



Despite the fact that the season ended in disappointment, as the Indians “won” the wild card, but fell in the one-game playoff that determined who would face the Boston Red Sox, it was a wildly successful season in downtown Cleveland. The Indians improved by 24 games, going from 68-94 to 92-70, and created a buzz about the team again. For the first time since 2007, the Indians will enter the next season with optimism, hope, and expectations.

Unfortunately, in 2007, the front office chose to sit on their hands and not improve the ballclub entering the 2008 season. The result was a very disheartening 81-81 record and it led to the rebuild that fans suffered through from 2008-12. The Indians finished 2007 with a Pythagorean Win-Loss record of 91-71, even though they won 96 games. Pythagorean W-L is based on run differential and is one of the ways to show “luck” over the course of 162 games. While 91-71 is still a good year, the Indians overachieved. Anchored by two 19-game winners, the rotation was clearly frontloaded, as the back end of the rotation was occupied by journeyman Paul Byrd, reliable, but unspectacular Jake Westbrook, and a combination of head case Cliff Lee, and generic soft-tossing lefties Jeremy Sowers and Aaron Laffey. Even with CC Sabathia and Fausto Carmona posting ERAs below 3.25, the Indians starting rotation posted a 4.19 ERA.

Instead of being proactive, the Indians front office opted to enter 2008 with essentially the same roster. The Indians were remarkably healthy in 2007 and had four starters make 25 or more starts. In 2008, Victor Martinez played in just 73 games, after playing in 147 the season before. Travis Hafner posted a .628 OPS just a year removed from an .837 OPS in what was actually a down year for Pronk to that point. Cliff Lee became the team’s ace and won the Cy Young Award, but CC Sabathia was traded to Milwaukee, Fausto Carmona went 8-7 with a 5.44 ERA, Jake Westbrook had Tommy John surgery, Jensen Lewis became the team’s closer as Rafael Betancourt went from a 1.47 ERA in 2007 to a 5.07 ERA in 2008, and the Indians were unable to overcome injuries and the front office’s decision to stand pat.

As we enter the offseason after a magical 92-70 run that included a postseason appearance, thoughts of the 2007 offseason are dancing through my head. As I discussed the other day, it was rather incredible that the Indians even got to the postseason given the adversity they faced in 2013. Key parts of the team were either hurt, ineffective, or both. Just because the team looks good on paper does not mean that the front office can sit idly by and hope for contention again in 2014. There are some positives entering next season, especially some things that were not present in 2007. In 2007, almost everybody played to their capability or higher. That wasn't the case this season. That's reason to hope, but not reason to sit idly by.

Looking ahead to 2014 is a process that started months ago for the front office. They've constantly been evaluating the current roster and the seasons from potential trade candidates or free agent targets. Most of the players in the Indians clubhouse echoed the same sentiment about making the playoffs. They enjoyed getting a little taste and it made them thirst for more. To make that a reality, the front office must be proactive this winter. There are some interesting decisions and some big holes on the 25-man roster that will need to be addressed and they will have to be met head on if the Indians want a chance at the postseason again.

PITCHING

Potential free agents: Ubaldo Jimenez, Scott Kazmir, Joe Smith, Rich Hill, Matt Albers

The work of Mickey Callaway in transforming the starting rotation from one of baseball's worst to one of baseball's more respectable groups was an unforeseen development and the key to the 2013 season. The Indians finished eighth in FIP, 14th in ERA, and second in K/9, after finishing 27th, 28th, and 29th in those categories, respectively, last season.

Two of the biggest parts of that equation were Ubaldo Jimenez and Scott Kazmir. Both guys pitched themselves into multi-year contract offers and Jimenez may command as much as five years, \$80M on the open market. To think that we might actually be priced out of keeping Ubaldo Jimenez after considering whether or not we even wanted to pick up his option for 2013 is mind-blowing.

The Indians payroll this season was over \$80M. The team is on the hook for nearly \$50M in guaranteed contracts, including raises to Michael Bourn, Nick Swisher, Mike Aviles, Ryan Raburn, Carlos Santana, and Asdrubal Cabrera. Michael Brantley is in his first year of arbitration eligibility, and he has a nice case for a raise. Justin Masterson is in his third and final season of arbitration eligibility and will definitely get a raise, if not a new multi-year contract. Vinnie Pestano, Drew Stubbs, Marc Rzepczynski, Carlos Carrasco, Josh Tomlin, Lou Marson, and Blake Wood are all arbitration-eligible as well. Another nine players (Kipnis, Kluber, McAllister, Shaw, Allen, Chisenhall, Gomes, Hagadone, Salazar) will make around the MLB league minimum, which is \$500,000 in 2014. With some very, very rough math, we'll assume Justin Masterson gets around \$9M and Michael Brantley gets around \$2.5-3M. That puts the Indians near \$62M. Nine league minimum contracts puts the Indians near \$69M. Contracts to the arbitration-eligible players would appear to be an additional \$7-8M. That places the Indians at around \$75-76M, with no guaranteed contract for closer Chris Perez, who is in his third year of arbitration eligibility.

