

Idling Into Cleveland

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

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After the Indians filled their holes in the bullpen and in the infield (for the short and long term) with a sizzle, it seems that the off-season will end with a bit of a fizzle as the Tribe has signed Carl Pavano to the 2009 rotation mix on a one-year, incentive-laden deal that guarantees Pavano \$1.5M with \$5.3M additionally available if certain incentives are reached, ostensibly ending the Indians' off-season. Paulie chimes in with his thoughts on the signing and tells us what it means.



After the Indians filled their holes in the bullpen and in the infield (for the short and long term) with a sizzle, it seems that the off-season will end with a bit of a fizzle as the Tribe has signed Carl Pavano to the 2009 rotation mix on a one-year, incentive-laden deal that guarantees Pavano \$1.5M with \$5.3M additionally available if certain incentives are reached, ostensibly ending the Indians' off-season. The rationale behind the Pavano deal is that adding him to the rotation gives them some depth in the rotation, allowing Pavano to be a candidate to fill one of the three spots in the rotation behind Lee and Carmona. Since a number of the candidates for those 3 spots still have options (notably Laffey, Sowers, Huff, and Lewis), it would stand to reason that Pavano (who was dubbed ["American Idle"](#)

by the brutal New York tabloids), even if remotely healthy or effective, will given a spot out of Spring Training to sit in the #3 or #4 hole in the rotation.

A low risk signing with potential to pull that "Kevin Millwood Miracle" of 2005 out of the hat again, right?

I guess, but this move doesn't really do much for me as Pavano has really only had two good years (OK, one very good and one decent) in his 11 MLB seasons.

While both of those years were his final two in Florida (during which he compiled a cumulative line of 3.61 ERA, 1.21 WHIP, 5.78 K/9, 2.08 BB/9, 2.76 K/BB, which is certainly an impressive performance), that was in 2003 and 2004. He's only pitched 145 2/3 innings since then over the last 4 years, and has pitched more than 140 innings only twice (those two final years in Florida) in his 11-year career.

When healthy, Pavano's a good middle-of-the-rotation starter...except that he hasn't been healthy in four full seasons now. I suppose if Pavano somehow finds a way to stay healthy, he's another arm to throw into the mix, but [his performance \(when allegedly healthy\) in 2008](#)

doesn't exactly scream that he's turned a corner as a pitcher or that he'll re-discover his 2004 form. He's never been a big strikeout pitcher or had dominant stuff, so he's a decent middle-of-the rotation option...if healthy (which, if I have failed to mention it, is no certainty).

It's true that the Indians are buying low on him, like Millwood, and giving him the opportunity to pitch his way into a bigger contract and back into legitimacy, right?

Maybe, but prior to Millwood signing his reclamation contract with the Indians (for \$7M guaranteed, if you'll remember), he had put up 200+ innings 4 out of his 7 full years in MLB (the lowest inning total being 121) and had put up inordinately better numbers year after year than Pavano, who seems to still be living off the 2004 (which looks to be the aberration when looking at [Pavano's body of work](#)) that netted him his payday in the Bronx.

Maybe Pavano, out of the bright lights of the big city, can re-capture some semblance of the career that derailed in 2004. I'm not that optimistic that he can, given his varied and illustrious injury history and the fact that his career and reputation have been built on one admittedly fantastic season. [Shapiro's saying all of the right things about his health and his hunger](#)

, but the Indians are protected against him being injured or being ineffective enough to be cut loose as the [incentives in the contract](#)

are pretty straightforward as

"Pavano gets \$100,000 each for reaching 18, 20 and 22 starts, \$200,000 each for reaching 24, 26 and 28 starts, \$250,000 for 30 starts, \$300,000 for 32 starts, \$350,000 each for 33 and 34 starts and \$400,000 for 35 starts. He gets \$100,000 each for reaching 130, 140 and 150 innings pitched, \$150,000 each for

160 and 170 innings, \$200,000 for 180, \$250,000 for 190, \$250,000 for 200, \$300,000 for 215, \$400,000 for 225 and \$500,000 for 235."

He's had 24 starts twice in his 11-year career and has reached 140 innings only twice, so he's going to have to come ROARING back into shape for most of those incentives to kick in. Being very optimistic, let's say he has 23 starts and 130 IP - his salary bumps from \$1.5M guaranteed goes to \$1.9M guaranteed.

