



To call the Major League Baseball draft a crapshoot is an understatement. Teams do tons of scouting, sending their scouts all over the country to look for talent that can be projected to the big leagues. Baseball is the only major sport with four levels of minor leagues, and that doesn't even include instructional leagues at teams' Spring Training complexes. The odds of making it to the Major Leagues AND having an impact are much, much smaller in baseball than in any other sport.

Luckily, instead of doing all of the work myself, I can poach a tremendous write-up on the 2002-06 drafts from *Bless You Boys*, the SB Nation blog of the hated Detroit Tigers. Rather than regurgitate [the entire piece](#), which is great and I recommend that you read, I will highlight some of the most pertinent stats:

- From 2002-06, 34.2 percent of players drafted in the first 10 rounds made it to the Majors.
- Of the 1,565 players drafted in the first 10 rounds from 2002-06, only 54 had a career WAR of 10 or more (Author note: Article was published March 5, 2013)
- The average result for each team over a five-year period is 18 players that make it to the Majors

A similar piece published in 2009 by Matt Swartz of *Baseball Prospectus* [showed](#) that 51

percent of first and second round draft picks since 1978 make it to the Major Leagues.

The Cleveland Indians organization has seen success at the minor league level over the last 10 years, but very little of it has translated to the Major League level. The Akron Aeros won the championship in 2003, 2005, 2009, and 2012. The Buffalo Bisons won in 2004. The Columbus Clippers won in 2010 and 2011. It is worth noting that the 2003 and 2005 Akron Aeros championship teams were integral parts of the 2005 and 2007 seasons for the Indians, far and away the two best seasons over the last 11 years of Indians baseball. Similarly, the 2010 and 2011 Clippers teams are helping to make an impact this season.

We can put Mark Shapiro and Chris Antonetti under a microscope for the mishandling of the two biggest trades in recent history, the trades of CC Sabathia and Cliff Lee, but it would be unfair to critically evaluate those without lining them up against the “minor” deals that the Indians made that have produced players like Carlos Santana, Asdrubal Cabrera, Shin-Soo Choo, Corey Kluber, Chris Perez, Joe Smith, and Zach McAllister. Justin Masterson and Ubaldo Jimenez were also acquired via trade.

The biggest problem for the Indians is that they have not drafted well. In the economic climate that the Indians have operated under for the better part of this century, poor drafting has crippled the franchise’s ability to be a contender. Brad Grant took over as the team’s scouting director following the 2007 season. In a few paragraphs, we will look at the changes that have taken place since Grant took over for departed Director of Amateur Scouting John Mirabelli.

For a team like the Indians that has been unable to participate in free agent spending, up until this season anyway, being able to reload after losing free agents to bigger markets or trading away soon-to-be high priced contracts is essential. That’s why the minimal return from Sabathia and Lee was so detrimental. The Indians have acquired a lot of good pieces in other trades, but they lack dominant, impact players. The guys that are labeled “blue chippers”. The Indians have a lot of good Major Leaguers, but it’s debatable if they have one player that would be considered “great”.

Interestingly, the Indians draft history since 2002 parallels that of their trade history. A swing and a miss on the big name guys and a decent smattering of help from the later round picks.

Let's look at the drafting history since 2002, stopping at 2011, because it's unfair to evaluate the last two drafts.

Year

# drafted

# MLB

Players

WAR w/ CLE

2002

54

4

Guthrie, Slocum, Francisco, J. Lewis\*

3.8

2003

52

6

Aubrey, Snyder, Garko, Kouzmanoff, Laffey, Jackson

6.5

2004

50

5

Sowers, S. Lewis, Gimenez, Torgas, Sipp

3.6

2005

52

8

Crowe, J. Lewis, J. Brown, Jennings\*, Wagner, Laird\*, Lincecum\*, Davis\*

2.5

2006

53

8

Huff, Wright, J. Rodriguez, McBride, Archer, Tomlin, Pestano, Gaub

4.5

2007

48

3

McFarland, Hague\*, Judy

-0.2

2008

50

5

Chisenhall, Phelps, Putnam, Langwell, Warren\*

0.9

2009

50

6

White, Kipnis, Burns, Guilmet, Nuno, B. Smith\*

9.8

2010

50

3

Pomeranz, Allen\*, B. Smith\*

0.0

2011

50

2

Allen, Roth\*

1.6

*- did not sign with Indians and drafted again another year*

Of the 509 players drafted from 2002-11, 50 have made it to the Major Leagues. Of those 50, I would say that only Francisco, J. Lewis, Sipp, Tomlin, Pestano, Chisenhall, Kipnis, and Allen have made an impact. For all intents and purposes, the Indians have drafted seven Major Leaguers of varying quality out of 10 drafts from 2002-11. Notice that four of them are relievers, one is a replacement-level starter, and Francisco and Chisenhall had great minor league success that has not translated to the big leagues. You could make the argument that all the Indians have to show for the drafts from 2002-11 are Jason Kipnis, Vinnie Pestano, Tony Sipp, and Cody Allen and it would be hard to argue that point. Furthermore, with the exception of Kipnis, those other three players were drafted in 20th round or later.

Frankly, that seems to be a running theme in Indians history. CC Sabathia, Manny Ramirez, Greg Swindell, and Charles Nagy are the four first rounders that have worked out for the Indians, but that's about it as far as first rounders go. Instead, the Indians have uncovered talent in the later rounds. David Riske was a 56th round pick in 1996 and he had a good Indians career as far as relievers go with 4.9 WAR. Richie Sexson was a 24th round pick in 1993 and hit over 300 home runs, though only 58 came in an Indians uniform. A scrawny little shortstop named Jim Thome was taken in the 11th round in 1989. Brian Giles was taken six rounds later in 1989 and he was a fine Major Leaguer for many years. Steve Olin, a 16th rounder in 1987, was on his way to a fine career before the infamous boating tragedy during Spring Training in 1993. Buddy Bell accumulated 65.9 WAR over his 18-year career after being a 16th round pick in 1969.

Diamonds in the rough are nice to find, but hitting on your early round picks is critical. The Indians simply have not done that enough over the course of their history, but especially not since 2002. Other teams have done it with success, so it's hard to just blame it on the percentages and how difficult it truly is to project a player to the Major Leagues with such a long and tenuous path to the Show.

When the Indians aren't in contention, having promising young players to watch in August and September is exciting. With the Indians in contention this season, it would be great to have a budding superstar just a phone call away to provide a shot in the arm for the ballclub.

Unfortunately, the team's budding superstar, Francisco Lindor, has been shut down for the season with a back injury after an impressive 2013 campaign.

The Indians have hit on some international free agents, like Victor Martinez, Jhonny Peralta, Fausto Carmona/Roberto Hernandez (at least for one year), and it appears that Danny Salazar may be the real deal. That helps to ease the burden of bad drafting, but it cannot make up for the sheer number of losing lottery tickets that the Indians have scratched off.

It would seem that Chris Antonetti has done a good job building this team to be competitive for the near future and that some reinforcements are developing in the minor leagues. But, we can't help but wonder where the team would be right now if they drafted better. This isn't a column about taking 2013 for granted, a year in which the Indians have already surpassed last season's win total with over a month left in the season. But rather to wonder about the green grass of contending year in and year out as opposed to having these "windows of contention". It's so much fun to be a fan of a team right in the thick of a playoff hunt and it would be great to be a part of it every year.

It's been the bad drafting that has held us back and the taste of a playoff chase brings that shortcoming to light.