

## Time For The Indians To Gamble

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Sunday, November 09 2008 7:00 PM -

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The Hot Stove Season in Major League Baseball will officially kick off this coming Friday November 14th when teams are permitted to start talking to and signing free agents. In addition to that, the trade season will start to kick into full gear before it reaches its climax during the Winter Meetings December 8-11. In advance of this, Tony gives our readers his thoughts on how the Indians and Mark Shapiro should approach this crucial off-season for the team.



The Hot Stove Season in Major League Baseball will officially kick off this coming Friday November 14th when teams are permitted to start talking to and signing free agents. In addition to that, the trade season will start to kick into full gear before it reaches its climax during the Winter Meetings December 8-11.

In years past, the start of the Hot Stove Season has opened with little fanfare for the Indians, mostly because when it comes to making headlining offseason moves they have been nearly non-existent during the Shapiro Era. That has to change this offseason.

In years past the Indians often passed on some big name free agents because of their lofty price tag, although the per annum amount is something that has never really steered the Indians away from signing a player, it has always been the contract length. These have and always will be justifiable concerns when dealing with free agency considering what an albatross a bad four year-plus contract can be to a small-to-midmarket team (c.f. Hafner, Travis).

While the casual fan ultimately doesn't care about budgets or the bottom line, the prudent spending of the Indians in the past in free agency has been wise and for the most part the right course of action to take.

There usually is not much value in free agency as players are already in their prime but either on the downward slope to their career path or on the brink of it. Considering most players do not hit free agency until their seventh or eighth season has completed in the bigs, that means the typical free agent is typically about 30-31 years old or older.

Obviously there are some exceptions like Francisco Rodriguez and C.C. Sabathia this year, but that is because both got started in the bigs at the tender age of 19 or 20.

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You are operating on a slippery slope when dealing with free agents which is why the Indians plan of attack on free agency in recent years to pluck guys out of the bargain bin was and probably still is the best way to go about it. Very rarely does any major free agent signing live up to the contract, and so often the player ends up having very little impact on the team.

A lot of times, it is the mid-level signings which almost always seem to have a bigger impact.

When it comes to free agency this offseason, it is expected that the Indians will stay the course as far as how they operate in it. Nothing is expected to change. When perusing the list of available free agents this winter, there is not much there and the little good talent available will be exorbitantly overpaid for this offseason.

They'll kick the tires on some of the big ticket free agents, but in the end their focus will be about picking up a complimentary player or two to fill gaps on the team.

Unlike in years past, however, complimentary signings in free agency should not really be needed at all because the Indians have young players at nearly every position except third base that can be relied on just as much or even more than any bargain bin free agent they may sign.

The only change needed in their free agency philosophy is to avoid splurging on the David Dellucci, Trot Nixon, and Roberto Hernandez's of the world, and instead go with the young kids that they have stockpiled in the system who are ready to contribute at nearly every position or role.

There are some places where a bargain bin free agent may make sense, like going after a Trevor Hoffman or Joe Crede on short one year deals to fill a gap, but outside of that the change mentioned above that *has* to happen is not in how they operate in free agency, but in how they operate in the trade market.

While I am mostly on board with the Indians free agency philosophy over the past few years - the philosophy itself mind you and not necessarily who was signed - I have never really been a big fan of the way they have approached trades. They may be quite the penny pinchers in free agency, but when it comes to trading players from their farm system for major league talent in return they often make Scrooge look like Santa Claus.

One of Shapiro's best strengths he has put on display many times since he took over the Indians GM job in November 2001 has been his ability to acquire minor league talent. From Milton Bradley (one of his first official deals), to the Colon Trade which netted Grady Sizemore, Cliff Lee and Brandon Phillips, to Asdrubal Cabrera, to Carlos Santana and so on, Shapiro has shown an ability to often get very good return when trading major league talent for minor league talent.

Unfortunately, Shapiro's history of trading major league players for major league players or minor league players for major league players has been poor at best. In fact, it has almost been non-existent because they often have overvalued their own young players and prospects.

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The only two times the Indians have really traded a top prospect was the Max Ramirez for Kenny Lofton trade in July 2007 and the Kevin Kouzmanoff for Josh Barfield trade in November 2006.

This has to change this offseason.

"[They] virtually stood pat on what they had [last year] even though they had numerous opportunities to deal some young talent," a source close to another major league team told me recently. "They just wouldn't budge on anything, which I know was frustrating to several clubs. Then they underachieve big time, there's no accountability and suddenly they have to deal their No. 1 for whatever they can get.

It just doesn't seem to make a lot of sense.

They had built a long-term sustainability system and now it's just kind of sputtering along without any sense that someone would be held responsible."

This is not meant to bash Shapiro and the Indians in any way whatsoever. Anyone who has paid attention to what I have written on blogs, message boards, and in articles the past few years know that I am very much a fan of Shapiro and the Indians organizational philosophy.

That said, the two things that I have been a staunch opponent against over the years has been how the Indians always seem to side with veterans over giving some of the young kids a shot when they deserve it and also not better using that young talent in trades to fill a need on the big league club.

I've wrote in the past that [Shapiro needs to believe his prospects](#) because so often it seems they pass on giving these players a shot and instead go out and sign a washed up veteran.

But the other complaint has been our inability to capitalize on our young talent pipeline.

The Indians for the most part have been a Top 10-15 farm system since they unloaded all their star players in 2002 and rebuilt the farm system that was in shambles at the time.

Many of the players in the Indians lauded system have since become stars at the major league level, while some other players have crashed and burned or stalled somewhere along the way of navigating through the asteroid field that is the minor leagues.

Through it all, the Indians have rarely used some of that young talent to fill needs at the major league level. They really did not do it at the trade deadline in 2005, the 2005 offseason, the 2007 trade deadline, and in the 2007 offseason, all years they were serious contenders or expected to contend the following year. They always were involved in trade discussions, but never could pull the trigger for various reasons.

For the first time since Shapiro took over as GM, the farm system is as balanced as it has ever been as there are some good pitching and hitting prospects up and down the organization at

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just about every level. In year's past they were overloaded with pitching or hitting, but never both at the same time. In addition, all the top talent has always been either at the upper level of the system like in 2003, or most of it was in the lower level like this past season. Going into next year, the Indians minor league system is balanced with good impact players in both the hitting and pitching department, and they will be found everywhere from Triple-A to the rookie-level Arizona League team next season. With this depth, the Indians can afford to gamble and even overpay with prospects to fill a need on the big league club.

Right now, the Indians have a current window of opportunity of two years with the roster they have as Cliff Lee, Victor Martinez, Rafael Betancourt, and Jake Westbrook will all be free agents after the 2010 season. Also, Jhonny Peralta will be in his final season in 2011, so the clock is ticking with this current crop of Indians. What that means is that while it is imperative that the Indians mix in some new, young blood from the minor leagues over the course of the 2009 and 2010 seasons, the Indians also need to make a couple of key moves to help in the short run as they battle to make the playoffs these next two seasons.

The Indians can't afford to go toe-to-toe with the big spenders in free agency, but when it comes to prospect wealth the Indians are on equal footing or richer than just about every team in baseball. The time is now to use some of that prospect wealth as currency in a deal to fill their needs.

Gambling in free agency is too risky for a team like the Indians, but gambling in the trade market is where the Indians make a big score. And win big.

*Check back here on Friday this week for a special article on the Indians Chuck Lofgren. Lofgren had a tough 2008 season on and off the field, and goes into full detail on where he has been and where he is going.*

*Photo courtesy of the Associated Press*