

Things Fall Apart - Standing Pat

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Monday, August 04 2008 7:00 PM -

Paulie C, fresh off his guest appearance on More Sports with Les Levine, hunkered down in his Cleveland home (to avoid the Paparazzi) last night for us and cranked out his latest installment in the "Things Fall Apart" series, which takes a look at what the heck went wrong for the Indians this season. In this piece, he takes a closer look at the off-season of inactivity for Mark Shapiro, the reasoning behind it at the time, and why it blew up in his face.



While trying to figure out what parts fit where for 2009 (and can we find a place for Kelly, seeing as how [he is my darling and my sunshine](#) ...who is [in the top 10 in OPS in all of the AL since taking over for Victor on an everyday basis in early-to-mid-June](#)

), I thought that I'd get into the final section of the "Things Fall Apart" series - after the bullpen, the injuries, and the regressions - dealing with the inactivity of the Indians' Front Office over the offseason and if the disaster of 2008 could have been avoided with a move or series of moves to bolster the roster prior to Spring Training.

Most people who point to Shapiro "sitting on his hands" this offseason point to the assumption that the Indians stood at the precipice of contention for 2009 and needed to upgrade parts of their roster to improve the team enough to overcome what was being done by the likes of the Red Sox, the Angels, and the Tigers (remember, we're talking about what we thought THEN), only to see the additions made to the roster amount to Masa Kobayashi and Jamey Carroll.

The Indians' stance was that the young players in place and the depth behind them would serve as the "additions" for the roster, in that a full season of Gutierrez in RF and a full season of a bullpen with Perez and Lewis were preferred to going out and overpaying for a piece, whether it be on the trade market or in Free Agency. While that strategy looks foolhardy in retrospect, knowing what we have seen from the likes of Gutierrez and Garko in the lineup and that the bullpen has blown up over and over again, the rationale did not seem all that flawed through the Winter as the progression of young players is something that every team counts on to some degree (see Twins, Minnesota).

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The idea that the young players on the roster would show some level of improvement, stay at their mean, or regress slightly was augmented by the likes of Ben Francisco and Josh Barfield in Buffalo, with The Big League Choo scheduled to arrive back to the team in May or June and Andy Marte starting the season with the parent club to serve as depth at 3B as Casey Blake could be moved around to fill holes because of his versatility.

Whether the correct mix of players broke camp with the team is certainly up for debate and we all know how a number of these ideas blew up watching Barfield struggle in Buffalo while Asdrubal struggled in Cleveland, then seeing Barfield get hurt just after his call-up as Andy Marte sat on the bench as the likes of Dellichaels, Frank the Tank, and Gark fell apart before our very eyes as the "3B" seemed to be written in permanent marker after Blake's name on the lineup card. Then, of course, there was the whole matter of Victor and Hafner getting hurt, inexplicably staying on the roster and in the lineup while hurt, and ultimately hitting the DL for stays that haven't been of the 2 to 3 week variety.

That all being said, most of the discourse regarded the Indians having to add another bat this offseason, preferably at a corner spot, to supplement the middle of the order and to essentially make Dellichaels disappear from our greater consciousness, even if Gutierrez had justified getting a look as a regular to close out 2007 and Francisco and Choo seemed ready to step in if Dellichaels continued to collapse in on himself or if Gutz struggled as pitchers adjusted to him.

While the Free Agent market for that corner bat was less than appealing, there were some moves that were made as players who fit the Indians' "need" as a corner OF or IF packed up their belongings for a new team in the off-season. The biggest names, in terms of hitters, that did change hands (or at least the ones that look the biggest today as the 2008 season enters August) were Miguel Cabrera, Josh Hamilton, Carlos Quentin, and Nick Swisher.

Realistically, the Cabrera deal involved prospects that simply didn't exist in the Indians' system (Cameron Maybin and Andrew Miller were both top 20 prospects in all of MLB while in the Tigers' organization) below the big-league level and an Edinson Volquez (whom Josh Hamilton was dealt for) is going to top any player that the Indians could have offered the Reds not named Fausto. Instead, then, let's focus on the two players acquired by the White Sox and see if the Indians missed the boat on either of these players in terms of who they would have had to

part with to net one.

