

The Future's So Bright ...

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Thursday, September 06 2007 7:00 PM -

While we are all caught up in the euphoria of the Indians pennant race, Paul Cousineau says it's important to remember that the Indians are built for long term success, and not a quick look at contention followed by a return to mediocrity. In his latest piece, our talented journalist looks at just exactly how well this Indians team is set up for the future, and says that Tribe fans should have a lot of fun ahead of them these next 3-4 years.



Watching this team congeal and accelerate going into the post-season, it's important to remember that this team is built for long-term success, not a quick look at contention followed by a return to mediocrity. The Tribe is built on young stars playing with long-term contracts (for the most part), giving the team a backbone on which the body of the roster can be fleshed out.

The likes of Sizemore, Hafner, Martinez, Carmona, Westbrook, Garko, Peralta, and Perez (plus Gutierrez, Cabrera, and Laffey) aren't going anywhere anytime soon and figure to serve as the bedrock for the Indians team (now just showing the flashes of brilliance which promise to shine brighter for years to come) that we are seeing emerge this season.

How deep-rooted is the roster?

Subscribing to the idea that you can never have too many arms to choose from and that there's no such thing as a sure thing (Cliff Lee, Jeremy Sowers, Atom Miller), let's assume that the Tribe picks up the options for Byrd (\$8M option), Borowski (\$4M option), and Fultz (\$1.5M option) for the 2008 season. With those three presumably in the fold, the only Free Agent on the roster after this season is Trot Nixon.

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Let me write that again (in another format) so everyone can do [their Dance of Joy](#)

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FA after 2007

Trot Nixon

Everyone who wants The Trotter to become scarce in the Tribe clubhouse (veteran leadership, awesome and ever-changing facial hair, the occasional Ultimate Warrior eye-black, and pie recipes notwithstanding) will have their wish granted in the very near future.

Of course, if Nixon helps (in ANY way) the team get fitted for rings or for a certain flag to be raised high above the Jake, I'll take his contributions (obviously unseen by the public) and assume that the Dolans can do some sort of tax write-off as paying his \$3M salary is essentially charity.

The fact that he's the only player on the current roster not signed for next year shows the foresight that the Indians' Front Office has shown to lock up and stabilize the "core" of this roster, keeping the current players (at known salary numbers) for the foreseeable future.

But it doesn't stop just by looking at the potential Free Agents next year. How about those that would be locked down until the end of the 2008 season?

FA after 2008

C.C. Sabathia
Casey Blake
Paul Byrd
Joe Borowski
Aaron Fultz

That's it.

And while that's a pretty big Matzo Ball hanging out there at the top of the list, the farm system has plenty of time to develop replacements for the other four (if it hasn't already).

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Rather than dwelling on C.C.'s contract negotiations and whether he will continue to anchor the Tribe rotation (call me crazy, but I think that he will...go ahead, do it...“you're crazy”), consider that with the bevy of arms that the Indians boast (I believe the oft-used term is “waves of arms”) you would think that one (or two) starter(s) and two relievers could emerge to fill the pitching staff out. Throw in the projected maturation of Rafael Perez, Aaron Laffey, or Jensen Lewis as well as the possibility of a rebound for guys like Jeremy Sowers and Tom Mastny and the pieces may not be far away at all.

On the non-pitcher related front, while some would scoff that Casey Blake has little value on the team going forward and could be replaced by any AAAA player, consider that Blake can play four to five positions, can be moved around the lineup, and can grow a beard like few who have ever donned the Chief. Essentially, he may not be as replaceable as some would like to think. Thus, it is entirely feasible that Blake could be re-signed to serve as the Super-Utility player for a few more years if that suitable replacement is not obvious or even on the horizon. It's not likely that it would take too much to convince Blake to remain with the first team that gave him a chance, where he can launch verbal cannonballs across Pronk's bow, and where he shares an Alumni Card with the manager.

That must be it, right? After 2008 is when the team falls off the cliff?

FA after 2009

Rafael Betancourt
David Dellucci
Jason Michaels

Depending on how the back of the bullpen situation plays out, it's conceivable that Senor Slo-Mo could be given a few years on a contract (though hopefully not too many, due to the volatility of relievers in general). Regardless, he's here for another two years...at least, giving the organization more time to churn out suitable replacements.

As for the other two, they may not be here at the start of 2008 depending upon how the OF situation plays out. Both were given contracts that were too long and are unlikely to see the end of those contracts with checks still coming from the corner of Carnegie and Ontario, particularly with Frank the Tank seizing his opportunity in RF and the likes of Ben Francisco, The BLC (Choo, assuming he's

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still around), Brian Barton, Jordan Brown (the dark horse candidate who won his 2nd consecutive MVP award in Akron this year, after winning the League MVP in Kinston last year), and even Brad Snyder and Trevor Crowe (both of whom have REALLY fallen off of the prospect map) in the pipeline with the hopes that at least one will separate from the pack.

That means the rest of the team stays intact for another TWO years and while the names of the prospective Free Agents look a little bigger going forward, take note of who's NOT on the list:

FA after 2010

Cliff Lee
Victor Martinez
Jake Westbrook

FA after 2011

Josh Barfield
Jhonny Peralta
Kelly Shoppach

That's right, Sherlock, you haven't seen Fausto Carmona (FA after 2012), Grady Sizemore (FA after 2012), or Travis Hafner (FA after 2013) even show up on the list.

The most important factor in all of these players being locked down is that the Indians figure to face few true off-season question marks. With most of the pieces already in place and the holes (hopefully) filled by youngsters, the Tribe isn't beholden to overpay on the Free Agent market.

Sure, this off-season promises to be full of spirited debate about what the makeup of the infield should look like, who will play LF, how the bullpen will shake out, who the 5th starter will be, or something having to do with a heavysset fellow from the Oakland area and how many zeroes should be on his biweekly checks, or...well, actually that's it. The question marks don't figure to be as large as most other teams face (and most other teams face HUGE question marks every off-season)

The stability and the "known quantities" that are making this playoff push so

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impressive and so very important is reminiscent of a comment made by Orel Hershiser after the 1995 season. He said, in effect, that the young players on that Indians team didn't understand that this (ridiculously winning games like you were playing a video game) isn't how it always worked in MLB...that your team just didn't win every year. But they did, and that experience, and the resulting swagger, is what carried the Tribe to the unparalleled success in the late 90's.

This group of youngsters is gaining that same invaluable experience, confidence, and an education in September and October baseball, with the hopes that it continues to translate into perennial success. When (not if) this group makes a push for the next few years, they'll look back on this, the first year of true success as a building block.

How large a building block it turns out to be will be determined in the next two months, but the team is learning how to compete (and win) within a divisional race.

Here's hoping the building block is shaped like a ring.