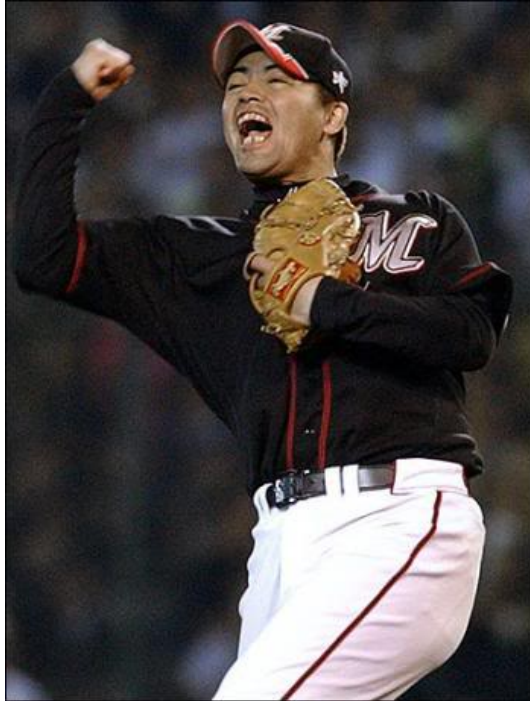


My Name Is Kobayashi!

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Tuesday, November 20 2007 7:00 PM -

Well this one kind of caught us out of nowhere Tribe fans. But the more I read about this signing, the more I like it. With the American bullpen options overpriced and unappealing, the Indians went overseas and signed Japanese closer Masa Kobayashi to a two year deal worth a little over six million bucks with a team option for a third year. Paulie Cous checks in to break down the signing for us, and hopes we've gotten as lucky here as the Red Sox and Dodgers did with Okajima and Saito.



The Indians have apparently lost their minds and have decided to "fortify" their bullpen today by signing a British lawyer with unsavory ties to extremely questionable characters, which I can't figure out how this helps the team at all in the short term OR the long term.

[You know, back when I was picking beans in Guatamala](#) ... what?

Different Kobayashi?

Oh, Masa Kobayashi - OK, OK - my Thanksgiving appetite just re-appeared.

Seriously though, the Indians may have found the "inefficiency" in the FA market (where value exists as opposed to getting in bidding wars for the services of lesser players) that many teams fail to find (or choose not to look for) and could have identified some real value for the bullpen with the signing of Kobayashi.

The 33-year-old Japanese reliever has compiled a 2.79 ERA with 227 career

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saves in 7 seasons, topping 20 saves in each of those seasons. He has a repertoire of a low-to-mid-90s fastball, a slider, and a cut fastball and has been durable throughout his career in Japan (although he spent some of 2007 on the shelf), so the Indians eschewed the barren domestic FA market for relievers and inked Kobayashi (for about what the middling middle relievers will fetch on the open market) without having to pay a posting fee as Kobayashi is an unrestricted Free Agent.

Kobayashi's stats since 2001 are pretty impressive with the Chiba Lotte Marines:

2001 - 48 Games, 33 Saves, 52 IP, 47 K, 4.33 ERA, 1.29 WHIP
2002 - 43 Games, 37 Saves, 43 1/3 IP, 41 K, 0.83 ERA, 0.74 WHIP
2003 - 43 Games, 33 Saves, 47 IP, 30 K, 2.87 ERA, 1.19 WHIP
2004 - 51 Games, 20 Saves, 57 2/3 IP, 50 K, 3.90 ERA, 1.21 WHIP
2005 - 46 Games, 29 Saves, 45 1/3 IP, 33 K, 2.58 ERA, 1.28 WHIP
2006 - 53 Games, 34 Saves, 53 2/3 IP, 48 K, 2.68 ERA, 1.06 WHIP
2007 - 49 Games, 27 Saves, 47 1/3 IP, 35 K, 3.61 ERA, 1.37 WHIP

Those are pretty consistent (and consistently impressive) numbers with similar stats across the board every year for 7 years. He averaged between 43 and 53 games, 43 1/3 and 57 2/3 IP, and 33 and 50 K over those 7 years, so it's not as if the Indians are taking one season of success and hoping it translates stateside.

Ah, the translation of success from Japan to America...

