

Lee Trade A Sign Of More To Come

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Wednesday, July 29 2009 7:00 PM -

Get ready for some potentially stormy weather Tribe fans, as yesterday's trade that sent left-hander Cliff Lee and outfielder Ben Francisco to the Philadelphia Phillies for four minor leaguers may open up the floodgates for even more trades involving some Indians fan favorites in the coming hours. Tony spent yesterday working the phones, and had a chance to speak with Indians Assistant GM and Director of Scouting John Mirabelli at length late last night. He profiles that conversation, talks about the new Indians acquired from Philly, and tells us what else may be coming today in this super piece.



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With a little more than 24 hours until the trade deadline this Friday at 4:00 p.m. ET, the Extreme Makeover Indians Edition could leave an Indians roster completely overhauled from what it was just two years ago at this time when they were on their way to winning 96 games and going to the ALCS, much less what the roster looked like three months ago when they broke camp in Goodyear, AZ for the start of this season.

The trade season is in full bloom with many deals already in place and several more to go down in the next several hours leading up to the deadline. But, it is important to note that rumors are just that, rumors, and that it is not always about acquiring players that fit somewhere on your roster. It is about acquiring assets. Assets you can use for yourself to make your lineup or pitching staff better, or make your team better because of what you can get for them.

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Rumors are flying high that momentum seems to be gaining on a Victor Martinez trade, and others like Jamey Carroll, Carl Pavano, Jhonny Peralta, Kelly Shoppach, and more could be dealt. With this in mind, don't be surprised if recently acquired players Lou Marson and Jason Donald are moved in another deal, or if the Indians package some of their other recent additions or prospects already in the system as pieces for a larger deal.

As this trading season has shown so far, we also are starting to see with the Indians and a lot of teams in Major League Baseball a shift where while the short-term goal is to win, more and more teams are focusing much more on long term plans by keeping their high end prospects and are reluctant to part with high end starting pitching that is close to big league ready. The days where the big market teams like the Yankees, Red Sox, Dodgers and other may have splurged on a big veteran arm or bat and paid a king's ransom in pitching prospects are gone, as even the big market teams recently have begun to understand the value of good, young pitching.

After getting over the initial shock of the Lee trade itself and looking at what the Indians are doing with all their pickups in the past week, you are beginning to see a plan at work here. The overall package received in the Lee deal may be disappointing on the surface, but rather than looking at the players individually there are a lot of things to like about the deal when evaluating and looking at the big picture to get a better context of what the Indians are trying to bring to the organization.

“Obviously we are increasing the inventory of our pitching and arms, and that has been the goal here all along,” said Indians Assistant GM and Director of Scouting John Mirabelli in a phone interview last night. “If you look at our position players - the guys in the big leagues and the guys we have on the cusp - we feel we are in a pretty good spot there and we actually have some depth. It takes more than one Cy Young Award winner to win a championship, you gotta have pitching and you have to have defense, and you have to be a complete team.

So that has been the goal here.”

While GM Mark Shapiro is the public figure talking about and announcing the trades when they happen, it is the in-house work behind the scenes involving the input from scouts before any decision is made to acquire a player. There are many trades discussed that do not come to fruition, but Shapiro and his staff rely heavily on their scouts who are dispatched all over the place to get firsthand looks at potential players they may look to acquire in a deal.

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They get together, interpret the reports, and with so many options to choose from they ultimately come to a decision on a player.

“I can tell you, this has been a relentless high-wire bouncing balls act by Mark Shapiro and Chris Antonetti and everybody in the front office,” said Mirabelli. “There are a lot of things up in the air at the same time and there is a ton that goes into it.”

Fans and reporters have the benefit of hindsight as they are not aware of how complicated and involved a deal can be, from the scouting stage, to the evaluation phase, to the negotiating phase, and so on, there is a lot involved in the art of making a deal. This is why so many deals often break down and why such a small percentage of deals ever gain enough momentum where both sides are willing to come to a conclusion on a deal.

“There has been very little sleep the last seven to 12 days,” said Mirabelli. “A lot of communication, a ton of information, and trying to get through a small window timeframe makes these trades very challenging to pull off.

I am not even talking about the negotiating part of it which Mark handles.

Just the evaluation part of it is very challenging as you then have to negotiate on different fronts with different teams involving different pieces as well as ownerships on many different levels being involved.

In some cases medical opinions.

So, let me tell you, this is not something where you snap your fingers and a deal gets done as there is a ton that goes into it and it is very complicated.”

It certainly was a move that sent shockwaves through the Cleveland area. Many fans were already distraught with the performance and direction of the team before the trade, and the trade certainly did no favors in the realm of public opinion as many fans absolutely hate the deal. The initial reception of the trade has not been good so far as this pretty much pulls the plug on any thoughts of a contending season in 2010 and also the return was not up to standards for most fans. In fact, the fan response to the trade has been brutal.

