

Four Angry Men

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Thursday, May 07 2009 7:00 PM -

Who would have thought we'd be where we are with the bullpen here in the first week of May? It's been a total disaster, and has sent the brass of the team into full panic mode as to how to fix it. Paul's latest piece is an excellent one. In it, he dramatizes what the conversation may have been like between the highest levels of the Indians brass (Mark Shapiro, John Mirabelli, Chris Antonetti, and Ross Atkins) as to how to correct the bullpen mess.



The conversation you're about to read is fictional, the names have not been changed, nor has the subject matter, but the accuracy of who said what and when has been changed to protect the innocent:

The lights go up on a conference room with four men in Polo Shirts and Khakis sitting around it. There is a quiet desperation visible on all of the men's faces and paper is strewn throughout the table at which they sit.

The man at the head of the table crosses his arms and speaks first:

Mark Shapiro - All right folks, we're at DEFCON 2 here with this bullpen and we're one more blown lead away from a full-out DEFCON 3. I don't care if May

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just started or how bad this division is, something has to be done and the answer isn't obvious to me as it feels like all of these contingency plans that we thought to be in place when we left Goodyear aren't even viable. We're about as low as we can go, people and anything you've got...anything you've even entertained as a possibility needs to come out of your mouth right now because, frankly, I'm out of ideas. So, let's go around the table and do a little brainstorming as to how we might be able to fix this

John Mirabelli - Perez and Lewis are a mess, get them out of here...get them down to AAA and all up Rundles and Meloan in their place. There's your start.

Ross Atkins - You want a mess? Meloan has been a mess, particularly recently. If you want to promote Meloan, now is not the time to do it. Maybe at some point down the line and I know that he could probably go out there and pitch better than some of these relievers, but we need to get Meloan right in Columbus so when he comes up he's contributing in a meaningful role and not riding the "Columbus Shuttle".

Shapiro - You know, at some point, we have to stop coddling these guys and just throw some things against the wall to see what sticks, but point taken on Meloan.

So right now we're on replacing Rafael Perez with Rich Rundles?

Chris Antonetti - You know, Rundles hasn't been that great in Columbus and I feel like we have all these other arms in Columbus that have had some semblance of MLB success; maybe we should cycle through those first seeing as how we're not married to any of them for the long term.

Shapiro - So, start seeing if we have anything worthwhile among these veterans that we're not that high on before we get into the younger guys that we're not that high on? I suppose it couldn't hurt if we give these veterans two weeks or so to

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show us something with no strings attached to them...who were you thinking about?

Antonetti - I don't know, pick a name out of those retreads to see if we can catch lightning in a bottle...how about Herges?

Shapiro - Herges, huh? Why not, we can pull Salas off the 40-man and get him up here...any dissenters?

(Silence)

Shapiro - OK, so Perez down, Herges up...but, COME ON people, Matt Herges isn't going to save this bullpen. How about some out-of-the-box thinking here?

Sheldon Ocker (poking his head in from the hallway) - What about seeing if Choo can pitch, wasn't he a pitcher back in South Korea?

Shapiro (whirling around to the door) - SHELDON! How did you get in here? Get out of here!

(Sheldon Ocker quietly moves toward the door, furiously writing in his notebook)

Shapiro - How did he get in here? Is he gone? Um...anyone think there's anything to that idea?

All - NO!

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Shapiro - OK, OK, just thought I'd give that one a chance...I guess it's kind of telling when that makes sense to me at some level. Sseriously people, we're taking on water and promoting Matt Herges isn't going to prevent this season from sinking.

Atkins - Here's a crazy idea...what if we moved a starter to the bullpen? Laffey's worked out of the bullpen before in the minors and if the issue we're having with him is aggressiveness and walks, maybe coming out of the pen will get him back to that aggressiveness. Lord knows even if it doesn't that he'd be more effective than the litany of relievers we're seeing now.

Antonetti - Wait...you're talking about taking a guy who's probably been the second or third most consistent starter for us on a rotation still full of question marks and putting him in the bullpen? The guy whose promotion to the rotation seemed to settle the whole mess with the starters a couple of weeks ago, and move him to the bullpen to become what...the long reliever?

Atkins - No, what I'm saying is that the bullpen options in Columbus stink right now and Akron isn't much better, while the rotation in Columbus has a couple of guys that are pitching well. If starting depth is what we have right now and Laffey's shown that he can work out of the bullpen in the past, why not call up a guy like Huff or Sowers to get into the rotation, move Laffey into the bullpen to try to settle it, and see what happens.

Antonetti - This is lunacy! Here's a question - Laffey going six effective innings every five games or going two effective innings every three games, which is more valuable to you?

Atkins - At this point, even when Laffey goes those six innings, the victory isn't guaranteed because, in case you forgot, **NOBODY IN THE BULLPEN CAN GET ANYONE OUT!**

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Which is more valuable in a vacuum? The six effective innings every five games.

Which is more valuable to this team right now? The two effective innings every three games.

Antonetti - I can't believe I'm hearing this...after all those years that we kept ALL of these guys as starters because starters are infinitely more valuable than relievers, we're talking about taking a middle-of-the-rotation starter, who just turned 24 two weeks ago, and moving him to the bullpen at the BEGINNING OF MAY...for what? To give us one or two innings every other day or every third game...is it really that bad?

Shapiro - Yeah, it's that bad and...yeah, that's exactly what we are looking for. If you have a better idea, throw it out there as long as it puts a pitcher as effective as Laffey into this bullpen mix.