While Swisher has struggled in his time with the White Sox, let's remember that we're attempting to transport ourselves back to the offseason and examine the market as it existed THEN. So instead of simply saying that the Indians should have tried to reacquire Ryan Ludwick, or some other such player that looks good in August but barely registered a blip on the radar this offseason, let's transport ourselves back to the time that [Swisher was dealt to the South Siders](#) .

Swisher was coming off a season that saw him hit 22 HR with 78 RBI with an .836 OPS as a 26-year-old after hitting 36 HR the previous year. He fit the mold of a "corner" player to a tee, being able to play LF, RF, and 1B with the fact that he was signed through the 2012 making it look like Swisher would be precisely the type of player that the Indians would target as he was young, affordable, and productive.

To net Swisher, the White Sox parted with their top overall prospect (LHP Gio Gonzalez, who is pitching in AAA with Oakland as a 22-year-old this year), their #2 prospect (RHP Fautino de los Santos, who is pitching in high A-ball as a 22-year-old), and their #6 prospect (OF Ryan Sweeney, who has posted a .739 OPS...which is .009 OPS points lower than what Swisher is putting up in Chicago...for the A's this year as a 23-year-old) - so Swisher didn't come cheap by any stretch of the imagination.

To put it in terms of a young, near MLB-ready pitcher, a young, high-ceiling pitcher, and a young LH OF in terms of the Indians system, I suppose you could throw names like Aaron Laffey out there or Chuck Lofgren if Lofgren hadn't exploded as he did in 2007 in terms of Gonzalez, names like Hector Rondon or Kelvin De La Cruz (though both are younger than de los Santos), and...well, we just didn't have close-to-MLB ready OF like Sweeney as young as he was at the time of the trade unless you consider the players already in Cleveland, who were still quite a bit older.

The White Sox gave up quite a bit to put Swisher in a White Sox uniform and, seeing as how the Indians were allegedly in on the Dan Haren negotiations, making the Oakland brass intimately familiar with the Tribe system, this could have been a matter of the Indians simply not having the pieces to extract Swisher out of Oakland. Early results since he arrived on the South Side indicate that might have been a good thing, particularly when you look at how he's fared up

against the other Chicago acquisition over the winter, Carlos Quentin.

Back in the day, some hack put together a list of players who would look awfully nice in LF, saying [this about the current AL HR leader](#) :

"Quentin represents a far more interesting option as he is a young RH OF out of Stanford (remember the Tribe's predilection to Stanford guys - Garko, Guthrie, Gerut) who has battled injury (right hamstring, then rotator cuff) since coming into MLB after cruising through the D-Back's system.

His OPS, by year, level, and age is pretty impressive:

2007 - AAA - Age 24 - 1.004

2006 - AAA - Age 23 - .906

2005 - AAA - Age 22 - .942

2004 - AA - Age 21 - .976

2004 - A - Age 21 - .990

This, to me, looks like a player simply blocked, organizationally, while producing at every level he's been at (up to MLB). While his HR totals have never been eye-popping, he has always had a consistently high OBP (something the Tribe deep thinkers love) and has high 2B totals which could translate to HR as he adjusts to MLB pitching.

Quentin did just undergo rotator-cuff surgery (non-throwing arm), which will keep him out of action until April, so his health concerns would be comparable to Choo; but, if the Indians are happy to do the same thing that they did in the bullpen last year (let the veterans keep a place warm for the youngsters to assert themselves) and they feel that Quentin will bounce back from the rotator cuff (not a certainty), they could find themselves a RH bat to handle LF...and possibly buy low on him because of the injury concerns."

