

## What To Do With Carsten Charles?

Written by {ga=mrburns}

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Should we re-sign him? Trade him before he walks way for nothing? Or hang on to him for 2008 to make another title run, then let him walk away? These are the options the Indians have with Carsten Charles Sabathia. And these options are the topic of Nick Allburn's latest column. Nick breaks down all the scenarios for us, tells us what's likely, and offers his thoughts on what he would do. Enjoy.



The Indians' magical playoff run is finished. It's been one hell of a ride, but the 2007 Tribe is as dead as [Vincent Vega](#) .

It's time to look to the future. One of the most intriguing storylines of the 2008 Cleveland Indians will revolve around C.C. Sabathia, who will be eligible for free agency following the '08 season.

In professional sports, free agency is the forum in which teams consistently overpay for players. In Major League Baseball, which lacks a salary cap, marquee free agents can only sign with a limited number of high-revenue teams (i.e. Cubs, Mets, Red Sox, Yankees, etc.) who can afford to meet their exorbitant demands.

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Unfortunately for the Indians and their fans, Cleveland is not one of the high-revenue markets referenced earlier. For Indians' General Manager Mark Shapiro, filling a hole on the roster isn't simply a matter of handing out an eight figure salary. No, the Tribe must build from within, through savvy trades, solid drafting, and quality player development.

This season, Shapiro's recipe for success brought the Indians within a game of a World Series birth, and the Tribe appears poised to compete for years to come. But success is not without its burdens, and coming into the 2007 season, the Indians had three players scheduled to hit the free agent market in 2007 (Jake Westbrook) or 2008 (Travis Hafner, C.C. Sabathia) who would command premium salaries.

Shapiro managed to re-sign Hafner and Westbrook during the '07 campaign, but southpaw starter C.C. Sabathia, who has far and away the highest market value of the three, has yet to be re-upped.

Presently, the major leagues are short on starting pitching. Whether it's a result of expansion or some other phenomenon, quality arms have been spread quite thin. Thus, it should not be surprising that in free agency, mediocre pitchers often hit paydirt, receiving far more money than they're worth simply due to supply and demand.

Let me hit you with some numbers from last winter's signings alone:

- **Barry Zito**, 7 years, \$126 million, \$18 million per year
- **Gil Meche**, 5 years, \$55 million, \$11 million per year
- **Jason Schmidt**, 3 years, \$47 million, \$15.7 million per year
- **Jeff Suppan**, 4 years, \$42 million, \$10.5 million per year
- **Ted Lilly**, 4 years, \$40 million, \$10 million per year
- **Vincente Padilla**, 3 years, \$33.75 million, \$11.25 million per year

Of those six, only Zito can come close to Sabathia in terms of skill, and Sabathia's crazy-good stuff certainly gives him the higher ceiling. Postseason struggles

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notwithstanding, Sabathia is a premier starter.

Only 27 years of age, Sabathia is just beginning to realize his potential, posting impressive earned run averages of 3.22 and 3.21 in 2006 and 2007, respectively. It's fair to assume that Barry Zito's contract will be the starting point for any team who wants to negotiate with Sabathia.

Barring some act of God, the Tribe has three options when it comes to C.C., they can re-sign him, trade him, or let him walk as a free agent a la Ramirez, Thome, etc. Let's take a look at all three options.

### **Option A: Re-Sign Sabathia**

Obviously this is what most Tribe fans want. An ace starter, especially a lefty, was the missing piece of the powerhouse Tribe clubs of the 90's and early 00's. If you want proof that John Hart was grasping at straws for a star southpaw, look back to the Chuck Finley signing.

The Tribe's payroll this season was about \$61 million. Let's assume that C.C. commands around \$20 million per year, which might be a conservative estimate given the market.

Now let's make another assumption, and it's a relatively bold one: attendance skyrockets in 2008, and the Indians either sellout or nearly sellout every home game. It could happen, but it probably won't. Even with that increased cash flow from gate and concessions, it's difficult to imagine Mark Shapiro having more than \$80 or \$90 million to work with.

