

Setting The Hook

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Thursday, July 19 2007 7:00 PM -

With all of the trade talk swirling about who's available, who's selling, and what the Indians need, Paul Cousineau takes a look at what the Indians are able to offer other teams that would be attractive enough to merit a decent return. As great as it would be to trade Jason Stanford and Mike Rouse for Jon Rauch (throwing Trot Nixon in doesn't help) - value begets value, and the Indians are going to have to part with some valuable pieces to fill the holes on the roster.



With all of the trade talk swirling about who's available, who's selling, and what the Indians need, it's time to take a look at what the Indians are able to offer other teams that would be attractive enough to merit a decent return. As great as it would be to trade Jason Stanford and Mike Rouse for Jon Rauch (throwing Trot Nixon in doesn't help) - value begets value, and the Indians are going to have to part with some valuable pieces to fill the holes on the roster.

The key in determining which pieces are expendable is to not weaken the existing ML roster or deal someone who is contributing today or is not at least easily replaceable with an in-house option. That is to say, the Indians can't consider dealing a player like Franklin Gutierrez unless they feel that Ben Francisco is capable of producing the way that Frank the Tank has in the past few weeks to replace his production in the lineup. If we've heard anything from Mark Shapiro ad nauseum, it's that he's 'not going to create a hole to fill a hole';

With that in mind, though, who could be considered for a trade? Guys like Hector Luna or Joe Inglett may have some value as a throw-in on a trade, but neither can be considered a vital piece to a package. The same can be said for the young OF in Buffalo and Akron (Van Every, Snyder, Barton, Crowe) as none of them screams 'can't-miss'; the way that a Cameron Maybin does or a

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Lastings Milledge once did.

So to say that a mix of those middle-tier prospects is going to get the job done, if the Indians are serious about truly augmenting the 25-man roster, is short-sighted.

Additionally, the Indians are hamstrung by players dealing with injuries, currently on the DL. At the beginning of the season, the depth of starting pitching was thought to be the reserve from which the Indians could deal their lesser prospects that could be close-to-MLB-ready while not disrupting the upper echelon of arms.

Unfortunately, guys like Smoke 'Em Brian Slocum, who made some starts last year in Cleveland and would have some value, is now on the DL and just another hurt 26-year-old AAA pitcher. In the same vein, J.D. Martin returned from injury last year and thrived in his first stint in the bullpen in Kinston and Akron, to the point that he would have garnered some consideration for a Jensen Lewisesque call-up this year, or at least to be dangled as part of a trade. But Martin has hit the DL (again) and isn't good for much of anything these days.

Remember, I'm not advocating a trade just to throw something against the wall the way that some message board rumors get started, but it's time to identify the parts that the Indians could conceivably offer in a trade.

Not included are the obvious "take them if you want them" players like Jason Stanford, that could project as a starter somewhere, but has cleared waivers about 4 times and isn't going to bring more than a bag of balls on his own. Also not included is C.C. (whom trading would constitute grounds for a padded room at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario, regardless of his signability) or Westbrook (who, despite some lackluster starts is still knocking the rust off as he's sporting a post-injury ERA of 4.50 in 5 starts).

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That all being said, the list of Indians that could be considered a key to a package AND would bring some substantial return would break down like this:

Cliff Lee

This move would have to be entirely contingent on whether the Indians feel that Atom Miller is ready (right now) to step into the rotation and fill the #5 spot, which is what Lee has pitched himself into. Shapiro said, during Wednesday's game, that the Indians are stretching Miller out in Buffalo so he has the ability to pitch EITHER in the bullpen or in the rotation, "wherever there is a greater need". Shapiro said that Miller is 100% healthy and intimated that the young Texan would be in the bullpen now if that was his determined path for this year.

The fact that they're stretching him out means that they're obviously displeased with the recent performances of Westbrook and Lee (and rightfully so) and won't hesitate to replace one of them with Miller. While Westbrook has only 5 starts since returning, Lee has now been healthy for some time (2 ½ months) and his reluctance (or inability) to throw his curveball has rendered him terribly inconsistent.