And sure enough, [Quentin was moved from Arizona](#) , blocked by players ahead of him and pushed by players behind him. It turns out what AZ was looking for, based on what they got, was a young, high-ceiling, power corner bat seeing as how 1B/DH Chris Carter is what came to them in return. Now, it shouldn't be forgotten that Carter was later a part of the Haren deal from Oakland, so Oakland's wishes could be just as relevant as what the Snakes demanded for Quentin. Regardless who was making the call on Carter being the return, here's

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what he had posted as a 20-year-old 1B/DH at Low-A in 2007:

.291 BA / .383 OBP / .522 SLG / .905 OPS with 25 HR and 93 RBI

Interestingly, Carter plays in the same league as newly acquired C Carlos Santana (from the Blake deal), prior to Carl Santana being dealt, in 2008 and leads whatever offensive categories that Santana didn't in the California League. So, when people say that the White Sox "got Quentin for an A-ball player"; remember that Carter is not some run-of-the-mill A-ball player, nor was he at the time that the trade was made.

What would be the comparable player in the Tribe organization at the time the trade was made?

Chris Carter - 2007 (as a 20-year-old in Low-A):

.291 BA / .383 OBP / .522 SLG / .905 OPS with 25 HR and 93 RBI

Nick Weglarz - 2007 (as a 19-year-old in Low-A):

.276 BA / .395 OBP / .497 SLG / .892 OPS with 23 HR and 82 RBI

Given that Nick Weglarz is continuing his meteoric rise up the Indians' elevator of levels in Kinston, posting a .273 BA / .400 OBP / .440 SLG / .840 OPS line as a 20-year-old (he can't sip a drink legally in the States until December of this year) before joining the Canadian Olympic Team a while back, I'm not sure how many people would have been that enamored with giving up Weglarz for Quentin last offseason.

Quentin, while he has dispelled many of the concerns about him this year, was still a bit of a question mark when he arrived in Chicago as his adjustment to a new league, his ability to overcome injuries, and whether the doubles power he showed in the minors (he never had more than 21 HR in any minor league season as he sits on 28 HR for the White Sox through July this year) would translate to greater power as he aged. Obviously, his 2008 season has been a revelation, but it was far from a certainty that Quentin would thrive in the AL the way that he has for the South Siders. And, given those concerns, I'm not sure if giving up a young, high-ceiling, corner bat who has cruised through the system was justifiable.

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In retrospect, giving up a minor leaguer that far away from contributing to the parent club for a player, at an affordable salary under club control, with 28 HR and 84 RBI while posting a .927 OPS from the right side of the dish is a no-brainer. But, given the circumstances when the trade went down (again, not knowing what we know now) the outrage would have been loud and proud for giving up one of the only power hitting prospects we had in the system (at the time) for a 25-year-old OF who was unable to crack the lineup in Arizona with less than 400 MLB at bats who some would have denounced as "another AAAA player" to fill the roster.

Could some of these moves been made?

Sure, notably the Quentin one in hindsight...but hindsight is a dangerous thing as between Swisher and Quentin, most people thought going into the season that the Swisher acquisition was the coup for Kenny Williams with Quentin hopefully fitting in somewhere in the lineup while providing whatever high OBP he could around the bigger bats in the White Sox lineup. Additionally, the cost for Quentin was not exactly as cheap as most paint it out to be...and his inability to pitch the 7th or 8th innings means that he wouldn't have been able to help the club where it would turn out to be needed most for the Tribe - the bullpen.

Before pulling on our waders and venturing into the mess that is the bullpen and seeing if help was available to fix that quagmire, let's just take a quick look back at how depth broke down for the starting pitching past Cleveland to re-establish that the rotation did not look to be a weakness or an area of need by any stretch of the imagination:

#6 starter - Laffey

#7 starter - Miller

#8 starter - Sowers

#9 starter - um...Slocum? Who the hell knows, because the season's lost when you're this deep.

So, the rotation's depth and quality looked to be a strength, with three competent youngsters slotting themselves in Buffalo for the first shot at replacing a cog in the parent club's rotation.

