

## Indians Lack A Plan In The Bullpen

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Monday, March 05 2007 7:00 PM -

---

Now five years into "The Plan", the Indians have done a good job restocking their farm system to the point where they have a consistent pipeline of young bats and starting pitchers available to the big league club. However, they have not had the same success with developing bullpen arms, hence the signings of guys like Borowski, Foulke, Hernandez, and Fultz. In his latest, Tony says this is due in large part to the teams philosophy on how to build a bullpen, and their lack of a real plan in that area.



The Indians embarked on "The Plan" back in mid-2002 to rebuild the Indians with a new core of players and keep a steady stream of talent coming in from the farm system. To date, they have pretty much done that.

Almost five years later, the Indians have a plethora of starting pitching talent on the major league roster and waiting in the wings in the minors. Pitchers like Jeremy Sowers and Cliff Lee are mainstays in the rotation, and prospects like Adam Miller, Fausto Carmona, Chuck Lofgren, Scott Lewis and JD Martin head an impressive list of starters in the minors that could debut with the Indians anytime between now and sometime in 2008.

In the outfield, the system is bursting at the seams with good outfield prospects like Trevor Crowe, Brian Barton, and Brad Snyder. And, oh yeah, they also have a guy on the big league club named Sizemore you may have heard about.

In the infield, while aside from Asdrubal Cabrera the minor league system is pretty much barren, the major league team is loaded with some very talented young infielders like Andy Marte, Jhonny Peralta, Josh Barfield, and Ryan Garko.

## Indians Lack A Plan In The Bullpen

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Monday, March 05 2007 7:00 PM -

---

And while catching was once a weak spot in the farm system just a year ago, it now might be arguably the Indians strongest position organization-wide. With Victor Martinez and Kelly Shoppach in the majors, they also have a stable of talented receivers in the minors in Wyatt Toregas, Max Ramirez, Matt McBride, and Robbie Alcombrack.

But the one area the Indians are lagging behind considerably in developing talent is the bullpen.

To think we are coming up on the five year anniversary of the birth of The Plan, yet we are still spackling the backend of the bullpen year after year with veteran retreads and pitcher's coming off of injury is an indictment against this organization showing their lack of a clue on how to develop relievers. Simply put, in five years, the Indians have failed to develop any impact pitchers to use in the bullpen so they can stop this endless charade of using duct tape to patch holes at the backend of the bullpen year after year.

Take the Indians starting pitching for example. The Indians have done a very good job at developing starters and keeping them healthy, and they have four very good young pitchers in C.C. Sabathia, Jake Westbrook, Cliff Lee and Jeremy Sowers anchoring the staff. With the established rotation, they no longer need to go out in free agency and overspend on middle-of-the-road starters or sign low risk/high reward reclamation projects to round out the rotation. Considering how expensive it is to sign starting pitching, this is a huge advantage for the Indians. And while some of the current starters like Sabathia and Westbrook are nearing free agency, they have several alternatives in-house they can turn to if/when they lose some of these pitchers. Shapiro's vision of having a constant flow of talent has been realized at least from a starting pitching standpoint.

But, for whatever reason, the Indians are on the exact opposite end of the spectrum when it comes to the bullpen. There are some good relief pitching prospects like Tony Sipp, Eddie Mujica, Rafael Perez, Juan Lara and others, but few project as true backend bullpen talents except for Sipp. Whether it be identifying which starting pitching prospects are better suited for

## Indians Lack A Plan In The Bullpen

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Monday, March 05 2007 7:00 PM -

---

a bullpen role, or going out and finding good relief prospects in a trade, the Indians just have not done a good job in managing this area of their farm system. In fact, it has been downright pitiful.

There are loads of impact prospects at various positions up and down the Indians roster that have come from the farm system or were obtained by using some of that young talent in a trade. Yet, there is virtually no one in the bullpen. The only two in-house relievers on the roster are Rafael Betancourt and Fernando Cabrera, and neither are the backend relievers this team is searching for. Betancourt is at most a quasi-setup man. He can pitch the 8<sup>th</sup> inning on occasion, but not on a regular basis. Cabrera might be the only true backend reliever they have developed since 2002, although he is still far from a finished product.

For whatever reason, the Indians organization has been unable to identify good relief options. In some cases, they do identify them, but the manner in which they develop them is puzzling. This all seems to stem from the Indians wanting too much starting pitching. They believe too much is never enough, and they keep the door open for everyone to remain a starter.