The problem with trading Lee, and subsequently moving Miller into the rotation, is that if Miller crashes and burns, we're back to the Jason Stanford Show (assuming he's still with the team) or we have Jeremy Sowers coming back, when his recent performance in Buffalo doesn't justify it. If the Indians feel that Sean Smith or Aaron Laffey are close enough, there could be more confidence in the depth, but Smith and Laffey are 23 and 22, respectively, and are still in their first year of AAA.

Before you say that Lee would have no trade value, remember that Lee is a LH starter who is working under a VERY club-friendly contract (he'll make \$5.75M in 2009) with a club option through 2010. In the right situation, Lee could thrive in the middle/back of a rotation. When I say the "right situation", I mean

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that his flyball tendencies would be a disaster in a place like Minute Maid Park (Houston), Chase Field (Arizona), or the GAB (Cincinnati), but could find success in a larger park like Petco (San Diego), RFK (D.C), or AT & T Park (San Francisco). Don't think that the Astros and D'backs aren't aware that Lee would be breaking HR allowed records if they slotted him into their rotations.

The degeneration of Five and (F)Lee from a possible solid #3 starter to his current role on the team has been a disappointing one, but the contract that the Indians signed him to last year is actually a positive in the equation as it offers another team an affordable LH starter. Where most of us thought Paul Byrd would be at this point in the season (used as trade bait) is the seat that Cliffie occupies and, if the Indians feel that the Atomic One in Buffalo is ready to step into the rotation like Andrew Miller did in Detroit (allowing them to trade LH Mike Maroth), Lee could be packaged to upgrade the team in an area of need.

Jeremy Sowers

Even more than the case with Lee, this would be the ultimate example of "selling low" on a player that many thought, after last year, had the opportunity to develop into a #3 starter because of a road bump in the path of his development. Sowers has, no question, struggled this year to figure out how to adjust to a league that has seemingly adjusted to him, giving his confidence a jolt in the process.

While the Indians could probably demand a good deal for Sowers, based on last year's success, most teams would come in with a much less tantalizing package due to Sowers' struggles this year. Frustration with his performance this year aside, the fact remains that Sowers is still a 24-year-old pitcher who experienced phenomenal success in the 2nd half of 2006, with a 7-4 record with a 1.19 WHIP.

If the Indians truly feel that his struggles are not easily fixed (first,

someone should lose their job as a pitching instructor), then they may look into moving The Vandy Dandy. Otherwise, it's time to give the intelligent Sowers some time to work out his difficulties (really the first he has ever experienced as a pro) and hope that it doesn't turn into the type of regression that another 1st Round Pick, Jeremy Guthrie, was not able to pull himself out of until he was paired up with Leo Mazzone in Baltimore.

Ben Francisco / Franklin Gutierrez

As similar as these two young OF are, one of them is likely to be included in a deal, if the Indians do pull the trigger before July 31st. Both are RH, can play all 3 OF positions, and thrived in AAA early in the year, seeing their success continue in their brief stints in Cleveland. What the Indians' deep thinkers need to decide is which player projects to become a full-time player (and not just a platoon player or a 4th OF) while balancing that with which of the two has more trade value on the open market.

The dearth of quality OF (particularly CF, which both can play) in MLB means that there will be some interest in both, though neither is a "can't-miss prospect" that will bring a lot in return on their own. The fact that both are entirely affordable and under club control for the

foreseeable future means that a team with an eye on the bottom line, attempting to augment their position player talent might bite on one of them.

My thought is that the Indians have similar feelings on both players and will trade the player that is asked for in a deal. Personally, I think that Frank the Tank is more attractive to teams because of his stellar defense, speed, and excellent 2007 showcase with the parent club. If that is the case and Gutz is the OF dealt, I'm fine with giving an extended opportunity to The Frisco Kid, whose shorter swing may be better suited for the Indians lineup and the lack of a disparate split (like FG has) means that he may have a better future as an everyday player.

