



The Indians entered the 2013 offseason in need of a closer and it appears that they have found one in former Milwaukee Brewers closer John Axford. With Joaquin Benoit and Grant Balfour gathering most of the attention and a higher price tag, the Indians turned their focus solely on Axford and were able to get what appears to be a one-year deal done. Financial terms have not yet been disclosed and the contract is pending a physical.

The Indians haven't been as quiet as some people would lead you to believe this offseason. They have had plenty of negotiations, but have fallen short on several free agent starting pitchers and a handful of relievers as well. With a front office that operates under the pretense of limiting risk, an extra guaranteed year or a higher annual salary in lieu of the extra year can hamper the team's ability to sign a free agent. Axford, however, seems to be a great fit.

Much of what the Indians did last season, except for the signing of Mark Reynolds and the announcement of Terry Francona as the manager, was completed after the Winter Meetings. The Nick Swisher signing was announced in late December, but was not officially completed until after the holidays. Michael Bourn was signed just before Spring Training. Brett Myers was signed in early January. Under the current economic climate of baseball, the Indians have to wait for both the market to settle as well as the competition for the players that they're targeting to die down. With a lot of teams already making transactions, the Indians would have fewer teams to contend with during player negotiations.

In Axford, the Indians get a guy who ended his season on a high note with the St. Louis Cardinals after losing his job with the Brewers. Axford was a waiver trade deal in late August. The Cardinals non-tendered Axford earlier this offseason because he was in his first-year of arbitration-eligibility and he was not going to get less than his current \$5M salary. With cheap, young arms in the pen already, the Cardinals had no reason to pay him that much.

His full season stats from 2013 aren't eye-popping, as Axford went 7-7 with a 4.02 ERA, but he did make 75 appearances and ended the season with 10 appearances covering 13.1 innings for the Cardinals with an ERA of 1.74 and an improved strikeout-to-walk ratio.

There are plenty of positives to signing Axford. For one thing, he had two seasons of tremendous success as the Brewers closer in 2010 and 2011, posting ERAs below 2.50 with 70 saves in that span. He had 35 saves in 2012, but posted a 4.67 ERA as his walk rate and his home run rate spiked. He has had past success and plenty of experience in the closer's role, which is something both Chris Antonetti and Terry Francona wanted. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, the Indians could sign Axford to a one-year deal and still control exclusive negotiating rights for the 2015 and 2016 seasons. Because Axford has not accrued enough service time yet, he is still arbitration-eligible through the 2016 season. That gives the Indians plenty of financial flexibility in regards to Axford's future.

Finally, Axford's a very interesting character and, by all accounts, a good teammate. One of the best stories in recent years involves Axford, [a letter he left for the media](#) after leaving the clubhouse in a hurry following a blown save. On a tight-knit team like the Indians, Axford should fit right in. If Axford were a malcontent like Chris Perez, as long as he did his job, there would have been no issues. But, Axford fits into the locker room and, while it has no bearing on the field, suffice to say that it probably played a role in how interested the Indians were.

The Axford signing could bring tremendous value for the Indians. He has swing and miss stuff and throws hard at the back end of the bullpen. He ran into control problems with Milwaukee and if Ubaldo Jimenez's turnaround is any indication, Mickey Callaway should be able to help Axford make adjustments.

One of the biggest adjustments to be made with Axford is getting ahead in the count. During his good seasons in 2010 and 2011, Axford's first-pitch strike percentage was 59.2 percent and 61.6 percent. League average for relievers in 2013 was 59.8 percent. In 2012 and 2013, Axford's first-pitch strike percentages fell to 54.2 percent and 53.3 percent. Hitters were ahead in the count more often, leading to an increase in home runs, a drop in strikeout-to-walk ratio, and, subsequently, runs allowed. In Axford's brief 10-game stint with the Cardinals, he threw first-pitch strikes 61.4 percent of the time.

Last season, American League hitters batted .229/.270/.349/.618 after a first-pitch strike. They improved to .269/.377/.438/.815 after a first-pitch ball. It's not as cut-and-dry as throwing a

first-pitch strike, but that's certainly a start for Axford to return to being a highly-effective reliever.

To fully understand the signing, you have to understand how the Indians front office operates. Two advanced pitching metrics, xFIP and SIERA, both rate Axford very well. [xFIP](#) is a metric that takes FIP, fielder independent pitching, and recalculates it assuming a league-average home run rate in relation to the fly ball percentage a pitcher allows. In Axford's case, this is relevant because Miller Park had the highest home run park factor in 2012 and the fifth-highest in 2013 and his fly ball rate was relatively low.

[SIERA](#)

, which stands for skill-interactive ERA, is an advanced metric that puts a high emphasis on strikeouts and batted ball types. Axford records a lot of strikeouts and induces an above average ground ball rate.

The Indians use a lot of advanced metrics in their scouting and evaluation. While Axford's walk and home run rates are still a concern, the Indians feel that there is a lot of value in a guy that has struck out 28 percent of batters he has faced and that has induced nearly 47 percent of balls in play to be hit on the ground. They are taking a chance that a more pitcher-friendly environment will help to curtail his home run rate and that Callaway will be able to help Axford with command and control the way that Callaway helped most of the pitching staff in 2013.

This is a strong signing. The Indians can keep Cody Allen and Bryan Shaw in their current roles, which they thrived in last season, and can use them for the highest-leverage appearances in the seventh and eighth innings. Axford is a candidate for a bounceback season and will likely be the cheapest of the free agent late-inning relievers on the market. It's a meticulously-calculated gamble from the Indians front office and one that will hopefully pay off handsomely.