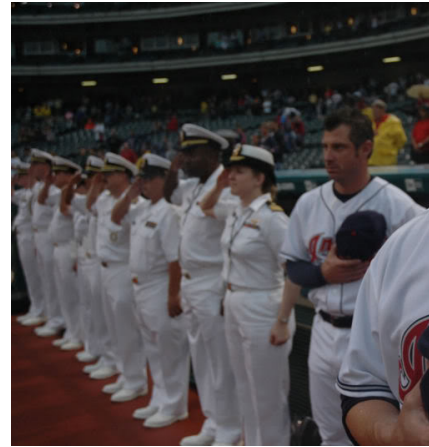


The Roadblock With Gold Locks

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Monday, February 25 2008 7:00 PM -

“If you could make one roster move today as the Indians GM, what would it be and why?” This was the question posed to Paul Cousineau at a recent bloggers roundtable on the Baseball Digest website. His answer? Well, it's the basis of Paulie's latest column, and it may surprise you a little bit. Opening day ... just a little over four weeks away. Finally.



Recently, I was invited to participate in a sort of “Bloggers Roundtable” at Baseball Digest Daily and was presented with 5 questions that the editors of BDD found most relevant for the Tribe for this year. Most of the questions were things that have already been addressed at length (where Barfield fits in 2008, feelings about the re-naming of Jacobs Field, etc.), but one question piqued my interest as an extremely open-ended question wrought with possibilities.

The question was “If you could make one roster move today as the Indians GM, what would it be and why?”

Since Danny Ferry essentially stole my answer Thursday around 2:59 PM (to jettison all of the dead wood on the roster for a defensive enforcer, a sharpshooter, more depth in the frontcourt, and a point guard...wait...oh, the Indians' GM), the question struck me as interesting mainly because of the timing of it as Spring Training is underway and the answer isn't as easy as simply perusing a Free Agent list, something that would have been an option in November, and because the Indians essentially head to Winter Haven with their roster more or less set to head North. So, if one move could be made today (today being the key word here, I think), what would it be?

Would it be anything?

Outside of addressing anything related to the C.C. contract non-negotiations and making the absurd blanket statement to “get a deal done with C.C. whatever the cost or length of the deal” (by the by, have you heard the report that C.C.'s agents broke off negotiations prior to Spring Training because they are acutely aware of the Hefty Lefty's close relationship with Shapiro and felt that the Tribe GM could

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have swayed Sabathia to see “the big picture” by reminding him of “The Plan” that Shapiro would preach to him during the time in Florida, resulting in C.C. ultimately ordering his agents to get a deal done to keep him on this emerging power...how’s that for confidence in one’s client), it becomes even more interesting with the pieces seemingly already in place.

Of course, bound by the restrictions of reality, I’m unable to give the simple answer of “I think we should trade Josh Barfield, Cliff Lee, and David Dellucci for Matt Holliday”, which is (unfortunately) still the way that some fans would approach this, blinded by their “Fantasy Baseball” mentality and the surely-twisted rationale on how this could work (“Lee was an 18-game winner a few years ago which would be an upgrade over Colorado’s youngsters, the Rox need a 2B to replace Matsui, plus Dellucci would replace Holliday in the outfield...think about it – it makes sense for both teams”), regardless of how little sense it would make for the other side of the ledger.

So, with the knowledge that we are bound by reality and that C.C.’s agents have no interest in continuing discussions, the one move I would like to see the Tribe make would be to trade Jason Michaels. The move is not due to the fact that Michaels is worthless to the Indians, but 2007 reinforced the idea that he is simply not an everyday player, by posting extreme platoon splits yet again and lending more credence to the idea that Michaels projects merely as a platoon OF/4th outfielder and little else. Keeping him doesn’t seem to be (on the surface) too much of an issue, especially since the Indians employ a platoon in LF. That is, until you consider the players (with perhaps a higher ceiling) that Michaels is essentially blocking from getting regular plate appearances – namely OF Ben Francisco and 3B Andy Marte.

