

Farm System A Key to Indians Success

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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When Mark Shapiro officially took over as general manager of the Cleveland Indians on November 1, 2001, he brought an out-with-the-old and in-with-the-new approach that transformed the way the Indians would evaluate and analyze players within and outside of their system. Last year we saw that philosophy bear fruit as Fausto Carmona, Asdrubal Cabrera, Rafael Perez, and Franklin Gutierrez became go to guys on this team. Tony takes a look back at what Mark has done with the farm since taking over as Tribe GM.



When Mark Shapiro officially took over as general manager of the Cleveland Indians on November 1, 2001, he brought an out-with-the-old and in-with-the-new approach that transformed the way the Indians would evaluate and analyze players within and outside of their system.

Shapiro brought a new philosophy with him, one where the Indians would once again primarily build from within and use their player development system as the main source for infusing needed talent to the Major League roster. Trades and free agency would serve more complimentary roles, whereas the players from the farm system would be looked upon as the foundation and impact players needed to sustain a competitive team.

Shapiro made some shrewd, though unpopular, moves early in his tenure, but never strayed from his vision. He traded popular players like Bartolo Colon, Roberto Alomar, Chuck Finley, Paul Shuey, and Einar Diaz, and received top prospects such as Grady Sizemore, Cliff Lee, Brandon Phillips, and Travis Hafner in return.

In-house their scouting efforts uncovered players in the draft and as international free agents like Victor Martinez, Jhonny Peralta, Fausto Carmona, and C.C. Sabathia.

As a result, at the time the farm system he inherited in 2001 that was ranked 26th by *Baseball America*

shot up to #1 in all of baseball just two years later. Ultimately his plan was realized in 2005 when the Indians won 93 games and solidified last year as the club returned to the playoffs for the first time since 2001.

With this shift in focus, it not only changed what type of players the Indians would put on the

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field, but also how they would evaluate and analyze players from the Major Leagues all the way down to the minor leagues. With the farm system moving to the top of the organization's priority list, the Indians looked to improve the stability of their player development system and revolutionize the way they went about their business.

The first thing Shapiro did was promote Scouting Director John Mirabelli to Assistant GM. One of the things that hurt the Indians near the end of Hart's tenure was in his last five years as GM he had four different scouting directors. With the constant turnover in scouting directors, the scouting department and front office never seemed to be on the right page, leading to confusion at times on what the true objective and vision was from management.

Shapiro wanted to give Mirabelli a vote of confidence and ensure that he stayed on board to help end the days of constant change in the scouting department. To date, Mirabelli is still the scouting director, although his role has evolved such that he pays more attention to the international side of things while Director of Amateur Scouting Brad Grant works more on the domestic side of things. Even still, Mirabelli has a large say on the scouting of domestic players, and Grant has been Mirabelli's assistant since 2001, so continuity exists in the scouting department.

The Indians have also maintained continuity on the player development side of things. When Shapiro took over, he appointed John Farrell as his Director of Player Development. When Farrell left the organization after the 2006 season, the transition to the new farm director was seamless as the club promoted from within by giving Farrell's right hand man Ross Atkins the role. Atkins had been the Assistant Director of Player Development since 2001, and had also been the Director of Latin Operations for three years from 2004-2006.

Another one of the big changes the Indians made was in the money the Indians filtered into the scouting and player development system. Near the end of the Hart era, most of Cleveland's financial resources were focused on player procurement for the Major League team, but this led to a much smaller player development and scouting budget.

More money started to be pumped into the minor leagues when Larry Dolan took over ownership of the team in 2000. Hart caught the tail end of this shift in organizational resources, but when Shapiro took over he saw it as one of the primary areas where the Indians could gain a competitive advantage over other teams. When you consider the way team payrolls and revenues for large market teams dwarf mid-to-small market teams like those in Cleveland, Shapiro and the Indians needed to find an alternative to find good, young players who were not exorbitantly priced.

As a result, the Indians have been one of the top three to five spending teams in all of baseball on scouting and player development since Dolan and Shapiro took over. The Indians now spend upwards of \$21-23 million a year on their scouting and player development, whereas they used to spend about \$11-13 million. They also spend an average of about \$7-8 million more than what the average Major League team spends on their farm system. With more spending on scouting and player development, the Indians have more scouts to send out to watch players and a greater number of roving minor league coordinators helping players

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already in the system.

One of the other unique things the Indians have incorporated into their scouting and player development system is the balance between the traditional methods of relying on their scouts and the currently en vogue Moneyball-style computer analysis methods being used throughout baseball. As an organization, the Indians balance the information from the subjective and objective side with the end goal being to gather all the information they can and weigh it appropriately depending on the situation. With purported math wizard Chris Antonetti as Assistant GM and sabermetrician Keith Woolner as Manager of Baseball Research and Analysis, the Indians have a strong backdrop in statistical analysis.

With all the objective analysis the Indians were incorporating into their daily tasks of evaluating the team, the Indians developed their own computer database known as DiamondView. The advent of DiamondView allowed the Indians to be much more precise with their valuations of players all throughout their system, as well as the rest of baseball.

While the system is heavily used to track players at the Major League level and assist in contract negotiations, the new database also allows the Indians to automatically get information every morning in an electronic report for every player in minor league baseball. For each minor leaguer, the database pools up-to-date statistics and biographical information, and also includes other things like scouting reports, medical reports, video, and more. They can even customize reports to track trends, put their player development philosophies to the test, and target players they may have an eye on acquiring in a trade.

In the coming years, another big help for the farm system will be the move of the spring training complex from Winter Haven, FL to Goodyear, AZ. While the Indians will not commence with their first spring training there until February of 2009, the facility is expected to be up and operational later this summer. The state-of-the-art complex will allow the Indians to have the year-round training, educational and rehabilitation facility that they have lacked. The hope is that many minor league players will live near the facility in the off-season to take advantage of the resources and support staff present there.

With improved communication, computer-aided research, a stabilized scouting and player development staff with a holistic approach, and the use of statistical analysis to help assess risk and also evaluate players, the Indians are much more sound and efficient with the use of their farm system.

The end result is the Indians have now built a pipeline that continues to pour in good young talent that filters up through the minors and to the major league club every year, and with their methods in place it appears it will continue to do so for a long time.

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