Case in point: Fausto Carmona and Rafael Perez. Look, Carmona and Perez may someday become good starting pitchers for the Indians or someone else, but right now the Indians biggest need is relief pitching. The bandaid they put on the bullpen this offseason with the Joe Borowski, Roberto Hernandez and Aaron Fultz signings will only hold so long. At some point this season the Indians will need to turn to some of their young relievers to make significant contributions in the bullpen. But, will they be ready?

Carmona and Perez were both impressive in the bullpen last year, Carmona as a setup man and Perez a lefty specialist. With so much starting pitching talent in the system, why not try and develop these two to fill backend roles in the bullpen? If Carmona could setup like he did last year, and Perez can learn to fill a lefty specialist role, the Indians could stop messing around with the Aaron Fultz and Scott Sauerbeck's of the world in free agency.

But no.

## Indians Lack A Plan In The Bullpen

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Monday, March 05 2007 7:00 PM -

---

Instead, the Indians are going to send Carmona to Buffalo and continue to start him, yet they say that there is still a chance he could be used in the bullpen if needed. Keeping Carmona as a starting pitching option is not the worst thing in the world, as he does have good value as a 6<sup>th</sup> starter. But, as for Perez, they are going to put him in the Buffalo rotation as well and use him as a starter, even though they acknowledge that he may best suit this team as a reliever.

And there is the crux of the issue with the Indians bullpen philosophy.

This issue is all summed up rather nicely in one short comment from Indians Farm Director Ross Atkins. A week ago, Atkins commented about Rafael Perez being sent to Buffalo as a starter and said "we feel like his development will progress in the right direction if he's starting ... secondary pitches, controlling the running game, fielding his position ... he has a better chance of learning those things as a starter than as a reliever."

Huh?

Instead of putting the reliever prospect in crucial situations and developing him by bringing him into tight spots in the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> innings, or getting them accustomed to working every other day on average out of the bullpen, the Indians instead opt for them to learn and develop as a starter. Am I the only one that sees the problem here with this philosophy? How are pitchers supposed to develop as a reliever if they are not exposed to the grind and stomach-turning moments that tight situations in the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>

or 9<sup>th</sup>

innings provide? You mean to tell me that working in the 1<sup>st</sup>

through 5<sup>th</sup>

## Indians Lack A Plan In The Bullpen

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Monday, March 05 2007 7:00 PM -

---

innings provides that?

Aye carumba!

Not only do the Indians lack good judgment in how to handle relief prospects, but they also are extremely conservative with their pitching prospects as well. Other teams like Boston (Papelbon), St. Louis (Wainwright) and Detroit (Zumaya) have had no problems putting high profile starter prospects into a much-needed relief role, yet the Indians continue to be frightened at the thought of such an idea. Prior to last season, the combination of Wainwright, Papelbon and Zumaya had a career total of three relief appearances between them (all by Papelbon). They are some of the top pitching prospects in each of their organization's systems, yet their club identified a short-term need (bullpen) and used them in such a role. This year, Papelbon and Wainwright are being moved back to a starting role, while Zumaya will continue to be one of Detroit's main setup men.

So, why can't the Indians do this? Instead, the Indians opt for the more conservative approach and just wish to stay the course with keeping their starters a starter and seem to use a shift to the bullpen as a last resort. It would be one thing if the Indians lacked much punch in the system when it came to starting pitching because then it would make sense to be so conservative. But, when you have so much starting talent, you need to balance the scales somewhat and start using that talent to fill much-needed holes in the bullpen.

While there is a fine line you walk in converting a pitching prospect from a starter to a reliever, in this day and age when setup guys get \$4-5 million a year and above average to elite closers get \$7-10 million a year, you have to pay more attention to it. Especially for a team as financially challenged as the Indians. It no longer should be considered a last resort to send a player to the bullpen, you know, those stalled prospects that failed as a starter (i.e. Jason Davis). No, these pitchers need to be identified much sooner and get as much work as possible at learning how to pitch in such situations and handle the excessive workloads. Keeping them in a starting role does nothing to help enhance their development as a reliever.

## Indians Lack A Plan In The Bullpen

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Monday, March 05 2007 7:00 PM -

---

The Indians need to rethink their strategy when it comes to developing relievers. Just ask the Minnesota Twins who appear to pump out relievers from their farm system as if they are coming off a production line. After this season, the Indians are likely to have as many as five to seven in-house starting options to turn to and use on the major league club in 2008, but only a handful of relievers, and maybe only one backend option in Sipp. While it is nice they do not want to close the door on any pitcher to remain a starter, the Indians also need to realize that developing bullpen talent is just as important as developing starting pitching talent.