The Ben Francisco Treat, with his success in AAA last year as he won the International League batting title, deserves the chance to fill the role of at least the 4th OF coming out of the Spring and not be subjected to another year of “The Buffalo Shuffle”, but is blocked by the fact that he and Michaels are simply redundancies on the roster and don’t figure to co-exist on the 25-man roster.

Now that, you say, would mean that Francisco would take up the RH portion of the LF platoon? Not so fast, my friend. As faithful readers know I think that the arrangement in LF (if we’re assuming that Michaels is gone) is to create batting opportunities for Andy Marte, who is out of options this year, before he walks out of the organization if only for a slowness to adapt quickly to MLB. Forgive me if

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you've seen this before, but it is simply reiterated to prove the logic behind parting with Michaels:

Against LHP, Blake in LF and Marte at 3B.
Against RHP, Dellucci in LF and Blake at 3B.

Consider Marte's splits for the past few years, and it is apparent that he has experienced more success against LHP, just like Michaels:

2007 – Buffalo (AAA)

.827 OPS vs. LH
.748 OPS vs. RH

2006 – Buffalo (AAA)

.894 OPS vs. LH
.730 OPS vs. RH

2005 – Richmond (AAA)

.936 OPS vs. LH
.848 OPS vs. RH

It's important to remember that Marte is still only 24 and the numbers he put up in Richmond (splits above while compiling an overall .275 BA / .372 OBP / .506 SLG / .878 OPS) as a 21-year-old in AAA, so the talent is there. If the young Dominican is not going to get everyday AB due to Casey Blake's stranglehold on 3B, why not let him ease into facing MLB pitching against LHP, whom he has the greatest success against to allow him to become comfortable in Cleveland and (hopefully) allow him to blossom as the everyday 3B for 2009?

Interestingly, the Indians recently signed veteran Jason Tyner to a minor-league deal, which should quicken nobody's pulse as Tyner is simply not a viable MLB player. But, delving further into it, assuming that he's not just in camp as an audition to catch on with another team (as Scott Elarton is), he would be joining a pretty crowded Buffalo outfield with Trevor Crowe, Brad Snyder, Jason Cooper, and...Ben Francisco. That is, of course, unless the Tyner deal represents a depth signing that would allow the Tribe to move Michaels, give Francisco a spot on the

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25-man, and replace him in Buffalo with Tyner.

That could be looking WAY too deeply into a minor move, but the logic is there.

The corollary to making a move with Michaels' would be that the Indians' bullpen, regardless of the success of 2007, still worries me in that much of the success came from pitchers that could certainly be on their last legs (JoeBo and Fultz), could have had career years (Senor Slo-Mo), are entirely unproven state-side (Kobayashi), or need 2008 to show that their success was not a fluke (The Scarecrow, Ginseng Lewis, Nasty Boy Tom Mastny). With bullpen construction, it truly is a crapshoot from year to year as past success certainly does not guarantee future results and the depth that the Indians are depending on from the minors (Mujica, Stevens, Santos, etc.) and the players looking to rehab from injuries (Sipp and, with less of a chance of contributing this year, Donnelly) are largely unproven quantities, even more so than the likes of Lewis and Mastny. The more arms that are options, the greater the chance that an effective mix of relievers can be slotted into a progression of roles.

To me, you can never have too many relievers to throw up against the wall to see what sticks. Despite the fact that we are assuming that most of the stalwarts of the 2007 bullpen will continue their successes, we all know what is said about making assumptions. That being said, with Michaels' likely going rate being a fair-to-middling reliever (see Rhodes, Art), I would have no problem if another arm for the bullpen mix was added in exchange for Michaels.

As has been stated, Michaels is not without worth on the current roster, but the bottom line is that I feel that both Francisco and Marte are ready to contribute for the Indians in 2008. The person on the roster, blocking both and taking plate appearances away from their development, is Jason Michaels. His removal from the roster (and if moving him allows the team to augment the bullpen, even better) opens the door for Marte to ease into 3B (which is very important with Blake becoming a FA at the end of 2008) and allows Francisco to see some substantial time at the MLB level for the club to determine if he has the possibility of playing every day.

Keeping him on the team, however, blocks both from happening and impedes the growth and development of Francisco and Marte in 2008.