



Now that the 2013 MLB season is finished, the hot stove rumor mill will heat up and the Indians will likely be mentioned a lot. Contenders tend to get more air time than bottom feeders and the Indians and their somewhat surprising season will have them on the national radar. The Indians certainly have some concerns and some holes to fill.

The weaknesses of last year's team were pretty clear and positions like third base and right field will dominate the fan base's offseason intrigue. But, the bullpen, which as we know is Jekyll and Hyde from year-to-year, may be my biggest concern for next season. Last week, I [looked at the starting rotation](#), specifically the situations with Ubaldo Jimenez, Scott Kazmir, and Justin Masterson. As I continue to delve into the offseason question marks, the bullpen may be the most important. The Indians can expect bounce back seasons from Asdrubal Cabrera and Nick Swisher, but can they expect the same from Vinnie Pestano? Can they expect Cody Allen to be as effective? Is Bryan Shaw that good? There are few certainties with bullpens, but that's especially true of the Tribe's pen as we enter the 2013-14 offseason.

The Indians addressed the Chris Perez issue by non-tendering him. That means that the Indians will be on the lookout for a new closer. The Chris Perez was certainly interesting. With Perez now gone, we can reflect back on his time with the Indians. I've been one of the few Perez supporters, but that flag became harder and harder to carry. More often than not, Perez was a successful reliever who got his job done. As a closer, context is only partially relevant and the bottom line is all that matters. His saves weren't Monets or Van Goghs by any means. In a results business, Perez's were above average.

As time went on, however, Perez's public outbursts at fans and ownership overshadowed his

statistics. Right or wrong, a large contingent of fans turned on Perez and his margin for error was incredibly slim. The drug arrest in June and his vow of silence with the media did little to help the situation he had created for himself. The last season meltdown with wild card contention in the picture was the final nail in the coffin and the Indians parted ways with Perez on Thursday.

It was the right thing for both parties. People who were upset that the Indians didn't trade Perez but lost him for nothing are completely out of touch. Perez had no value. He was a good, not great, reliever with a history of bringing unwanted attention to himself and his team. His relief contributions would not be enough for teams to give up any sort of valuable assets when he could be had on the open market for a bargain deal as a guy looking to rebuild himself.

Perez would have been owed somewhere around \$9M in arbitration. He'll get significantly less than that on the open market. Teams will overlook character issues if you consistently produce. While Perez had good years in Cleveland, consistency is an issue. To top it off, relievers are some of the most volatile players in sport. A guy can lose it at the drop of a hat. With Perez's issues very evident, a prolonged period of ineffectiveness may turn the ticking time bomb into a full-fledged explosion.

As far as I'm concerned, even as a long-time Perez supporter, it's better to enter the offseason without a closer than keep Perez on the roster.

The second big decision in the bullpen has to do with Joe Smith. Smith took over the closer's role at the end of the season and was Terry Francona's most reliable reliever. For all the flack that Chris Antonetti has gotten over the last few years, the Smith trade remains one of his best moves. He traded Franklin Gutierrez and Luis Valbuena in a three-team deal with the Seattle Mariners and New York Mets to acquire Smith. Since the trade, Smith has made 303 appearances with a 2.76 ERA and a 1.20 WHIP. Baseball-Reference credits Smith with 5.8 WAR over his time with the Tribe.

Smith presents an interesting dilemma for the Indians. The Indians are very hesitant to offer multi-year contracts to any pitcher, let alone a reliever. Smith likely commands a three or four-year deal on the open market. He's been healthy, making 70 or more appearances in each of the last three seasons. However, it's clear that Terry Francona is a big fan of Smith and his unique delivery should continue to be an asset. Smith will turn 30 in March, so he should still have a few years of quality mileage on his arm.

The market may dictate what happens. Quality setup men are making around \$5M per year in free agency, though it's hard to ascertain what Smith's role would be on another team. Would he be a righty specialist? A seventh inning guy? An eighth inning guy? Smith could be in line for a three-year deal worth \$4M per. Will the Indians pay that?

Personally, I say no. The Indians will hope that Vinnie Pestano can return to form. Bryan Shaw and Cody Allen were spectacular this season, especially in the second half. CC Lee can be a viable bridge to those guys and the Indians still have Mark Rzepczynski. They'll look for more Matt Albers/Rich Hill types to fill the remaining spots in the bullpen. That leaves Smith out of the picture and the Indians with some funds to throw towards a closer.

As I just mentioned, the pen isn't in bad shape with Shaw, Allen, Rzepczynski, and hopefully a return of Pestano. Lee showed enough glimpses in his appearances that he has good stuff and enough deception to get by in a low leverage role.

There's another wild card in the mix – Carlos Carrasco. If Carrasco gets his head on straight, the Indians could go the Kansas City Royals route and convert Carrasco to a full time middle reliever like the Royals did with Luke Hochevar. Carrasco's arsenal doesn't appear deep enough to go through the lineup multiple times, so he could be a tremendous asset as a reliever. He's got a heavy fastball with some sink, a good slider, and should be more effective with one inning at max effort than trying to last for six or seven frames.

The Indians used 23 different relievers in 2013, which speaks to the volatility of bullpens and also speaks to the number of marginal arms that could get by in a 25th man role. Guys like Nick Hagadone, Scott Barnes, Matt Langwell, and Preston Guilmet could be cheap options.

Bryan Shaw and Cody Allen were lifesavers for the Indians this season. With Chris Perez hurt and the struggles that he endured, Shaw and Allen were tremendous. They combined for 145.1 innings, a 13-4 record with three saves, and a 2.84 ERA. In the second half, the duo combined to go 9-1 with a 2.25 ERA. Shaw was a "throw-in" for the Choo/Bauer deal. With those two guys, the middle relief seems sound, even without Smith and if Pestano is forced into a 6th/7th inning role.

Closer is the big question mark. Nobody remaining on the roster has extensive closing experience. Personally, I believe a certain mentality is needed to close and not everybody is cut out for it. Even the best setup men in the league have trouble in the ninth inning getting that 27th out. The [list of relievers](#) with past closing experience is far from awe-inspiring. The Indians could attempt to sign and fix one of the numerous injury-prone former closers including David Aardsma, Juan Carlos Oviedo (Leo Nunez), Carlos Marmol, Ryan Madson, Joel Hanrahan, or Mike Gonzalez.

None of these options seem good, so the Indians will have a very tough decision to make. Can somebody in-house handle the job? If so, the Indians may try harder to sign Joe Smith. Cody Allen might be a closer-in-waiting, but he remains inexperienced and I'm not comfortable with the amount of high-leverage appearances he made this past season. The closer-by-committee approach rarely goes well, so that would appear to be the team's last resort.

On paper, the middle relief should be a strength, especially the setup men, while the closer and a second lefty for the bullpen appear to be the big question marks entering the offseason. With money needed elsewhere, hopefully to upgrade third base or right field, the Indians are unlikely to spend a sizable amount on the bullpen.