Antonetti - But we're talking about a drop-off from Laffey to Sowers in the rotation being the net result of a couple of innings out of the bullpen...isn't that a big enough dip in expected production from the rotation to prevent us from making this move?

Atkins - Sowers has a 2.25 ERA in Columbus right now with a WHIP of 1.17 and he's struck out 22 with only 5 walks in 24 1/3 innings pitched...if not now, when with him?

Antonetti - Spare me the AAA success, we've heard it before with Sowers...“he's really turned the corner, he's showing improvements in AAA, his velocity is creeping up, he's ready to re-capture that 2006 success...blah, blah, blah”. Then he comes up here and shows why we see his ceiling as that of a 5th starter...which is to say, we can't see why we called him up in the

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first place. Are we forgetting that Sowers' ERA over the last two years in MLB is 5.88 with a WHIP of 1.51, this after he thrived in AAA? Remember last year, when he posted a 2.08 ERA in Buffalo with a WHIP of 1.20 and his best K rate since 2005, then came up to Cleveland and couldn't do anything right?

This...THIS is the best idea, without getting into the roller-coaster ride we're putting Laffey through?

Shapiro - Look, at some point we're going to have to find out if Sowers can ever get back to that 2006 success in the Bigs and we can give him a shot for four or five starts. If he falls on his face, that's it - we move onto Huff or have Scotty Lewis at the ready to come in and take his spot. It's a month long audition for Sowers to show if he's going to stick in this organization.

Antonetti - Fine...whatever, I'll give you that we need to find out what we've got in him at some point this year and now, I guess, is as good of a time as any. But what about what this does to Laffey?

Mirabelli - It's starting depth we have and relievers we need.

Shapiro - Exactly, and this is as good an idea as any that we have right now.

Antonetti - But what about Laffey? First we make him work his way into the rotation after having him not break camp with the team, he

pitches well, and THIS is his reward. How do you sell that if I'm not even buying it?

Shapiro - I think that we just have to frame it that this is where we need him now and this by no means is a permanent move, but that his most useful role on this team right now would be as a reliever. Maybe he goes out there and becomes a legitimate set-up guy or late-inning option....at this point, anything's possible.

Antonetti - Wait, are you saying that he's going to the bullpen for good this year?

What does that mean and are we endangering his long-term health by bouncing him around like this?

Shapiro - I'm not saying anything other than we have NO idea what to do and that he could be in the bullpen for the rest of the year as easily as he could be back in the rotation by the All-Star Break. The bottom line is that the season is slipping away because of the bullpen and we need to fix this bullpen RIGHT NOW with whatever means that we use.

Is Laffey the answer...who knows? But at least it's an arm that we can use and have some confidence in during the late innings.

Mirabelli - OK, so if Sowers is coming up, who goes out?

Lewis...Masa?

Atkins - At this point, I guess it's a question of which is the least of all of the evils out there in the bullpen...Lewis is a mess, Masa hasn't been used in a high-leverage situation in weeks, Chulk is walking guys left and right. Do I need to continue?

Antonetti - Here's a salient question in response to that question - if Sowers is coming up and he, Reyes, and Pavano are capable of throwing up a two-inning, seven-run disaster seemingly at any time, who's the long man to eat innings? It's not Laffey, is it?

Shapiro - No, if we're moving Laffey to the pen, it's not to eat innings. I suppose the real question is, if the game is ostensibly lost by the 3rd

inning, who do we care LEAST about in the long-term in terms of just throwing them out there on an island and saying, "you're going 3 innings...good luck."

All (in unison) - Kobayashi.

Shapiro - Right...at this point with Kobayashi, let's just use up all the bullets in that arm until somebody from the minors forces himself into the picture or hope that Perez can right himself and add to the depth of what we hope can become some form of a

bullpen.

Atkins - "Bullets in that arm"...Kobayashi? Don't you mean "blanks"?

Shapiro (stifling a laugh) - Sure, but we could probably get Chulk through waivers and Lewis at least has a track record of success to the point that he may be able to still become a viable option. Masa has no usefulness on this team, so let's get some innings from him in mop-up duty. Let's at least get something for our money.

Antonetti - You really think we can get Chulk through waivers?

Shapiro - I think so...who wants to guarantee Vinnie Chulk a spot in their bullpen right now? And even if somebody does, will there legitimately be any tears in this room for that?

Mirabelli - He has been one of the more effective relievers on this team?

Shapiro - "More effective"? Sure, but look what he's being compared to right now...this bullpen needs an overhaul and if there's a chalk outline around Vinnie Chulk in the process, so be it.

Atkins - Wait...did you just say, "Chulk outline"?

(Hysterical Laughter)

Shapiro (wiping his eye) - Wooo...thanks, I needed that laugh.

So, we're going with Herges for Perez and Sowers for Chulk with Laffey going to the bullpen. I'll talk to the scouts to see if Luis Vizcaino is worth a look.

Everyone convinced that the bullpen is now saved?

Atkins - Um...no.

Mirabelli (still laughing from the "Chulk" joke) -
What was the question?

Antonetti - Harrumph...

Shapiro - Come on, people...let's get behind this.

A new day is dawning, the bullpen will be saved, we're being pro-active, no stone unturned, we're being creative...

Oh hell, who am I trying to kid? I guess the fingers are crossed at this point unless someone else has any other ideas to throw out on the table.

Ocker (poking his head in from the hallway) - Has anyone thought of Luis Isaac?

All - GET HIM OUT OF HERE!

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The lights dim and...scene.