Andy Marte / Asdrubal Cabrera

Call this the Jhonny Contingency Group.

It all depends on where the Indians see Jhonny Peralta two to three years from now, with the added factor of how

these two players develop. If the Indians are comfortable with Peralta at SS and feel that Marte (who is still 23) projects as the everyday 3B next year,

Cabrera is essentially blocked as an everyday player. Now, AstroCab could certainly stick with the club as a Utility Infielder, but his talent (this year particularly) would say that he projects as an everyday SS or 2B. So, assuming that the Front Office is comfortable with Peralta and Marte on the left side of the infield (and Barfield at 2B, really), with him tearing it up in Akron, do the Indians sell high on Droob?

The other direction to go would be if the Indians have lost their faith that Marte is the answer at 3B and feel that Peralta will eventually slide to his right, clearing space for Cabrera at SS. If that's the case, the Indians need to deal with Marte NOW and not during Spring Training next year when he's out of options and every other team in MLB knows that he can be had for pennies on the dollar.

As much as this one depends on how the Indians see

Peralta as a fielder two to three years from now, a lot depends on whether the Tribe still holds Marte in the high regard that they did when he was acquired for Boston. If they do, Cabrera could fetch a bit as a 21-year-old tearing up AA. If they don't, it's time to cut bait with Marte before their hand is forced in Winter Haven.

Ryan Garko / Kelly Shoppach

OK, sit down. It's going to be all right.

Nobody's advocating trading either one of these vital pieces to the 2007 team right now, but let's examine the situation. With Pronk signed through 2013 and Vic under contract until 2010, those two are going to fill two of these spots - C, 1B, DH. That means that the Indians have one of those spots open for an everyday player and one for a back-up.

Let me put this another way, assume Pronk is the everyday DH, Garko stays at 1B, and Victor stays the C -

Shoppach is nothing more than a back-up C, when he certainly has the talent to catch every day in MLB. Say The Stick moves to 1B on a full-time basis and Shoppach assumes the catching duties...see where I'm going here?

The fact is that one of these two players is not (barring injury) going to be in the lineup everyday and should be for some MLB team. Is Shoppach more valuable on our bench or as part of a package to get a stud corner OF? What about Garko?

The Indians are flush with talent at this convoluted C/1B/DH position and will have to deal from their strength at some point to fill another hole. Is that point now? No, I don't think it is as there are no suitable replacements in the minors waiting to step up. If, say next year, Max Ramirez or Wyatt Toregas looks like a MLB-quality back-up C, Shoppach may find himself ordering new return address labels.

Right now, I don't think the team makes this move (though they both would be valuable trading chips)

because of a lack of MLB-ready replacements...just don't be surprised when the day arrives.

Fernando Cabrera

Here's hoping that one man's trash...

Cabrera, who has pitched himself out of ANY role in the bullpen due to his inability to pitch well with the bases empty or the bases full, seems to be following the Jason Dangerously Train out of town. Cabrera, who was SO effective a mere two years ago, filling the same 7th inning role in 2005 that Rafael Perez has thrived in for the squad this year, has regressed to the point that the Indians cannot afford to put him into a game...any game.

Perhaps they're able to diagnose him with a "tired arm" or say that he's played too much "Guitar Hero" and send him to the DL, then a rehab assignment that would buy the

organization more time to try to rectify whatever has happened to Cabrera, mechanically or confidence-wise. If not, Cabrera's potential could serve as enough of an oasis in the desert of reality that a team could take Cabrera as part of a package with the idea that he can be fixed and can become the reliever that we all thought he would be in Spring Training of 2006.

If the team is unable to find a taker for Cabrera, or cannot put him on the DL with an injury (tendonitis, anyone?), the Indians will be forced to DFA him and put him out to pasture with the promise of very little (Davis brought an extremely low-level prospect and has since been DFA'd in Seattle, by the way) coming in return.

