

Poor Drafts A Big Reason For Tribe's Failure

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Wednesday, June 24 2009 7:00 PM -

Back in 2002 when Indians Owner Larry Dolan and General Manager Mark Shapiro implemented "The Plan", the idea was to build from within with a focus on pitching that would "come in waves". Seven years later those waves have been reduced to barely a ripple in what has been a sea of disappointment that has been "The Plan". Many people have pointed the finger at Wedge and Shapiro and blamed them for the failures this season, but the seeds for the struggles this organization is going through were planted several years back in John Mirabelli's first four drafts as Scouting Director.



Programming note: Indians first round pick RHP Alex White is scheduled to appear on Paul Cousineau and Tony's radio show "[Smoke Signals](#)" tonight. The show is on from 9:30-10:30 PM EST, and can be heard live at the link provided or the show can be downloaded later. The show is also available on iTunes under "The Cleveland Fan".

Back in 2002 when Indians Owner Larry Dolan and General Manager Mark Shapiro implemented "The Plan", the idea was to build from within with a focus on pitching that would "come in waves".

Seven years later those waves have been reduced to barely a ripple in what has been a sea of disappointment that has been "The Plan". The fact that the Indians have very little on the current pitching staff and virtually nothing available to help at Triple-A or even Double-A is pretty damning in itself, and is a big reason why the 2009 season is circling the drain and the immediate future may be as well.

We are about seven years to the day since "The Plan" was put into

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action following the Bartolo Colon trade, and the pitching in the system is arguably worse now than it was when they started it with that trade. Yes, there have been some unfortunate injuries along the way (Adam Miller), unexpected falls (Fausto Carmona), and poor decision making (Jeremy Guthrie). But, the bottom line is the results, and those results show very little right now at the big league level to stabilize this pitching staff not only in the starting rotation but the bullpen as well. And there is very little at the Double-A and Triple-A level that can impact this team. Where are all the arms?

The one guy who has been a stabilizing force on the staff the last two years has been Cliff Lee, a guy they got from another organization and came into the system pretty much big league ready with little development needed to finish him off. David Huff is the lone bright spot from their system, though he is still young and working his way into being more comfortable and consistent as a big league pitcher. He looks like a keeper and mainstay in the middle of the Indians rotation for years to come, but what about the rest of the staff?

Young guys like Carmona, Rafael Perez, and Jensen Lewis who were counted on to be integral pieces to this pitching staff have fallen hard. It's almost like someone came along and just ripped the magic carpet they were riding on right out from under them. That's how hard and far they have fallen so fast.

What once was considered good depth in the starting pitching department with Scott Lewis, Aaron Laffey, Jeremy Sowers, and Zach Jackson has been reduced to nothing because of injuries and poor performance.

The same is true of the relief corps. At the end of last season they had what seemed to be some good depth with right-handers Adam Miller, Jeff Stevens, and John Meloan, but an injury (Miller), trade (Stevens), and disappearance (Meloan) have left the Indians with no impact bullpen arms to call upon from the minors this season.

Bottom line, the pitching staff has been largely ineffective and inconsistent all season, sometimes of Biblical proportions. Take your pick. One week it is the starting rotation that blows up, and the next it is the bullpen which implodes and finds new ways to make us all cry (die) of laughter because we just can't take it anymore.

So where does the blame for this mess lie? The easy target of course is GM Mark

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Shapiro, but two of his underlings Scouting Director John Mirabelli and Farm Director Ross Atkins surely are in the discussion.

Atkins has only been on the job for three years now, and he wasn't given much to work with when he took the farm duties prior to the start of the 2007 season considering what Mirabelli and former Farm Director John Farrell left him. Since taking over, the Indians system has improved a lot, some because of a better plan and system in place, but a lot because under Atkins' reign the drafts have been much better. So, he gets a pass, and from this corner he and his staff have done a good job considering what they have had to work with when he came in as well as the directives set down from Shapiro.

Shapiro gets some blame here as he is the top man, and the guy where ultimately the final decision lies. Obviously he can't make every decision day in and day out in the organization. Whether it be player procurement, evaluating his major league team and coaches, scouting for talent at the big league and minor league level, scouting for talent in the draft and internationally, or developing players in their farm system, he simple can't do it all.

This is why a GM has people run these other areas of the organization, and why he has to trust the people he has empowered to make those decisions as a scouting director, farm director, assistant GM, and so on. But, since he is the man responsible for putting those people in the position to make those decisions which affect the organization negatively or positively, in the end the blame does fall at his feet.

Shapiro is also the one who continues to go out and acquire has-been castoff reliever seemingly day after day after day. It's to the point of an addiction. He loads up on them in the offseason, picks a few off the scrap heap at the end of spring training, and continues to sign more and add more throughout the season. It never ends.

It's a vicious cycle he has gotten himself in, and mostly because of the success that was Bob Howry back when we signed him going into the 2004 season, which was five years ago now. But for every Bob Howry, there have been what seems a million Jose Jimenez's or Luis Vizcaino's or Danny Graves' or Juan Rincon's or ... you get the picture. And this doesn't count the litany of guys signed to populate the Triple-A roster instead of giving some of their internal arms a chance at that level or above.

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But simply blaming Shapiro for everything is not fair either. While I am nitpicking his obsession with retread relievers, he has done more good than bad as a GM for this organization. Making some excellent trades acquiring talent for soon-to-be free agents has really been his hallmark as a GM. Save for the Robbie Alomar trade, he has really done a good job of hitting at a high rate on the players he has received in return for veterans he has traded away.