Using the \$90 million figure (best-case scenario), and C.C.'s projected \$20 million per year salary (a low-end estimate), the Tribe would be committing nearly a quarter its yearly payroll to a single player. Given the business model Shapiro has

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successfully employed thus far, it's extremely difficult to imagine him committing such a large portion of the payroll to a single player.

Sabathia does appear to enjoy playing in Cleveland, but it's probably naïve to think that he will give the Indians a significant hometown discount. When it comes to pro sports, money talks, just ask Jim Thome.

Furthermore, the Indians committed \$90 million in contract extensions to Travis Hafner and Jake Westbrook this season. Although those signings were good for the ball club, there's only so much money to go around, and extensions awarded to Hafner and Westbrook make it far less likely that Sabathia will be re-upped.

**Verdict:** Re-signing Sabathia, although the most desirable option, seems to be nothing more than a pipe dream.

### Option B: Trade Sabathia

Most realistic Indians fans have come to terms with the unlikelihood of re-signing the Crooked Cap, and many are proponents of trading the hefty lefty. Those who champion this concept cite the Bartolo Colon trade of mid-2002, which netted Cliff Lee, Brandon &quot;Franchise&quot; Phillips, and Grady Sizemore from the Washington Nationals (then the Montreal Expos). If the Indians procure a similar return on Sabathia, tell me where to sign!

Unfortunately it's not that simple. There are never any guarantees that prospects will develop into stars like Sizemore (see: [Alex Escobar](#)), not to mention that the Expos were an unusually motivated buyer when they dealt for Sabathia.

The 2002 Montreal Expos were in the relatively unique position of trying to make

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their franchise more attractive to a potential buyer. In order to do so, they were willing to part with several talented prospects in an effort to acquire a big-name talent like Colon. This time around, it's fair to assume that the Tribe won't find such a trade-happy partner.

Of course, Sabathia has more value if traded before the season begins, but that increase in value is only marginal, as the fact remains that C.C.'s contract expires at the end of the season.

The big advantage to trading Sabathia, aside from receiving prospects in return, is that the Tribe can dictate where Carsten Charles ends up for the long term. As long as the Tribe deals C.C. to a team with the financial means to retain him, they can control where he ends up. In other words, the Indians can trade C.C. out of the division, out of the league, and perhaps most importantly, out of pinstripes.

**Verdict:** Trading Sabathia is probably the most reasonable course of action if the Tribe brass is thinking long-term, and it's more than likely what will come to fruition.

### Option C: Let C.C. Walk

The third, and perhaps least popular option, involves doing, well, absolutely nothing. The Indians could let Sabathia play out the remainder of his contract, and he would become an unrestricted free agent after next season.

In this construct, the obvious negative is that the Indians would lose Sabathia and gain nothing in return save compensatory draft choices, which wouldn't help them in the short term. Also, Sabathia would end up with a high-revenue team, which brings about our doomsday scenario of C.C. working for George Steinbrenner, and not the [Larry David version](#) .

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But the upside to standing pat with Sabathia is tempting; C.C. would pitch a full season for the Erie Warriors, all while motivated by a contract year. From one perspective, keeping C.C. would be like making a big trade at the deadline.

And the Indians could still make a push to sign C.C. in the season's latter half and in free agency, although their chance of success would be quite bleak.

If, as seems likely, the Indians are in the playoff picture come July, it would be very difficult to trade Sabathia, which would deliver a serious blow to the Tribe's playoff hopes.

**Verdict:** Although the Indians would receive nothing concrete in return, a strong argument can be made for inaction, and keeping a highly-motivated C.C. all year is certainly a viable option.

**My Call:** Up front, re-signing Sabathia is not an option. I would be equal parts shocked and thrilled if the Indians came to an agreement with Sabathia, but it's just not in the cards.

Ruling out an extension, this becomes the definition of a catch-22, so my solution will have to be conditional. If the Indians are in contention when the trade deadline arrives, then they have to keep Sabathia. That said, regardless of the team's success or lack thereof in 2008, a trade wouldn't surprise me.

Either way, it's time for us to be pragmatic about this situation and face the music: C.C. Sabathia won't be a Cleveland Indian in 2009.