Success with Asian pitchers has been hit-and-miss, with recent signings from the Pacific Rim ranging from closer material to "why did we sign this guy";. For every Takishi Saito (Dodgers closer) and Hideki Okajima (you remember him looking at Mike Lowell) standing out as some excellent finds, there are Kei Igawas that scream "Caveat Emptor"; when dealing with Japanese pitchers.

So, if we're going to accept that that success of Saito and Okajima is what the Indians are obviously trying to capture, is it fair to compare how those two fared in Japan for some measure of comparison? If so, Saito's last three years in Japan were as a starter (1st year with Dodgers - 2006), so we'll take a look at the last time he closed:

Saito

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2002 - 39 Games, 20 Saves, 47 2/3 IP, 46 K, 2.45 ERA, 1.09 WHIP
2001 - 50 Games, 27 Saves, 64 2/3 IP, 60 K, 1.67 ERA, 1.01 WHIP

From those numbers, they look pretty similar to those of Kobayashi, but Okajima is the one that most people are comparing the signing to; so how do Okajima's stats look from his last 2 years in Japan?

Okajima

2006 - 55 Games, 4 Saves, 54 2/3 IP, 63 K, 2.14 ERA, 1.10 WHIP
2005 - 42 Games, 0 Saves, 53 IP, 56 K, 4.75 ERA, 1.39 WHIP

It looks like Okajima had higher K rates than Kobayashi, but Kobayashi is far and away the more proven product...in Japan.

Okajima's success hinges on his deceptiveness to the plate and the illusion that the ball explodes out of his hand because of his exaggerated head snap.

Does Kobayashi posses similar deception?

It sure doesn't look like it [based on this video from 2005](#) , where Kobayashi certainly doesn't look too impressive pitching for Bobby Valentine, walking home a run before inducing an inning-ending grounder.

In fact, the best comparison for a well-established closer to come from Japan to America would have to be [Kazuhiro Sasaki](#) , who made a seamless transition to MLB by compiling 129 saves for the Seattle Mariners from 2000 to 2003. Consider Sasaki's career Japanese stats against those of Kobayashi:

Sasaki

439 Games, 252 Saves, 627 1/3 IP, 851 K, 2.41 ERA

Kobayashi

445 Games, 227 Saves, 580 1/3 IP, 463 K, 2.79 ERA

Outside of the K numbers put up by Sasaki in Japan, the two are relatively comparable in terms of how they left Japan - and Sasaki had marvelous success

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in MLB in his 4 years in the Emerald City. Of course, Kobayashi could just as easily mirror the career path of [Shingo Takatsu](#) (though Takatsu was 36 when he entered MLB); another Japanese closer to record over 200 saves in Japan.

Obviously, something piqued the Tribe's interest for the Indians to go against their patterns of relievers working off of one-year deals to offer 2 guaranteed years to a reliever (for \$6M), with a 3rd year as a club option (worth \$3.25M) to Kobayashi, likely in part based on his track record.

While we'll truly not know how Kobayashi's repertoire will translate to MLB until he toes the Jacobs Field rubber for the first time, his signing indicates that the bullpen essentially set (before Thanksgiving) with the 7 relievers that are likely to break Spring Training with the Tribe:

JoeBo
Betancourt
Kobayashi
Perez
Lewis
Fultz
Mastny

The goal of adding some back-end depth and making the bullpen deeper to accommodate for injury and ineffectiveness seems to have been accomplished prior to the Winter Meetings. Now, the advantage of adding Kobayashi to a largely settled bullpen is that he can work his way into the sequence of relievers while he acquires himself to his new surroundings. If he finds success, he can quickly become another back-end option in the bullpen to lead up to JoeBo or even become an option (with Betancourt) to close games as it certainly seems that he has the stomach for it. If he struggles out of the gate, other relievers exist on the staff to pick up the slack to allow him to attempt to right himself to prepare himself again for the back end.

When it's all said and done, the Indians took a relatively low-risk, high-reward gamble on one of the more decorated relievers in Japan, strengthening the depth in their bullpen, allowing relievers to slot into roles out of Spring Training and shortening the game for the Tribe rotation. In this age of teams throwing money and years at fair relievers with track records in MLB, the Indians have embraced the trend of finding bullpen help elsewhere and it would seem that they started at

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a pretty high level by inking the pitcher third on the career saves list in Japan.