Shapiro has one of the hardest jobs in pro sports of maintaining and essentially operating a pro franchise that operates under an inefficient system where you have a handful of big spenders who can spend three to four times as much on player salaries. Those teams don't have to worry so much about their scouting and player development because they can throw money at their problems and bring in stars every year. The Indians can't do that, as those stars must come from within.

And they haven't done that of late, and this is why Scouting Director John Mirabelli carries a heaping amount of the blame for the Indians current problems.

The "Era of Champions" during the Indians great run from 1994-2001 was one of the best periods in Indians history. But, for as much fun as it was back then, how exciting it was with the opening of Jacobs Field, and the 455 consecutive sellouts, none of that ever happens unless they have a plan in place to accrue talent and develop it.

Yes, the Indians got a big boost with some key trades that landed them minor leaguers at the time like Carlos Baerga, Sandy Alomar Jr., and Kenny Lofton, as well as the pickup of gold glover Omar Vizquel. But, without stars being developed in-house like Albert Belle, Manny Ramirez, Charles Nagy and Jim Thome, this organization may never have climbed out of the gutter it was in from the 60s through the 80s.

All star caliber players in their prime have never and will never come to Cleveland. Roberto Alomar was the lone exception because he took less money to come here and win and play with his brother. They must be found and developed internally. That's what they did with Belle, Ramirez, Nagy and Thome, and with other players taken in the draft during the 90s like Richie Sexson, Brian Giles, Sean Casey, CC Sabathia and others. Sure, they had their fair share of misses and near the end of the 90s fell into the trap of dealing away young talent for the hopes of more short-term success, but ultimately they were able to bring stars into

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the organization through the draft.

Under Mirabelli's first four years as the man in charge of the draft from 2000-2003, he was given an unheard of 23 picks in the first three rounds combined over those four years. 12 first round picks, six second round picks, and five third round picks. I mean, they on average had three first round picks a year from 2000-2003!

Here is a quick rundown of who was chosen in the first three rounds from 2000-2003:

2000:

1st: Cory Smith (3B), Derek Thompson (LHP)

2nd: Brian Tallet (LHP), Mark Folsom (OF)

3rd: Sean Swedlow (1B)

2001:

1st: Dan Denham (RHP), Alan Horne (RHP), JD Martin (RHP), Michael Conroy (OF)

2nd: Jake Dittler (RHP)

3rd: Nick Moran (RHP)

2002:

1st: Jeremy Guthrie (RHP), Matt Whitney (3B), Micah Schilling (2B)

2nd: Brian Slocum (RHP), Pat Osborn (3B)

3rd: Jason Cooper (OF), Dan Cevette (LHP)

2003:

1st: Michael Aubrey (1B), Brad Snyder (OF), Adam Miller (RHP)

2nd: Javi Herrera (C)

3rd: Ryan Garko (C)

Obviously, injuries are the great unknown, but here is the bottom line. Out of those 23 picks, only two players remain in the organization (Garko and Miller). Only five of the 23 have played a game in the big leagues for the Indians (Tallet, Guthrie, Aubrey, Slocum, Garko), but the only player to appear for any meaningful length of time is Garko. 11 of the 12 first round picks are out of the organization or out of baseball, and the lone first rounder still with the team - Adam Miller - may never pitch again because of a serious finger injury.

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To take it a step further, 2004 first round pick Jeremy Sowers is out of options after this year and looks to have no future with this team after this season, and second round pick Justin Hoyman is out of baseball. 2005 first round pick Trevor Crowe looks like a fourth outfielder at best, and the other first rounder taken that year outfielder John Drennen has been a disappointment.

You want to know why the Indians are so bad right now and why they are scrambling to find bodies and talent to impact this ballclub? I just ran down Exhibit A, B, C, and so on. Those players taken in the first three rounds should be a big part of the nucleus of the major league team currently.

To be fair, the Indians had their fair share of top three round busts in the 90s prior to Mirabelli taking control in 2000; however, they were able to find very good talent in later rounds. The first three rounds, especially the first round, is where you get most of your big time all star talent. Yes, all stars are unearthed later in the draft, but a high majority come from the top of the draft.

Over the years the Indians have done a good job of scouting and signing international free agents. This is an area that Mirabelli has done a very good job in, and is an area he now primarily oversees since Brad Grant was promoted to the Director of Amateur Scouting and in charge of the draft the past two years. Also, Mirabelli's last two drafts in 2006 and 2007 look to be two of his best, and by far. His 2006 draft and Grant's first draft in 2008 could be the foundation that gets this organization back on its feet pumping out all star potential talent like it did back in the 90s.

In the end, whether it is an awful job scouting and picking players in the upper levels of the draft, poor player development once they get into the system, or just a general lack of a plan on how to get players effectively through the system and into a big league uniform, the bottom line is they have struggled in all of these areas. Some moreso than others.

When you continue to pluck guys off the waiver wire or as minor league free agents and continually add them to the Triple-A team and big league team, either it is a lack of options or trust internally to fill from the Double-A or Triple-A level. Or, just a ridiculous bang your head against the wall approach of doing the same thing over and over and over again in the hopes that you can find the next Bob Howry off the scrap heap.

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The recent drafts have been much improved, and it is showing with the talent in the system. Combined with some nice international signings in the past few years, the Indians have a lot of talent in the lower levels starting to creep their way up to the Double-A level. But it all comes back to a lack of options currently at the major league and Triple-A level ready to impact this team.

They have lots of quantity, but really lack quality.

And that is where the Indians have failed and why they have the problems they do today, and where the blame truly lies.