But, at first glance, the bullpen looked to be a strength as well...even if the existence of JoeBo had everyone's medicine cabinets full of TUMS. It was thought

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that if Brodzoski (The Close) blew up, that the likes of Betancourt, Perez, and Lewis (look again at [his 2007 numbers](#)) would be able to step up a rung in the ladder of progression for relievers and wait for the likes of the rest of the bullpen arms to slot themselves accordingly to lock down the middle of the game and get the ball to the burgeoning back end.

With all of that said, the Indians felt strongly enough about adding some depth to what was in place as they netted some insurance in the bullpen when they went out and signed Masa Kobayashi with the idea that he would join the cavalry that seemed certain to ride in when Borowski found his Little Big Horn and left the team. Thus going into the season, the Indians had four relievers that they felt could step into the void that was sure to be created by Borowski (in The Fists of Iron and Steel, Stomp Lewis, and the Pakistani lawyer from "The Usual Suspects") with the lesser lights of Jorge Julio (ugh) and Craig Breslow (we hardly knew ya) given the first opportunity to serve as the long man and match-up lefty in the bullpen.

The thought was that the players that broke camp with the team, plus Mastny and Mujica (who would get regular work in Buffalo) would be enough to make up for the certain implosion of JoeBo. Added into the mix was the fact that the Indians were toying with the idea of converting Atom Miller into a reliever and the depth seemed to be in place in case of a blow-up. Of course, multiple blow-ups occurred and the gum and chicken wire that was holding The Big Borowski's arm together went "SPROING" about the time that it became apparent that Betancourt and Lewis had fallen off the cliff, performance-wise.

But that subject's been covered ad nauseum (and trust me, it is nauseating) and I could stay on this soapbox for days. I won't, though, as what this piece is attempting to explore is whether the Indians' inactivity of the offseason had a major impact on the team's poor performance in 2008. And when every sentence that's written presupposes that Borowski was far from a given, isn't it fair to say that a bigger addition to the back end of the bullpen (bigger than Masa) was necessary as none of the other relievers had much experience closing games...stateside, at least?

Whether or not Borowski led the AL in saves in 2007 (and, remarkably he did...go look it up), there was an impending sense of when it would all go wrong for JoeBo. A sense that was strong enough that the Indians added Kobayashi BECAUSE he had experience closing games in Japan.

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If that sense was that strong, then, why wasn't a bigger piece added to the bullpen?

Certainly, they were out there on the Trade Market with [Jose Valverde \(who led the NL in saves\) being dealt to the Astros](#)

. The problem with the Valverde deal, of course, is that the Astros had to give up their set-up man in Chad Qualls...as well as parting with a utility man and a AAA starter who had a 3.45 ERA in the minors while averaging more than a K an inning.

Valverde did not come cheap...which brings us to the one that got away for the Tribe this offseason - Brad Lidge.

Brad Lidge was a dominant closer for the Astros for three years, but had fallen out of favor with the Astros and the Houston faithful, who felt that Lidge changed as a pitcher in the playoffs of 2005, unable to get past the bomb he gave up to Al Pujols in Game 5 of the NLCS. There was some fire to the smoke of that belief as Lidge's 2006 became a nightmare as his ERA doubled to 5.28, his WHIP rose from infinitesimal levels to 1.40 and he lost his closing duties to Dan Wheeler as the wheels looked to have come off.

He rebounded with a stronger 2007, seeing his effectiveness return somewhat, striking out 88 (to 30 walks) in 67 IP and limiting - but as Ed Wade took the reins as GM of the Astros, it looked like the change of scenery that many thought would benefit Lidge and get him out of the Pujols-induced funk was imminent.

As November began, Lidge (who was set to be a FA at the end of the year) [found his way out of the Lone Star State and en route to Philly](#)

. Heading to Houston in return was OF Michael Bourn, RHP Geoff Geary, and 3B prospect Michael Costanzo (who was later moved to Baltimore in the Miguel Tejada deal) as the Astros tried to turn the page from the Lidge era and the Phillies tried to fix their interminably poor bullpen.