Now, the Indians may not sign guys like Lou Marson or Blake Wood, but even still, the **current** roster sans Jimenez, Kazmir, and Smith is almost up to this season's payroll. With increased TV revenue money, both from Fox Sports's purchase of SportsTime Ohio and MLB's new TV revenue sharing agreement, Paul Dolan will have the means to increase payroll if he wants to, but how high will he actually be willing to go? I don't think a nine-figure payroll is part of the equation, which would appear to give the Indians around \$20M to spend this offseason in a best-case scenario. It would appear that Jimenez would take a sizable chunk of that, Kazmir around half, and it wouldn't surprise me to see Joe Smith sign a three-year or four-year deal for \$4-5M annually. Keep in mind that Smith made \$3.15M this season in his last year of arbitration eligibility.

As unfortunate as it would be to see Jimenez leave after this tremendous turnaround, it's difficult to see the Indians locking into the four or more year contract it would take. One staple of the Indians front office is that they will not sign pitchers to multi-year deals. We'll see if that changes with Masterson.

The better course of action would be to re-sign Scott Kazmir. My ideal scenario would be a two-year deal worth \$14-18M with a vesting option for a third season that automatically kicks in if Kazmir throws 320 innings over the two years. Kazmir kept his velocity, command, and control through most of the season. He has an offseason training regimen in place now that should keep him strong and sharp. If Kazmir would take that, I'd be on board. If he's expecting three or four years guaranteed, I become less enthused.

With regards to the bullpen, the middle relief looks solid with Shaw, Rzepczynski, and Allen. CC Lee showed enough in flashes to get a bullpen job for next season. Nick Hagadone will get his 407th chance to prove something. Beyond that, the Indians have questions. Chris Perez will probably not be retained, leaving the Indians without a closer. The loss of Joe Smith could be eased by the return of Vinnie Pestano. Whether Pestano will say it or not, the World Baseball Classic affected his entire season. Since he won't be participating in it next season, I would expect a bounce back season. Closer is a big issue, but the pen looks more than serviceable. Bullpens are very volatile, but, on paper, this looks like a good enough group.

POSITION PLAYERS

Potential free agents: Lou Marson, Jason Giambi, Jason Kubel

The Indians are in pretty good shape here. This discussion starts with Michael Bourn, Asdrubal Cabrera, and Nick Swisher. The three big money position players have to be better next season. Luckily, there's reason to think that they will be. We'll start with Bourn, the expected catalyst at the top of the lineup. Bourn was below his career numbers in batting average, on-base percentage, slugging percentage, and, obviously, on-base plus slugging. He wasn't as good defensively as most of his previous seasons and 23 stolen bases was the second-lowest output of his career and the first time in the last six years that Bourn stole fewer than 40 bags.

The big improvements should come from Swisher and Cabrera. Each guy battled a nagging injury throughout the season. Swisher dealt with a rotator cuff problem and it severely affected his swing from the left side. Cabrera was plagued by leg injuries that affected his overall performance.

For Swisher, this was the third-worst season of his career by wOBA (weighted on-base average), wRC+ (weighted runs created plus), and slugging percentage. His power evaporated from the left side, and since that's a big portion of his season from seeing more righties than lefties, his numbers suffered. Had it not been for the injury, one could argue that Swisher fell right where he should, somewhere ahead of his Oakland numbers in the pitcher-friendly park and behind his Yankees numbers in the hitter's haven that is Yankee Stadium. But, because of the injury, the jury's out on that argument. Despite the struggles, Swisher was still 16% better than league average according to wRC+.

Cabrera had the second-worst season of his career, with only his injury-plagued 2010 ranking worse. His strikeout rate went up by five percent while his batting average, OBP, and wOBA went down. For Cabrera, it was a matter of making less contact, leading to fewer balls in play, and fewer base hit opportunities. From a slugging percentage standpoint, 14 home runs are probably more in his range than the 25 he hit two seasons ago.

Another element of Cabrera that may come into play is that he's in a contract year. While [some statisticians question](#)

how much a contract year comes into play, with a player like Cabrera, it may have increased relevance because of how bad his 2013 season was. He went from a top offensive player at a weak offensive position in line for an easy four-year deal worth \$12M+ per season to a guy who has a reputation for coming to camp out of shape, having lackadaisical moments in the field, and maybe not enough offensive skill to outperform his marginal defense. He has a lot to prove and if the Indians hang on to him, that could be beneficial.

Jason Kipnis wore down again at the end of the season. Kipnis saw substantial drops in his OBP and SLG in the second half. To my untrained, but observant, eye, Kipnis's bat speed looked like an issue to me. He wasn't driving the ball for extra bases and hit fewer fly balls with the potential to leave the ballpark. This is an issue that the Indians need to address. Lonnie Chisenhall's problems at third prevented the Indians from using Mike Aviles to give Kipnis a day off here and there. Kipnis missed a week in April from an elbow problem. Taking that missed week into account, Kipnis played 149 games this season.

Yan Gomes developed into a bona fide starting catcher this season and is one of the most intriguing players entering 2014. He's showed plus defensive ability, hit for power, and mashed left handed pitching. Thirty-one of Gomes's 55 hits went for extra bases. With Carlos Santana still in the fold, the Indians should be able to get Yan Gomes enough days off to keep him fresh and productive over the course of 2014.

In upcoming weeks, I'll look at potential free agent or trade targets as the Indians try to fill some holes, but the team is in pretty good shape entering 2014. That doesn't mean the Indians can sit back and hope that things go better or go right in 2014.