Fans have seemingly had it with the organization, and a trade of Victor in the coming hours may

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push a great many of them over the ledge for good.

This is a deal that will not be forgotten about anytime soon, and will often be the talk around the water cooler when Lee pitches well or one of the prospects in the deal potentially washes out. This is a bold move by Shapiro, and a real crossroads kind of trade where if it bombs it could lead to him being relieved of his GM duties, or if the trade blossoms it could strengthen his legacy as a great trade deadline negotiator maximizing major league talent for prospects.

Shapiro and his staff have proven in the past that they have a pretty good knack making these kind of deals. It has been Shapiro's best quality as a GM since he officially took the role almost eight years ago in November 2001. Time and time again - with few real misses - Shapiro has received a good return on a high percentage of his trades.

Their draft and free agent history certainly has been questionable under Shapiro's reign, but one thing the organization has clearly excelled in is an ability to trade proven talent for young prospects.

In any case, the Indians roster is in for a bit of a shakeup and it appears that we are seeing a rarity occur right before our eyes where a large percentage of the roster will be flipped for new players in lieu of firing manager Eric Wedge. The old saying always goes something along the lines that you can't get rid of the entire team when it fails and since the manager is just one guy he is the one who typically falls on the sword for the team.

But clearly it appears Shapiro is doing just the opposite where he is getting rid of most of the team and retaining Wedge.

Betancourt. Garko. Francisco. Lee. Who's next? We'll find out in the next few hours, but it certainly looks like this is but the calm before the storm for sure.

Recapping The Lee Trade

The big news of the day yesterday was the Lee trade where they packaged him and outfielder Ben Francisco and sent them to Philadelphia for right-handed pitcher Carlos Carrasco, right-handed pitcher Jason Knapp, catcher Lou Marson, and infielder Jason Donald.

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I had a chance to talk to Kevin Goldstein last night of [Baseball Prospectus](#) , and we discussed at length the players the Indians received in the deal.

In his preseason rankings of the Phillies prospects, he had Carrasco #1, Marson #5, Donald #6, and Knapp #10, and when asked about where they would fall in a midseason update Carrasco would move down a little, Larson would be ranked about the same, Donald would be down a tiny bit, and Knapp would be way up.

Here is what he said about the four players acquired in the deal:

On his initial reaction to the trade: "It took me awhile to kind of stomach it and digest it and figure out everything going on there. It's funny in a sense that none of the big names that were associated with the Halladay deal went to Cleveland. But I do think it is kind of a different situation because we don't know what he is worth because there has not been a Halladay trade.

I think it is a good deal for Philly because they keep those guys and get Cliff Lee, and it is a good deal for Cleveland on the surface as they got guys who are going to play in the big leagues and got an incredibly high ceiling arm in Knapp.

Sure, he is a bit of a lottery ticket, but the payoff could be huge."

On Jason Knapp: "Knapp is one of those guys where if you catch a scout who has been to the Sally League and seen that Lakewood team, everyone will say 'what about this Knapp guy, have you heard about him?' His name just came up a lot all year, and that says a ton. He was definitely a guy generating buzz in a huge way as at least once a month someone was [asking about him].

There is just an incredible raw package of abilities there, and that is something the Phillies have always been known for drafting.

Their draft focus is on upside more than any other team in baseball.

Knapp is an upside guy where you are talking about a 6'5" pitcher built like a rush linebacker.

A power frame and power arm that sits mid 90s up to 98 MPH, and is raw.

He is not a kid from Texas or California, he is from a cold weather state and so he is not a kid who did a ton of showcase and national circuit stuff.

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He came to the Phillies as a very raw product where you were just excited about his size and strength in his arm.

He lights up a radar gun as his fastball is an overwhelmingly powerful pitch.

His secondary stuff is raw, and the command is raw, but just the package that he starts off with is incredible and so the upside is huge with a guy like that.

What he turns into, who knows, he could end up as an elite power starter as he certainly has the body and frame to be a starter and eat up innings, or he could end up as a guy who just has two pitches and is a ninth inning closer.

Guys that big who throw that hard do not grow on trees.

They are valuable commodities.

He has done a lot of good things this year at Low-A and been very dominant at times and has scuffled at times when things are not working out for him.

You have to take upside guys because I think you turn trades into lopsided ones down the road.

But you need a lot of patience as you are probably talking at least 2012 before he makes it to Cleveland."

On Carlos Carrasco: "He is an interesting guy in the sense that the age is good and the stuff is good, but the numbers are not so good. A lot of it is because he has a tendency - and this has been the book on Carrasco for a long time - he has an incredible knack for making bad situations worse.