Edward Mujica

If the Indians do make a move for an established

reliever, and the team would like a younger, less expensive, high-ceiling arm in return, the just-turned-23 Mujica may be the man. While he's struggled with the parent club, Mujica has served as the closer in Buffalo and could just need a little more seasoning to find his MLB rhythm.

Of course, the question becomes if Mujica is a reliever, and we need relievers, isn't this counter-productive? The answer to that would be that the Indians need stability in the bullpen TODAY, not in two years, so if Mujica can bring a more established (and more expensive) reliever in return, he could be the bait to help consummate a move.

He does have some value as just last year, as a 22-year-old, Mujica posted a 2.95 ERA with a 1.36 WHIP, out 12 and walking none in Cleveland, so the potential is there. But after watching him struggle with his command the year, it's apparent that the

Indians are reticent to allow him to come back up and pitch in a meaningful situation as it stands now.

The Young Arms

Aaron Laffey (22-Buffalo) / Sean Smith (23-Buffalo)

Not including Chuck Lofgren (21-Akron) in the list, these two would be the closest to MLB-ready prospects not named Miller or Sowers in the system. Both are having fine years in Buffalo (Laffey 7-3, 3.23 ERA, 1.21 WHIP, 53 K, 14 BB not to mention a stellar stay in Akron; Smith 8-6, 4.15 ERA, 1.43 WHIP, 60 K, 41 BB), and the Indians could make the decision that, because there are arms that slot above them in the pecking order, they can be better used to fill a hole elsewhere. While Laffey has garnered quite a bit of attention with his performance this year, possibly moving in step with,

or ahead of Lofgren (9-5, 4.13 ERA, 1.43 WHIP, 92 K, 44 BB in Akron) in terms of value, Smith has flown under the radar a little, but his youth and success in AAA could intrigue a team enough to merit a look.

The flip side to moving either of these players is that you lose the depth that we have learned is pretty important through the course of a season due to injuries and unexpected ineffectiveness. But, if the Indians feel that their depth can absorb the loss of one of these two and another team is looking for a young, high-level, successful arm - both of these players would fit the criteria.

The Younger Arms

Shawn Nottingham (22-Akron) / Scott Lewis (23-Akron) / Ryan Edell (23-Kinston) / David Huff (22-Kinston) / Kevin Dixon (23-Kinston)

/Sung-Wei Tseng (23-Kinston) / Frank Herrmann (23-Kinston)

Call these the "throw-in arms" to make a package a little more juicy as they are young, lower-level prospects who aren't going to help an MLB club at any point, but are the type of players that, if a team is enamored with one of these arms, could enhance a package.

With the depth of starting pitching that the team has, and quality starting pitching depth at that, it's conceivable that one (or two) of these guys can be used without drastically effecting the overall depth and getting a decent piece in return.

While the reliever market is getting more competitive with more teams getting into contention and the available names' list getting smaller (Akinori Otsuka seems destined for the 15-day DL and may

no longer be an option for movement before the July 31st deadline), the Indians need to make some very hard decisions in the next two weeks.

How does what the Tigers decide to do affect their strategy?

Do they trust the young players (Atom Miller, Francisco, Gutierrez, Perez, Jensen Lewis, etc.) to carry them through the AL Central or do they need help?

If they need help, the price isn't going to be cheap and, after the Dolans have spent some money to turn the world on its axis for some, the trading of youngsters by Shapiro in mid-season to bolster the parent club would land some fans in some sort of Bizarro world

(night is day, down is up, etc.).

Is 2007 the year to go for it, regardless of what the consequences are down the line?

Should they fill the holes internally and hold off on dealing any parts for fear of dealing away a Brian Giles, Sean Casey, Danny Graves (when he was a Red, not an Indian) because the window of opportunity is not close to closing?

It promises to be two weeks full of rumors, conjecture, and debate - but bear in mind how these deadline deals have reduced in frequency and importance as it takes a buyer AND a seller to make these trades happen, not just one team's wish list.