

A Lazy Sunday Bearing Arms

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Saturday, August 22 2009 7:00 PM -

With most everyone's attention turned to the Browns these days and polishing that trophy for "The GLC", we'll take a quick departure into a modified Lazy Sunday. Normally, Paulie gives us all the best weekend Indians links, and talks about some of the best Indian-related stories on the web. But with no good columns out there this weekend, Paul takes a look at what the Indians pitching staff may look like in 2010 and the "layers" of depth that will be beneath them in Columbus and Akron.



With most everyone's attention turned to the Browns these days and polishing that trophy for "The GLC", we'll take a quick departure into a modified Lazy Sunday as the original intent of this piece has always been to link pertinent stories from the Sunday paper about the Indians. That has evolved though, as the pieces now don't often lead to much insight or discussion unless you're interested in reading Bud Shaw regrettably continue his evolution into Norman Chad Lite (no link provided) or read [Paul Hoynes's list of potential managerial candidates for 2010](#) (which is...um, not a good sign for The Atomic Wedgie), which feels a little premature even for someone like me who felt that Wedgie should have been fired after the very series in Chicago that Hoynes mentions.

Usually, a piece by Terry Pluto garners some discussion but [today's about the 2010 rotation \(among other topics\)](#)

feels like old news here and

[Anthony Castrovince's Inbox from the past week about attendance and payroll](#)

as well as

[Pat McManamon's even-handed piece separating myth from reality in terms of payroll](#)

feels like a topic that deserves a little more attention than a cursory glance and

minimal comment in a Lazy One.

Thus, let's go a little off the board as an intro to what I think is a more important discussion with [a piece forwarded along to me by sharp-eyed reader Richard Sheir on Chris Perez and Jess Todd, from a Cardinals's perspective](#)

. The piece bemoans the loss of Chris Perez as a future closer (looking at the ridiculous numbers he's put up as an Indian as proof) and wonders if Perez is flourishing because he's out from under the direction of STL Pitching Coach Dave Duncan, the same direction that led many to be skeptical of the deal as Duncan and LaRussa are generally loathe to give up on any pitching talent, often coaxing more out of a particular arm (see Piniero, Joel) than anyone else.

While I can't really speak for whether Perez's success is a direct result of being out of St. Louis or a new approach, it did get me thinking about the return that the Indians received for a few months of Mark DeRosa and the effect (particularly when combined with the other acquisitions) that it could have on the Indians' pitching staffs going forward. The thought would be that Chris Perez and Jesse Ray Todd already have found themselves in the Indians' bullpen and while Todd has been inconsistent thus far, both are 23-year-old arms with a repertoire that seems to fit in the bullpen - what with Perez's high-90's fastball and wicked slider and JR Todd looking like Jensen Lewis with his herky-jerky motion, but with some actual movement on his pitches and some velocity, separating him from Lewis' arsenal - and each has had success in the minors as a reliever.

Knowing what we've seen in the past few years regarding the construction of a bullpen, how does locking down 2 of the 7 (or 8 if you're going with the Indians' current curious strategy) for the next 5 years sound in terms of a return for DeRosa?

Seeing Perez perform over the last few weeks, does anyone else get the feeling that him finishing a game or two down the stretch may be a nice solution to the potential problem that Kerry Wood is still on pace to finish 52 games this season, with 39 finished in 122 games, with his 2011 option vesting if he closes 55 in a lost season during which he's been ineffective?

Yes, bullpen arms are volatile, but it gets to the greater point if the Indians are able to FINALLY fill the bullpen out with young arms like Perez, Todd, Sipp, and Smith while hoping for a return to form in the short-term for Rafael Perez, Jen Lewis, and Wood. That greater point is that suddenly the Indians have the luxury

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of letting their OWN players project into the bullpen (with success never guaranteed) for 2010 and thus allowing some of the young arms to not be rushed through the system to serve as the premature cavalry.

This is important because with the haul of arms that the Indians received in their - what are we calling it now, rebuild...reload...re-stock...whatever, you know what I'm talking about - recent moves finally seems to have stocked multiple layers of the organization with pitching that is now able to develop as a group and perhaps accomplish what the first group of arms in "The Plan v.1.0" was never able to do, which would be to fill holes created through attrition, injury, Free Agency or otherwise at the MLB level and fill out the pitching staff with more than just organizational filler. Rather, the "layers" (you'll notice I'm backing away from the "waves") of arms are filled with potential impact arms. Sure, some of them are high-risk/high-reward, but after last year and this year, is that necessarily a bad thing?

