



The offseason started to heat up this past week, at least as far as the American League Central Division goes. After the Indians signed free agent David Murphy to a two-year, \$12 million deal that is supposed to be officially announced next week, the Detroit Tigers reached a major trade with the Texas Rangers to send Prince Fielder to the Lone Star State in exchange for Ian Kinsler. The Royals had a “major baseball-related announcement” at 4 p.m. on Thursday to announce a non-major signing of Jason Vargas.

With dominoes starting to fall around them, the effect on the Indians should be taken into account. Now that the Indians are contenders, almost every transaction around the league has an impact on them. These two transactions obviously have more of an effect on the Indians because they were completed by division rivals, but there are some subsidiary effects from these deals that could help or hurt the Indians.

Obviously the Fielder-Kinsler swap was all the rage on Twitter on Wednesday night. It's not a good deal for the Indians. By jettisoning what was considering an immovable contract to Prince Fielder, the Tigers created more payroll space and improved the overall quality of their team. The wins above replacement player contributions from Fielder and Kinsler could come close to canceling out for the foreseeable future, but it's what Kinsler allows the Tigers to do that has a bigger impact. The Tigers could use top prospect Nick Castellanos at third base. While he's not a Gold Glove caliber third baseman, he will allow the Tigers to lessen the physical strain placed on Miguel Cabrera from having to play the hot corner. By most defensive metrics, Cabrera and Fielder were the worst defensive players at their respective positions last season. Between Omar Infante, Ramon Santiago, and Hernan Perez, Tigers second basemen combined to be minus-6 in defensive runs saved. Kinsler was above average at second base for the Rangers. The Tigers have also replaced Jhonny Peralta with Jose Iglesias, a plus fielder at shortstop. Kinsler and Iglesias will make a very nice combination up the middle.

From an offensive standpoint, the Tigers do downgrade overall. Kinsler has a 91 wRC+ away from hitter-friendly Arlington Stadium, so his offensive numbers could sag playing in a more neutral park. Fielder's numbers should spike going to Arlington, where left handed hitters tend to have a lot of success. Kinsler has 20-30 stolen base potential, so his speed could be an asset for a pretty slow Tigers team.

The Tigers are [saving \\$76 million](#) in this deal, per Dave Cameron of Fangraphs. With Max Scherzer set for free agency after the upcoming season and Miguel Cabrera a potential free agent the year after, the Tigers can put that money to good use. Deep pocketed owner Mike Ilitch will continue to spend like a drunken sailor to try and win a World Series as he continues to get older. Players like Jacoby Ellsbury and Shin-Soo Choo could be on the Tigers' radar.

There could be one side benefit from this trade from the Indians perspective. With the Rangers creating a hole at second base, Jurickson Profar is expected to be the guy to plug that gap. If Profar is indeed the starting second baseman, the Rangers would be very reluctant to trade current shortstop Elvis Andrus. Now, the Rangers could become serious bidders for the services of Robinson Cano, putting Andrus solidly on the trading block, but that remains to be seen. In the meantime, it means that Asdrubal Cabrera continues to be one of the most attractive options for teams in need of a shortstop. Cabrera's coming off one of the worst seasons of his career, but offensive production from shortstop is very valuable and pretty rare around the league. The Cardinals are still very interested in acquiring a shortstop and Andrus/Profar off the market should increase Cabrera's value.

The other move in the AL Central this week was the signing of Jason Vargas by the Royals. Vargas has spent most of his Major League career pitching in Seattle and Anaheim, as well as 16 road starts in Oakland. Vargas only has more road starts in Texas in his career. Between Seattle, Oakland, and Anaheim, Vargas has a 3.24 ERA in 552.1 innings of work. In 427.1 innings in all other parks, Vargas has posted a 5.66 ERA.

Vargas received a four-year deal worth \$32 million. The money amount isn't that absurd, as Vargas only has to be worth an average of between 1.3-1.5 WAR to make this deal look like market value or better. Most of the analysis on the trade focuses on the four-year term and that it appears to be a bit long.

With the Indians on the market for pitching, the Vargas signing creates an interesting dynamic. The Royals clearly added a fourth year to the contract to lower the annual base salary. The Indians are extremely reluctant to give pitchers a long-term contract. It leaves them with two options if they wish to sign a veteran pitcher. The first is to adopt the Royals model and extend the term for a lower base salary or to give a higher base salary for a shorter term. Guys like Ricky Nolasco and Ervin Santana, who reportedly wanted a five-year deal close to \$100 million, are now looking at both longer terms and higher base salaries than anticipated.

Josh Johnson received a one-year, \$8 million deal from the Padres just after Tim Hudson was given a two-year, \$23 million deal from the Giants. I hoped that Johnson had been on the Indians' radar, but San Diego is a great fit for him to have a bounceback season and maybe get himself a longer contract next winter. The unfortunate thing for the Indians is that pitchers like these, Dan Haren included, appear to be signing early in the offseason rather than later as teams miss out on the big ticket free agent arms. The Indians usually scrounge the bargain bin closer to Spring Training to find starting depth. It looks like they may have to pull the trigger a bit earlier than they wanted to.

Another interesting signing was that the Giants locked up lefty specialist Javier Lopez to a three-year, \$13 million deal. Retaining Joe Smith appeared difficult for the Indians anyway, as the team probably wasn't going to offer the contract length that Smith and his agent were looking for, but this pretty much seals it. Javier Lopez has faced 536 batters over the last three seasons as a LOOGY. Joe Smith, who looked destined to be a matchup guy prior to improving greatly against lefties, faced 537 batters over the last two seasons. Lopez's role is important, but Smith became the primary setup man for the Indians in 2013 and did a very fine job. At a minimum, Smith is probably looking at a three-year, \$14-15 million deal at this point. That's simply not doable for the Indians.

A Friday afternoon transaction that had nothing to do with the AL Central could also have an impact on the Indians' offseason plans. The Cardinals acquired Peter Bourjos from the Angels for David Freese with some additional assets thrown in. Bourjos and Drew Stubbs are similar players, though Bourjos is a bit better of a defender and probably a better overall hitter than Stubbs. The Cardinals were in dire need of an outfield upgrade and Bourjos is exactly that.

With the David Murphy signing, which I addressed [here](#), the Indians have a logjam in the outfield. Stubbs is the likely candidate to go because of an escalating salary in arbitration and Michael Brantley and Michael Bourn locked into starting roles in the outfield. With a projected Ryan Raburn-Murphy platoon in right field, Stubbs would be the odd man out. There is one less suitor for Stubbs now, but also one less outfielder available on the market. With Bourjos being

traded for a bona fide Major Leaguer in Freese, the value of Stubbs may be higher than most people originally thought.

That's the beauty of contention. Transactions across the league have importance to the Indians, especially with the situation that they're in this winter. It's still early in the offseason, but as the free agent market gets set and as teams start to plug holes, the Indians will have to keep close tabs on what's going on and react accordingly.

As I've said before, this is a very important offseason for the Indians. Most of them are, but especially this one on the heels of a 92-win season, a playoff berth, and the Indians likely being in contention again in 2014. With holes to fill, players to move, and teams in need of assistance, it's shaping up to be a very business winter at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario.