



After a brief hiatus to decompress from the baseball season and let the postseason sort itself out, the View from the Porch is back and talking about pitching. The Indians have some big decisions to make as they try to make contention a reality for a second straight season.

The San Francisco Giants didn't do the Indians any favors earlier this week when they re-signed Tim Lincecum to a two-year, \$35M extension. With the Indians trying to determine a course of action for Ubaldo Jimenez and Scott Kazmir, the price tag of the Lincecum signing cast a grey outlook. The starting rotation, which was a major question mark entering the 2013 season, looks like a major question mark entering 2014.

A year ago, it was impossible to think of the Indians being priced out of the market for Ubaldo Jimenez. A year ago, a lot of people hoped that the Indians would decline Jimenez's option, despite the fact that it was obvious that the team would pick it up because the starting rotation lacked depth, proven Major League caliber talent, and Jimenez came relatively cheap. The decision was a no-brainer, solely because the Indians had no better alternatives. It looked to be a terrible decision during the month of April. Jimenez went 1-2 with a 7.13 ERA over his first five starts. He struck out 19 and walked 13 over 24 innings. The Indians struggled their way through an 11-13 start.

Something strange happened after that. Jimenez went from being to punching bag to being the puncher, or if you'll allow me a cheap pun, the puncher-outer. From the start of May through the end of the regular season, Jimenez was outstanding. He gave up 48 earned runs over his final 27 starts covering 158.2 innings. That's a 2.72 ERA. He struck out 175 batters and walked 67. Over a 13-start span in the second half of the season, Jimenez posted a 1.82 ERA. And when the Indians needed Jimenez the most, he posted a 4-0 record, a 1.09 ERA, and a 51/7 K/BB

ratio in six September starts.

Add it all up and the Indians are no longer able to retain Jimenez's services. The 2014 option in Jimenez's contract became a mutual option with his July 2011 trade to the Indians. With a multi-year deal and a lot more money than expected on the table in free agency, Jimenez will decline the option, saving the Indians \$1M on the buyout. At that point, the Indians can extend Jimenez a qualifying offer of \$14M. If Jimenez declines, the Indians will receive draft pick compensation from the team that signs Jimenez. If Jimenez accepts, which is highly unlikely, he will play for the Indians in 2014.

Scott Kazmir is the guy most people felt the Indians should target and I believe that's the case. The Indians don't like to give contracts of more than three seasons to pitchers and Kazmir should be able to be signed to a lower-term deal, possibly with incentives or a vesting option. What's interesting about Kazmir is that he showed no signs of wearing down late in the season. His strikeout-to-walk ratio actually improved in August and September. His average fastball velocity for the season was 92.5 mph. In his last 10 starts, Kazmir averaged 92.96 mph with his fastball. The Indians did mix some additional rest in there for the lefty, but for throwing over 155 innings at the Major League level for the first time since 2007, what Kazmir did was very impressive.

The hope would be that Kazmir has some loyalty towards the Indians and pitching coach Mickey Callaway because they took a chance on him and allowed him to win a Major League job. An injury late in Spring Training kept Kazmir from making the Opening Day roster, but he gave the Indians 29 starts of a 3.51 FIP and was worth 2.5 WAR. As a point of reference, Tim Lincecum has been worth 2.5 WAR in the last two seasons combined and he just made \$17.5M per.

Kazmir is an interesting case. Will teams shy away from him because of his injury history? What will the market be like for him? Can he return in the same form next season after his first season of high-stress innings in four years? While these questions remain, and the Indians have to take them into consideration, there's still plenty of reason to be interested in re-signing Kazmir.

For starters, Kazmir will turn 30 in December. There's a lot of mileage left on that arm. For another thing, Kazmir's work ethic is unparalleled. To work as hard as he did to come back and be not only effective, but at times downright dominant, is a testament to his character and desire. Kazmir also pitched better than his traditional stats would indicate. His 4.04 ERA is

marginal, but his 3.51 FIP and 3.36 xFIP are very impressive. Among 63 American League starters with 120 innings pitched or more, Kazmir's 3.51 FIP was tied for 17th, just .04 behind James Shields, and ahead of other lefties like Jon Lester and Matt Moore.