To put it in tangible terms, let's look at these "layers" below the MLB level to start 2010, and if you're wondering...here's my best guess at the pitching staff for 2010 as it stands today:

Jake Westbrook
Justin Masterson
Aaron Laffey
Fausto Carmona
Carlos Carrasco
Jeremy Sowers
Jensen Lewis
Rafael Perez
Jess Todd
Joe Smith
Tony Sipp
Chris Perez
Kerry Wood

Remember, I have Sowers as the long man necessary due to the fact that so many middle-of-the-game innings may be needed to be eaten due to Westbrook returning from his injury, Masterson still converting from the bullpen, Carmona still potentially wandering the desert, and the youth of Laffey and Carrasco - who I'm putting in there as the "winner" of the 5th rotation spot for 2010...yes,

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on August 23rd of 2009.

If you assume that the 12-man pitching staff looks something like that (and can we please log a formal petition that a veteran starter or veteran reliever is unnecessary in a 2010, during which contention is unlikely even though the organization won't come out and say it), the addition of the arms in "The Great Sell-Off of 2009" to the players who legitimately are considered home-grown prospects that were already in the Tribe organization puts some meat on the bones of an organization in which impact pitching was a rarity. Regardless, here's what I'm referring to as the "layers" of pitching in the pipeline below MLB with their ages for the 2010 season listed thusly:

1st Layer

Hector Rondon - 22
Dave Huff - 25
Jeanmar Gomez - 22
Zach Putnam - 22
Connor Graham - 24

2nd Layer

Scott Barnes - 22
Bryan Price - 23
Nick Hagadone - 24
Eric Berger - 24

3rd Layer

Jason Knapp - 19
Alex White - 21
Alexander Perez - 20
TJ House - 20

That's a short list that doesn't include guys like Scott Lewis, Chuck Lofgren, Steven Wright, Ryan Edell, Josh Tomlin, Frank Herrmann, or plenty others who all have some merit as possible MLB pitchers but truthfully fall more into the category of "depth" than they do "impact". As for the names that did make it that fall closer to "impact", I threw Alex White in there based

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on the fact that he wasn't in the organization and will likely be in the Top 10 for the Tribe this year and guys like Jeanmar Gomez, Zach Putnam, Eric Berger, Alexander Perez and TJ House because of their success in 2009.

Why do I make such an assumption to only list those players?

Here's how the pitchers (who all now find themselves in the Indians' organization) were ranked at the beginning of the 2009 season [by Kevin Goldstein at Baseball Prospectus](#) :

Carlos Carrasco - #1 Philadelphia Prospect entering 2009 (4-Star Prospect)

Chris Perez - #3 St. Louis Prospect entering 2009 (4-Star Prospect)

Jess Todd - #5 St. Louis Prospect entering 2009 (3-Star Prospect)

Hector Rondon - #6 Cleveland Prospect entering 2009 (3-Star Prospect)

Dave Huff - #7 Cleveland Prospect entering 2009 (3-Star Prospect)

Nick Hagadone - #8 Boston Prospect entering 2009 (3-Star Prospect)

Connor Graham - #8 Colorado Prospect entering 2009 (3-Star Prospect)

Jason Knapp - #10 Philadelphia Prospect entering 2009 (3-Star Prospect)

Bryan Price - #10 Boston Prospect entering 2009 (3-Star Prospect)

Looking at that list, the Indians went from having 2 pitching prospects with 3 or more stars to 9 and that doesn't include guys like Justin Masterson or Laffey, who are not too far removed, age-wise, from some of the names on this list.

Yes, there are other guys in there that could be added to that "layer" list, but that's not the point of this - the point is if you were to take out the multitude of arms that came into the organization via trades, it looks like a pretty bare-bones crew or one that may have one impact guy that was in the organization when 2009 started, but was filled out by organizational depth beyond that. Now, what the Indians possess is top-end pitching talent at a number of different levels where the onus of expectations isn't placed on one particular player's shoulder (or arm or finger), which is a sharp departure from years past when the Indians pitching prospects consisted of Atom Miller and...um, well the guys that we've seen the last two years who seem to fall under that "organizational" depth category instead of being a legitimate impact arm.

For instance, if you'll remember, the Indians have 2 of the top 18 pitching prospects ([according to this](#)) in MLB in Rondon and Carrasco and unlike years past, if something were to (knocking firmly on wood) happen to one of them, the

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Indians wouldn't find themselves staring at a vast chasm of talent to the next impact arm. Prior to the trades, who was the next legitimately exciting arm in the organization in terms of front-of-the-rotation stuff...Alexander Perez?

How do these arms ultimately shake out, in terms of who remains a starter and who projects as a reliever?

