had 72 hours to report to Triple-A, but personally called Manager Chris Tremie and gave him his word that he would be there the following day.

It's been a tumultuous season for Pestano, who struggled in the World Baseball Classic, fought

through mechanics issues, and spent time on the disabled list with a nagging elbow injury. When he has worked in games this season, he has not been good. Baseball is a humbling game and nobody is more humbled than Pestano, who was one of the game's most valuable relievers in 2011 and 2012 and now has to get things worked out in the minors in 2013.

This demotion should not be an indictment of Pestano. The Indians simply couldn't get him regular work and he's not going to get any better or get his mechanics issues worked out by sitting in the bullpen six days a week. He has to pitch and Columbus is the best place for that. He worked a scoreless frame on Wednesday night with a strikeout and a walk, throwing seven of his 13 pitches for strikes. The walk was to a left handed hitter. On Friday night, Pestano was a contributor to the Clippers' 8.2-inning no hitter, working a clean eighth with two strikeouts.

To wrap up the Rzepczynski trade, I'll refer you back to the final line of my first paragraph. Antonetti's recent track record with deals like this is very impressive. By "deals like this", I'm talking about under the radar kinds of moves to add depth. Trades like acquiring Mike Aviles and Yan Gomes for Esmil Rogers. While Rogers has been useful as a starter for the Jays, Aviles and Gomes have combined for 2.8 wins above replacement player and Rogers just 0.7. Aviles and Gomes have been big contributors, especially of late, and Aviles has been a tremendous asset in the clubhouse. You can bet that Terry Francona had his fingerprints all over that trade, knowing both Aviles and Gomes from his days in Boston.

There's also the Austin Kearns for Zach McAllister trade. The Jake Westbrook for Corey Kluber trade. Bryan Shaw and Matt Albers have worked out reasonably well for the Indians and they were depth throw-ins in the Shin-Soo Choo/Trevor Bauer trade. The same can be said for Drew Stubbs, who was a valuable piece in that trade, but certainly not the centerpiece.

Antonetti and his staff have done a good job poaching talent from other organizations. Rzepczynski should be no different. If he's willing to listen to suggestions and a different voice, there's a lot of reason to believe that he can succeed and contribute for this season's playoff push and the next couple of seasons.