

## Integration Of New Talent Just Another Part Of The Game

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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Over the course of the past few seasons, Indians GM Mark Shapiro has made several trades where he flipped a big league player and received minor league prospects in return. But after the Indians acquire these new young hopefuls, how do the Indians go about integrating them into the system and getting them on board with their philosophies? Tony sat down with Indians Director of Player Development Ross Atkins to find out.



Over the course of the past few seasons, Indians GM Mark Shapiro has made several trades where he flipped a big league player and received minor league prospects in return. But after the Indians acquire these new young hopefuls, how do the Indians go about integrating them into the system and getting them on board with their philosophies?

It all starts before the trade actually takes place as Shapiro includes his player development staff in the process. Whether a trade involves players from within the organization who are being considered as trade currency, or acquiring young talent from another team, Director of Player Development Ross Atkins and his staff are involved every step of the way. This not only ensures that Shapiro is getting all the information he needs on the young players he is considering acquiring or dealing, but also it ensures that there are no surprises for Atkins and his staff.

So when the Indians went out last summer and traded C.C. Sabathia to the Milwaukee Brewers for outfielder Matt LaPorta, left-hander Zach Jackson, right-hander Rob Bryson, and eventually outfielder Michael Brantley (the player to be named later in the deal), the Indians player development staff was ready and knew what they were getting well in advance. The same holds true for the other big trade made later in the summer that sent Casey Blake to the Los Angeles

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Dodgers for catcher Carlos Santana and right-hander Jon Meloan.

Once those trades were made official, the Indians immediately reached out to the new players and welcomed them to the organization. The general protocol in regard to who contacts a player acquired in a trade is that if it is a major league player Shapiro will be the first to contact them, and if it is a minor league player Atkins will contact them first.

"We all really reach out to them," Atkins said in a phone interview from Goodyear, Arizona. "From a protocol standpoint and how it is written down, if it's a guy who is an established major league player Mark contacts them, and if it is a minor league player it is me. But Mark called Matt LaPorta and Michael Brantley as well to welcome them to the organization, and I think in every case we all reach out to each individual on some level."

Once Indians personnel have contacted a player and welcomed him to the organization, the real work starts of incorporating them into the system since everything is foreign to them, be it the facilities, coaches, staff, teammates, and so on. For a player such as LaPorta who was sent to Akron after being acquired, or Santana who will be in Akron this year, it can be a whirlwind of an experience for them. So to better help acquaint the player with the organization, the Indians have a very defined orientation process.

One of the more commonly known orientation programs is the Winter Development Program that the Indians host for two to three weeks every January. This program is designed primarily for upper level players and any recent acquisitions, and the goal is to acclimate them to Cleveland and the Major League environment, as well as the Major League staff and the Indians' philosophies. For new players, Cleveland intensifies that effort and hosts some additional sessions to further educate them on the club's priorities and expectations.

"It depends on the time of the year, but there is always some type of orientation setup," Atkins said. "The biggest thing about the acquisition and transition process is their comfort level and acquainting them with our organization philosophies. So after we have gathered all of the information and a short term and long term plan has been put together, then we call that individual or sit down with them and walk them through what our thoughts are to see how they feel about it and get feedback from them, and then we move forward with a plan. A lot of the getting to know each other takes care of itself because we play everyday, but this is no different for any player in this organization whether we acquire them by trade or the draft."

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In some cases, depending on the player acquired, Atkins will go right out to the affiliate the player is assigned to and introduce himself face-to-face and see him play right away. Otherwise, he will make the initial contact by phone and then meet with the player on a trip to the affiliate at a later date.

"It always depends and is a case by case scenario," said Atkins. "Do I always on every trade go out to immediately meet that player? It depends. I will say that I would not let much time pass without introducing myself formally to any member of this organization, no matter how we acquired them."

The minor league coordinators are some of the most crucial people to get involved with a new acquisition right away. The Indians have several coordinators who focus on defined areas of instruction, and will travel to each affiliate and work with the managers and coaches to help assist the further development of every player.

"Yes, we do the same things with each one of our coordinators," Atkins confirmed. "For example, in the case of Michael Brantley I made sure that our Field Coordinator Dave Hudgens, Hitting Coordinator Bruce Fields, and Outfield/Base Running Coordinator Gary Thurman all met him. Brantley was an off-season acquisition, we were all here [in Arizona] in Instructional League, he was already here in Arizona in the Arizona Fall League, so we drove him over and kept him here and he basically had a one-day orientation for us to get to know him and him to get to know us as individuals and as an organization. He actually spent a week with us just working out and to get comfortable and get to know some of the other players."

Cognizant that any player coming into the organization (whether by trade or the draft) will experience an adjustment period, the Indians have a policy in place that freezes training changes for 30 days. This allows the player to get comfortable in their new surroundings before being asked to make changes to their swing, pitching mechanics, or the way they field the ball.

"The 30-day policy is mostly about making sure that we allow guys who are going through a transition to do just that," Atkins said. "And that is to get as comfortable as possible without asking them to change their swing [or pitching mechanics] right away. There is enough in the transition from an amateur to a pro, or in a trade, that we try to minimize the adjustments we are asking them to make initially."

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In addition to orienting the player to the organization, the other part of the integration process is fitting the player into the system. When new players are acquired in the off-season, it often means current players in the system are let go or shuffled down the organization's priority chart. It can also make for a complex situation when a player is acquired mid-season, as not only does Cleveland have to find the appropriate affiliate for the new player, but a player already at that affiliate has to be asked to change roles or in some cases moved out completely.

"Our first goal is to always isolate individuals and think about what is best for them, and depending on their value to the organization they may take precedence over another player," Atkins said. "Secondly we think about organizational depth, and then lastly we think about how they affect our minor league affiliate's team. Those are the three components that are factored."

Whether the Indians make a move in the off-season or during the season they always have a plan in place to integrate their new young talent into the fold and effectively introduce them to the organization. This is one of the many nuances of the player development and acquisition process that is often not talked about, but so vital to the long term success of the organization and player to ensure they both get off on the right foot.