We're not going to know that answer for a while, but the presence of some legitimately talented power arms that already figure into the 2010 pitching staff (like Perez and Todd) allow for a longer amount of time for discernment. The importance of these "layers" though is also that the idea that the Indians simply cannot have too many potential impact arms may have finally found a foothold. That importance comes into play when you realize that not all of these guys are going to pan out...they're just not. Whether one of them is done in by an injury or difficulty adjusting to a new level or a new role, all of these names look great on paper as arms to dream on, but the idea becomes if the Indians can get one or maybe two of the names in each of these "layers" to legitimately contribute, it becomes a successful development of arms.

If you believe that "There Is No Such Thing As A Pitching Prospect" or TINSTAAPP, because too many things go wrong between Point A (which could be wild success in AA as a 21-year-old) and Point B (which would ultimately be production in MLB), you see that the supplementation of the top arms in the Indians' system almost takes an approach that attempts to take the attrition rate out of the equation by lining up that many more arms.

Again, think back to the projection for Atom Miller to come in and step in as a front-of-the-rotation starter then as a potential closer. Even after Miller's injuries started, he remained the Indians' top pitching prospect because the difference between his potential and every other pitcher's was so vast that Miller (injuries considered) represented the true impact arm while the rest of the guys looked like middle-to-back-end-of-the-rotation fodder or maybe middle relievers. Now, think about what we're looking at with the arms that came up with Miller and how they're performing in MLB...as middle-to-back-end-of-the-rotation fodder or maybe middle relievers.

Now, what the Indians have attempted to do is line up not only a Miller-type impact arm in each of these layers (like Hagadone and Knapp in the lower layers), but also to make sure that the pieces that figure to mature and project with them

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simply aren't guys who throw in the low-90's and get by on "control" and "command", instead stocking up on guys like Bryan Price and Alex White, whose eventual role may not yet be determined, but whose floor as a potential late-inning option represents a higher floor than the players we watched come up with Miller.

After you get past that notion of the "layers", the question becomes how quickly these arms all move in the organization as the position players are all but set going forward if you consider that 3B, 1B, and LF look to be the only question marks come 2010 (assuming Marson is the de-facto catcher in 2010 until Santana arrives) and some combination of Peralta, LaPorta, and Marte can hold down those positions until Brantley is ready to take over LF and The Chizzle is ready to take over 3B.

How quickly these arms should move brings up an interesting piece brought to my attention by Jay Levin at [Let's Go Tribe](#) that came from the noted Nate Silver from the Spring of 2007,

[taking a look at the development of young pitchers and how prudent it is to continue the "development" of true high-impact arms](#)

:

...Although there are a few categories of pitching prospects - particularly guys with good stuff, high strikeout rates and highish walk rates (think Homer Bailey) - that tend to improve more often than not, in general there is no systematic pattern of improvement after the age of 21 or so. Sometimes guys get better, of course, and sometimes they do so in a hurry - but you can't take a young pitcher in a vacuum and expect him to improve the same way that you can for a hitting prospect. Mark Rogers (to pick on some low-hanging fruit) will probably never get his command sorted out, Yusemiro Petit will never add enough ticks to his fastball to become a useful major league starter, Gavin Floyd will never learn how to keep the ball down, and so forth. All of these things are possible - but they're not very likely.

The flip side, as Gary also alludes to, is that young pitchers often take less time to become dominant big league performers. Pitching, somewhat contrary to the mad genius reputation of pitchers like Greg Maddux, is more of a purely physical skill and less of a learned behavior than hitting is. Pitchers like Francisco Liriano and Jered Weaver and Cole Hamels - these guys weren't just holding their own last year, they were among the very best pitchers in baseball. Someone like Hamels - or Tim Lincecum or Philip Hughes - might very well be as effective today as he's

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ever going to be, before he's had a chance for injuries and mileage to accumulate. Keeping those guys down on the farm is not conservative - it's a downright irresponsible way to run a ballclub.

It's a fascinating way to look at the handling of young arms and while I'm not suggesting that the next Tim Lincecum or Cole Hamels is in the Indians' organization, you have to wonder if the kid gloves are going to come off with these arms like Hagadone and Knapp, particularly given the fact that Atom Miller (who was likely ready to contribute to the parent club in 2006 or at least in 2007 based on his talent) has yet to pitch in MLB

The arms (whether they be "layers" or "waves" or whatever) look to be in the Indians' organization to complement the position players in place and just below the surface. How closely the two groups adjust and mature as essential pieces of the team will likely determine whether The Plan v.2.0 becomes a success or Shapiro's Last Stand.