Perhaps the most encouraging thing about Kazmir is his improvement from the first half to the second half. In the first half, Kazmir allowed opposing batters to slug .463 and gave up 14 home runs in 86 innings. His K/BB ratio was 2.67. In the second half, as Kazmir shook off the rust and got his command back, he allowed just five home home runs in 72 innings, opposing batters slugged .366, and he posted a 4.82 K/BB ratio. Realistically, Kazmir is probably in the middle of those two halves, but that still makes him a highly effective pitcher with great stuff and adds another dynamic to the rotation as a strikeout lefty.

Kazmir is a really special case because there aren't many pitchers that fall all the way to the independent leagues and come back as effective pitchers. Finding a market rate for Kazmir would be extremely difficult for the Indians and for Kazmir's agents. That should work in the Indians favor. My solution would be a guaranteed two-year deal with a vesting option for a third season at more money. Kazmir would be just 32 at the end of a three-year deal, 33 in January, and would be able to get a very nice contract if he stayed healthy over the duration of this contract. The option could vest at something like 320 innings over the course of the guaranteed two years. That could be 140 and 180, 160 and 160, or whatever. Because Kazmir is a high pitch count guy due to foul balls and swings and misses, 160 innings per season would be around 30 starts. The Indians would clearly get value out of Kazmir over 60 starts in the next two seasons, certainly enough to reward him with a third season. Overall, something like two years at \$17M (8M, 9M) with a vesting option at \$10M would be my idea. A three-year, \$27M deal seems plausible on the free market and the Indians would mitigate their risk by not having the third-year guaranteed. There are plenty of selling points in this deal for Kazmir, as he can get another lucrative contract at age 33 and has the chance to prove his health over a large sample size.

The Indians can also offer Kazmir a qualifying offer at \$14M for next season. If he declines, they will receive compensation if he signs elsewhere. If he accepts, which may be in his best interest to try and build his resume for next offseason, the Indians will pay a hefty price for Kazmir, but will at least have a strong middle of the rotation starter to show for it.

That brings me to Justin Masterson. Masterson is in his third year of arbitration eligibility and if the Indians want to keep Masterson past the upcoming season, a multi-year extension needs to be discussed. For the purposes of trying to come up with a number, I'll include Masterson's statistics from 2010-13, the time when he was almost exclusively a starter.

There are 31 American League pitchers with 500 or more innings pitched from 2010-13. According to Fangraphs, Masterson ranks 12th in WAR over that span at 11.1. He's 20th in ERA, 13th in FIP, ninth in games started, and 11th in innings pitched. He's a very durable pitcher with no history of arm trouble and he does seem to be getting better under the tutelage of Mickey Callaway. If there's any pitcher that can be considered a safe multi-year signing, Justin Masterson would have one of the stronger cases.

One of the closest comparables for Masterson is CJ Wilson. We'll temporarily ignore the fact that Wilson throws left handed. Wilson benefited from pitching in Anaheim and throwing several road starts in Seattle and Oakland. He did pitch for Texas, and we can consider their park factor, but I don't think it negates all of his time pitching in pitcher-friendly parks.

Another comparable would be James Shields. You'll note, if you look at the sample size I'm discussing, that Shields and Wilson have significantly lower ERAs than Masterson. Both of them also have higher strikeout rates. In terms of FIP, however, the three are quite similar. Also, Masterson's strikeout rate spiked this season and that could be a sign of things to come.

Perhaps the best comparable because of age is Jon Lester. Again, Lester is a lefty, which tends to be a sought-after commodity in starting pitchers.