To put the exchange in perspective, consider that Bourn, the centerpiece, was a 24-year-old CF who had served primarily as a 4th OF for the Phillies in 2007. His greatest commodity was (and is) his speed as he stole 18 bases despite only 119 AB over the course of 2007. Bourn had an EXTREME platoon split as the LH posted a .809 OPS vs. RHP and a .434 OPS vs. LHP in his (admittedly, very limited) time with the Phils. Through the minors, he had never posted great hitting numbers (his OPS this year in Houston, by the way, is .595 with 80 K to 28

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BB...but he does have 33 SB), but his speed always kept his stock rising.

In terms of the other players, Geary was a 30-year-old RH reliever who had found moderate success in the middle of the Phillies bullpen. Nothing special ([his closest comp as per Baseball Reference is the one, the only...Mike Koplove](#)), but filler for a Houston pen that would be losing Lidge and had already lost Chad Qualls. He's actually pitched fairly well this year, bouncing around between the 6th and 9th innings for the 'Stros, posting a 2.55 ERA and a 1.14 WHIP in Houston.

Costanzo was a 23-year-old 3B at the time of the deal, who had just completed a season in AA with a .858 OPS and 27 HR while playing in Reading. He was a 2nd round pick in the 2005 draft out of Coastal Carolina who was (as noted above) has found his way into the Orioles organization, where he figures to get a shot in Baltimore if Melvin Mora ever makes his way out of town (club option in 2010). Costanzo is a nice prospect, while far from a blue-chipper, who has now been traded twice in his young career which could mean any number of things.

Essentially, looking at what was given up for Lidge, it doesn't look like that much - whether you're looking at the haul then or now. Of course, it needs be mentioned that Wade was Philadelphia's GM until the end of the 2005 season, so each of the players joined the Phillies' organization while Wade was in control in the City of Brotherly Love. Thus, each of the players could have been coveted (for one reason or another) by Wade and targeted as pieces he would like to add to the Astros, in that he was intimately familiar with each.

If pressed for a comparable return from the Tribe, I suppose you'd be looking at players like Gutierrez and Francisco (though both had better overall numbers than Bourn), a middle reliever like...I don't even know...let's say Koplove, and a player like a Wes Hodges (though Costanzo is not nearly highly-as-thought of as Hodges is). Again, those comps would be at the high end and there's no way to really put a firm return on what the Astros would have wanted as Wade seems to operate on his own set of rules as a GM and the fact that he went back into the Phillies' organization to get these three players may mean that he was going for these players, regardless of who else may have been offered from anywhere else.

Of course, Lidge has rediscovered his old self in Philly, pitching well enough (28 saves, 2.25 ERA, 1.19 WHIP, 63 K, 23 BB in 48 IP) for the Phillies to keep him away from the open market at the end of the season, inking him to a 3-year,

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\$37.5M extension with a 2012 option a little under a month ago, essentially locking down the back end of their bullpen by taking advantage of the fact that they held exclusive negotiating rights with Lidge until the end of the year.

Could the Indians have taken advantage of Lidge being available this offseason and seen if he would have been able to get his groove back, the way that he has in Philadelphia?

If so, could they have parlayed his success and his presence on the roster to lock him down the way that the Phillies did, solidifying the back end of their bullpen?

Who knows?

In the land of shoulda, woulda, and coulda, we can debate what moves were made in MLB without the Indians getting involved this offseason until we're all blue in the face. But opportunities missed, real or perceived, are all that the Indians' Front Office has to look back on as the 2008 season slips further and further down the mountain. The strategy of allowing the reinforcements to emerge from within the organization, rather than augmenting the team from the outside, certainly has backfired as everything that could have gone wrong has done so before our very eyes.

Was there a "magic bullet" (or a "magic loogie", if you will, that stops "in mid-air, mind you"), that would have saved the Indians' 2008 season from becoming what it has?

Unfortunately, since no such bullet was fired we'll never know...