Overall, the signing itself and adding Pavano doesn't do much for me other than to know that there's another arm to add to the rotation mix to perhaps eat some innings until Jake Westbrook returns from injury (hopefully) in the middle of the season. Realistically, a healthy Pavano, is better than simply giving innings to Jeremy Sowers and it adds the depth that the Indians love, where they can go 7 or 8 starters deep, with the top of the AAA rotation serving as insurance against injury or ineffectiveness. It certainly sets up an interesting battle for the 5th spot in the rotation (remember, Reyes is out of options) as Laffey, Sowers, Huff, Zach Jackson (who does have an option left) and Scott Lewis all fight NOT to go to Columbus.

But (while I never wanted to remember or invoke this name ever again) let's all say right now that the "Lesson of Jason Johnson" should be in full effect with Pavano. That is, if Pavano is not healthy, or is obviously ineffective, while the talented youngsters that now figure to start the season in AAA (notably, Dave Huff) prove that they're further along than AAA (and Huff may have already proved that in his 16 starts in Buffalo last year), he should be on an awfully short leash and that this low-risk contract should be one that the Indians are not afraid to eat early and admit a mistake before it's...I don't know [mid-June or so](#) .

More interesting to me than simply adding Pavano is what the signing means in the long-term as it's likely that this is the last move that the Indians make this off-season as they've now added to their bullpen, their infield, and their rotation. Unless Pavano was added to create more depth to allow one of the young LHP to be part of a package for a surer thing in the rotation, this looks to be the 2009 Indians, which brings some things to light.

First off, for the first time in what seems like a long time, the rotation figures to go into Spring Training with a lot of "if's" around each of the principals that figure to make up the rotation:

What if Cliff Lee shows that 2008 IS NOT who he is as a pitcher?

What if Fausto Carmona shows that 2008 IS who he is as a pitcher?

What if Carl Pavano can't stay healthy or has had injuries take their toll on his effectiveness?

What if the injuries that shut down Anthony Reyes and Aaron Laffey rear their ugly head again in 2009?

What if the [Aaron Laffey we saw when he was promoted](#) is nothing more than a Sowersesque mirage?

What if Jeremy Sowers' career descent cannot find a bottom?

What if the young pitchers like Huff and Lewis fail to take that next step?

For an organization that has been designed to be built on strong starting pitching, that's a lot of variables at play to fill out the top 5 spots in the rotation. Perhaps we've been spoiled by knowing who would be getting the majority of the starts during the season when the team got to Spring Training as far back as 2005, but the middle-to-back of the rotation still looks to be built on sand to me, Pavano or no Pavano.

Going further than that, the Pavano signing removes, for the most part, the thought of trading Kelly Shoppach for a middle-of-the-rotation starter as Pavano is designed to fill that need. What that means to me is that concerns about the health of Hafner and Martinez and the long-term production of Garko are significant enough that the Indians don't want to part with their insurance policy against another lost or poor year by any of them. Because, on the surface, everyday AB don't look to be there for Shoppach (despite him earning them in 2008) as the Indians' oft-stated stance is that Victor is the catcher, which would mean that Garko remains the de facto 1B. If Hafner is supposed to be healthy for 2009, how does this not suddenly look like a part-time position for Shoppach or maybe some sort of platoon with Garko, when Shoppach far outperformed Garko in 2008?

The Indians claim that they can find regular AB for all four players at three positions, but I'm just not seeing how that's going to happen with one of these

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players being out of the lineup every game. How they're going to balance it out remains to be seen (if, in fact, no more moves are coming) and it will be interesting to see how Shoppach performs in 2009, whether this off-season will come to represent his peak value or if 2008 was simply an appetizer for the main course that Show Pack has in store in 2009.

As an aside, this essentially means is that I can stop writing the piece that I was working on suggesting why Ricky Nolasco (FLA), Wandy Rodriguez (HOU), and Mike Pelfrey (NYM) would all be attractive trade candidates for the Indians to target in that their team would be in need of a catcher and each of them represented tangible upgrades (a few years away from FA) over the in-house back-end-of-the-rotation candidates.

Regardless, the Pavano signing looks to be it this off-season...so without further ado ladies and gentleman, YOUR 2009 Cleveland Indians!