Here's a breakdown of the three pitchers side by side:

ERA

FIP

K/BB

WAR

Age

Salary

Masterson

4.08

3.71

2.11

11.1

28

TBD

Shields

3.61

3.63

3.45

14.6

32

12M\*

Wilson

3.37

3.58

2.15

15.1

33

16M\*\*

Lester

3.83

3.66

2.56

16.3

29

13M\*\*\*

\* - Shields signed four-year extension in 2008 (at age 27) for \$11.25M guaranteed. Club options '12-'14 at 7M, 9M, 12M, respectively

\*\* - Wilson signed five-year, \$77.25M contract in free agency in 2011 (at age 31): Salary 10M, 11M, 16M, 18M, 20M by year

\*\*\* - Lester signed five-year extension in 2009 (at age 25): Salary 1M, 3.75M, 5.75M, 7.625M, 11.625M, 13M club option

All of these guys have certain similarities with Masterson. Wilson started his career as a reliever. Shields signed around the same age, but signed his extension prior to being arbitration-eligible. Lester also signed prior to arbitration. Their production over the last four seasons is within a similar range. It may not be completely accurate to use these guys as a baseline, but I'm going to do it anyway.

Let's consider the Indians. The last multi-year deals given to pitchers have been Jake Westbrook, who subsequently had Tommy John surgery, and Fausto Carmona, who wound up being Roberto Hernandez Heredia and was two years older than originally thought. Twice bitten, four times as shy? Like Masterson, Westbrook was a ground ball specialist who injured something in the abdominal region. Rushing back caused damage to the ulnar collateral ligament and Tommy John derailed Westbrook and hurt the Indians immensely because the one thing Westbrook could be counted on for was his reliability. This should not be as big of an issue with Masterson, since his injury occurred late in the season and he'll have the offseason to completely recover, but I have to throw it out there because it's a very Cleveland thing to do.

So, we have a team that's very hesitant to give long-term contracts to pitchers. In Masterson, we have a guy who is a very interesting commodity. He's one of the game's most proficient ground ball pitchers, who seems to be getting better, and has a very unique arm angle that provides deception, giving him a greater margin for error. Common ground between agent Randy Rowley and the Indians should be inevitable. Rowley is not Scott Boras or Alan Nero. In fact, Randy Rowley has seven clients according to MLBTradeRumors's Agent Database. Masterson is his only client with arbitration eligibility.

The key numbers in all of this are Jon Lester's age 28 contract amount of \$11.625M and CJ Wilson's \$7M arbitration award in his final year of eligibility. The Shields contract was one of the great bargains in all of sport. I think it would be fair to project Masterson to make about \$7.5M in arbitration this season, a raise of nearly \$2M from last season's earnings. With that, I suggest that the Indians offer Masterson five years at \$58.5M. If we assume \$7.5M for next season, the deal simply breaks down as \$10M in 2015, \$12M in 2016, \$14M in 2017, and \$15M in 2018.

If Masterson continues his upward development curve, this deal is great value for the Indians. Paying \$11-15M for a 3+ win pitcher is below market value and Masterson's durability should allow that to happen. Furthermore, this deal may coincide with the Indians' window of contention. We've heard the term before and, unfortunately, it is a reality in this market. The Nick Swisher and Michael Bourn contracts are up in 2016. Outside of Francisco Lindor, the

Indians don't have a budding superstar working his way up the minor league ranks. This deal allows the Indians to trade Masterson in 2017 if a rebuild is necessary or keep him at a reasonable price. It also gives them the opportunity to move him in 2018.

For Masterson, this deal gives him a lot of things. For one, financial stability in one of sport's most volatile roles. For another, he would hit free agency at his age 34 season, giving him the opportunity to cash in on another multi-year deal before his career starts to wind down. It's a fair deal, given that Masterson only has two years of legitimate Major League success under his belt and pays him handsomely, though not in the realm of a Felix Hernandez or Justin Verlander.

With Corey Kluber, Danny Salazar, and presumably Zach McAllister, all pitching around the league minimum, the Indians should be able to afford Scott Kazmir and Justin Masterson. It may take some maneuvering, possibly cutting costs in the bullpen, or trading away Asdrubal Cabrera, to fit under budget for this season, but pitching is the name of the game and we saw what can happen with a starting rotation that exceeds expectations.

My numbers are ballpark estimates and may not be the right value, but if nothing else, they should serve as some kind of starting point. Masterson and Kazmir are two of the most important topics this offseason. The case could be made that both guys are essential for the foreseeable future with no impact starting pitching talent on the near horizon, with the exception of Danny Salazar who has already made his presence known. The Indians could go the reclamation project route again, but they've found a legitimate commodity in Kazmir and should try to hold on to that.