



The Indians announced a contract extension to Ryan Raburn on Wednesday afternoon that keeps him in an Indians uniform through 2015. The deal, worth a minimum of \$4.85M with a \$3M option for 2016, comes as Raburn is having a career year at the plate. The Indians initially signed Raburn to a minor league contract with an invitation to Spring Training this past winter. Now, he'll be a fixture on the Indians' bench for the next two seasons, and possibly a third.

On the free agent market, this is market value for a utility player of Raburn's skill set. So, the salary amounts are relatively fair. The deal breaks down as \$2.25M in 2014, \$2.5M in 2015, with a \$100,000 buyout of the 2016 option at \$3M. Considering the season Raburn is having, his value would, in theory, increase if he hit the open market and he could possibly have made more money. That being said, nobody wanted Raburn enough to give him a guaranteed job this past offseason and this season appears to be an aberration.

At age 32, Raburn is doing things this season that he has never done before. He was let go by the Tigers because he put up a .247/.299/.410 slash line from 2010-12 in 1,050 plate appearances. He struck out 4.25 times to every one walk and hit a home run once every 32.1 at bats. This season, Raburn is batting .277/.370/.565, with just 2.2 strikeouts to every one walk, and a home run every 14.1 at bats.

The Indians are doing what they usually do, trying to get cheap value wherever they can. Raburn is a roll of the dice. Paying around \$1M for a win above replacement player is terrific value. If Raburn has truly turned a corner, the Indians will get good value out of this contract extension. If Raburn reverts back to the player he has been for the majority of his career, it's a gamble that didn't pay off.

Raburn's wins above replacement player from 2010-12 was 1.4. In his career with the Tigers, Raburn accumulated just 2.6 WAR. This season, Raburn is truly having a career year, accumulating 2.5 WAR, nearly doubling his career output. At this point, the Indians should be asking themselves what player they should expect for the next two, possibly three, seasons. The answer may lie somewhere in between, but guys start to decline in their 30s, not get better.

Raburn's 2013 season most closely resembles his 2009 season with the Tigers, in which Raburn batted .291/.359/.533. During that season, Raburn batted .305 against right handed pitching, with a .368 batting average on balls in play (BABIP). That was an unsustainable stat for Raburn and the rest of his career has validated that, up until this season, anyway.

In the team's defense, Manager Terry Francona has utilized Raburn's strength of batting against left handed pitchers. Of Raburn's 1,050 plate appearances from 2010-12, Raburn faced a righty in 597 of them, posting a .243/.290/.382 slash. In the 366 against left handers, Raburn batted .254/.313/.456. Clearly, Raburn is more useful against southpaws. Forty-one percent of Raburn's 2013 at bats have come against lefties.

In a vacuum, you could argue that Raburn played himself into the contract extension. He signed on with the Indians with no guarantee for a job and is the team's second-best position player by WAR, trailing only Jason Kipnis. (Author note: Yan Gomes is third, in case you're wondering why the offense has struggled so much.) Kudos to Raburn for winning the bench job and making the most of it, but this probably will not continue.

While Raburn's BABIP of .321 is not too far out of the league average range of .290-.310, his home run per fly ball rate is out of control. For his career, Raburn has averaged a home run 12.2 percent of the time when hitting a fly ball. This season, that number has more than doubled to 26 percent. That's simply not sustainable. Three full-time players have a HR/FB% higher than Raburn this season: Chris Davis, Pedro Alvarez, and Miguel Cabrera. Of guys with 100 or more plate appearances, seven have a higher HR/FB% than Raburn. The aforementioned three, plus Jeff Baker, Matt Tuiasosopo, Brett Wallace, and Juan Francisco. It is worth mentioning that Baker and Tuiasosopo are also platoon players like Raburn and their managers have used them in a way that gives them the best chance to succeed.

Could this simply be a case where the Indians have found a niche for Raburn? He was exposed with the Tigers, playing everyday for a portion of his career and simply not getting enough plate appearances at other times. Possibly, but Raburn is a guy with a large sample size who is

approaching the downside of his career.

The money amount would appear inconsequential, at least until you take a look at the pitching staff, specifically, the bullpen. Joe Smith is a free agent at season's end. Chris Perez is in his third year of arbitration and is either looking at a raise or not being tendered a contract. Rich Hill and Matt Albers are impending free agents. That currently leaves a bullpen of Perez, Vinnie Pestano, Bryan Shaw, Cody Allen, and Marc Rzepczynski. In-house candidates include Preston Guilmet, CC Lee, Matt Langwell, Nick Hagadone, and Scott Barnes, unless somebody takes the Cody Allen route, flies through the system, and is thoroughly impressive in Spring Training.

The Indians will have to add to the bullpen through free agency or trade. That generally costs money. With contract raises to Michael Bourn, Nick Swisher, Asdrubal Cabrera, Chris Perez, Justin Masterson, Carlos Santana, and Mike Aviles, spending \$2.25M on a guy who is unlikely to repeat the previous season's production is not a sound business decision.

Consider the starting rotation. The Indians will lose Scott Kazmir to free agency and a bigger contract somewhere else. They'll have a decision to make with Ubaldo Jimenez and his \$8M option. If both players are gone, the Indians will have two rotation spots to fill. In-house candidates include Danny Salazar, Josh Tomlin, Carlos Carrasco, and Trevor Bauer. The Indians would probably try to go the minor league free agent route a la Scott Kazmir to get some more competition in there, but would anybody feel comfortable with a rotation of Justin Masterson, Corey Kluber, Zach McAllister, and two of those four mentioned above?

The money being paid to Raburn wouldn't be enough to sign any kind of competent starting pitcher on the market, unless he's coming back from major surgery and would take an incentive-based deal, but allocating the Raburn money to the pitching staff would be a wiser use of resources.

With the Raburn extension, the Indians locked up a utility player for around market value. If Raburn can have a quality follow-up season in 2014, then the deal may be worth it, regardless of his 2015 performance. But, if Raburn goes back to being replacement level, as his track record suggests, then this is a gamble that will not pay off at the expense of other team needs.