If you look at the game logs and the games where he did not pitch well you will see a tendency for those runs to all happen in one inning.

He turns one run innings into three or four.

His splits are pretty horrible with runners in scoring position and various pressure situation splits and that has been the story with him a lot.

Whatever that is, whether it is an ongoing emotional thing or him trying to get too cute with his pitches, if you can correct that I think you have a pretty solid major league starter.

He has average to above average velocity.

It is a 50 to 55 fastball just on velocity, and I think it plays up a bit because of his ability to locate it.

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It also plays up a bit because of the quality of his changeup, which is a true plus offering."

On Lou Marson: "He is very athletic for a catcher, and defensively he is a pretty good defender. He is an on-base kind of guy. He hits for average and draws walks. He uses the entire field and sprays a lot of line drives. He does not have a lot of power and he is not going to fall into a lot of power as it is just not in his game and not in his swing.

He definitely has an approach that is oriented towards contact, but he is a good hitter and nice prospect.

Is he as good a catching prospect as Carlos Santana?

No.

But, he is a guy where scouts have him as a big league catcher.

So something has to budge there one way or another.

I don't know if Victor [Martinez] is going to move or they are just going to do what they maybe should have done awhile ago and just make Victor the first baseman.

But, Marson is either going to be flipped or hold the job down for a year until Santana is ready."

On Jason Donald: "It's tough with him in a sense that when you talk to scouts he has always been a guy who has been around for a couple years now and was a high profile guy in college. I talk to scouts who have seen him for half a decade now if not longer and it is pretty varied still where some see him as a second division guy who can play everyday just not for a championship club while others just see him as a utility player.

I think most of the debate revolves around his ability to play shortstop everyday, and I don't think he has the range to do it.

I think he has the ability to play well in a utility role.

He is an okay hitter with a very good approach and good power for a middle infield guy.

He can play second, third and short, and I think that is the big thing as there is value there and I think he is gonna have a pretty long big league career."

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Recapping The "Other" Trades

Mirabelli was not about to publicly comment on the players the Indians obtained in the Lee trade since it has not been completely finalized because the players involved have not had their physicals completed yet. That said, he provided some insight into the three players picked up in the past week to complete the Mark DeRosa trade (Jess Todd), for Rafael Betancourt (Connor Graham), and for Ryan Garko (Scott Barnes):

On Jess Todd: "He is probably the closest major league ready very finished product kind of guy. He is a very aggressive attack mode strike-thrower who can sink it or cut it. He throws a slider just about anytime he wants to for a strike. He is a very finished product kind of bullpen arm who has a low 90s fastball.

He is not a big guy, but he does leverage the ball and does sink it down in the strike zone.

He stays out of the middle of the plate, and he has a lot of versatility I think on how you can use him in a major league pen.

The Cardinals used him in a little different developmental role as they used him as a closer in the minor leagues, which is something we don't do with prospects.

So he needs to get stretched out a little bit because he is not coming to the big leagues to pitch for one out or two outs or one inning.

He is going to provide some depth in middle relief there.

So he has to get stretched out a little bit in Columbus before he is ready to come to the big leagues, but in terms of his stuff and where he is with his command and control he is pretty close to a finished product."

On Connor Graham: "We've known him since his Miami, OH days, and we had him in for a pre-draft workout right in Akron and I was there. So we are familiar with him. He is a big, massive, power-body, power-arm guy.

He has a power fastball and power slider.

The thing he needs to work on is developing his slider a little more consistently and developing his strike-throwing ability.

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He is a big, physical kid and the delivery, the body, and the arm action is something he has to work on to repeat because he is so big.

We think the best way to do that is as a starting pitcher.

We do want him to develop his slider, but the only way you develop your pitches is as a starting pitcher.

You have to throw more pitches and you have to throw more innings.

Obviously [with starting] you can throw 50-75-100 pitches when you go out there and also throw in your regular bullpen routines on the side.

That's how you develop your pitches, and not in the bullpen with two innings then two days off then two innings then two days off.

That's what we are going to do with the guy.

Eventually could he be a bullpen guy?

Sure.

But for the time being we like his arsenal, and we are going to try and develop some consistency in those areas as a starting pitcher.

I think he has some significant upside either way."

On Scott Barnes: "He is an interesting guy too. We think he has a chance because of his feel, his arsenal of pitches, and he is a very athletic kid that we think he has the chance to be a left-handed starter. The one thing that he has improved since last year - and I have to give San Francisco credit here - is they have developed his strike throwing ability.

They have done a good job of improving that, and I think they have gotten him to be more aggressive and attack the strike zone and consequently his strike throwing numbers have really improved since college.

He has got feel, he has three pitches, he is an athletic kid, and we have every reason to believe he has a chance to be a left-handed starter in the big leagues."