

A Lazy Sunday Around The Central

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Saturday, November 14 2009 7:00 PM -

Another weekend on the North Coast, another 50-plus degree Sunday with no NFL to ruin my day and take away from the majesty that is Fall in Cleveland, even if we are in mid-November and simply living the dream with this recent weather. Nevertheless, it is Sunday and it's time to get down to brass tax by hammering out a Lazy one. In this edition of Paul's popular Sunday column, he takes a look at our AL Central rivals, and what their offseasons may look like when it's all said and done.



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With very little happening around the Wigwam, outside of [Buster Olney's not-so-shocking "revelation"](#);

(Insider only) that the Indians would listen to offers for Kerry Wood and that with the glut of closers on the market, the Indians aren't going to get much for Wood unless they "eat some money" on his deal) maybe we'll take this in another direction to whirl around the Central, if only to check in on what the off-season is looking like for the rest of the division.

As a nice introduction to this trip around the Central comes from SI.com's Cliff Corcoran, who [dips his toe into the shallow pool that is the AL Central](#) , with his take on the outlook for the Indians in 2010 not looking too far off what many feel:

With a new manager in place, the Indians are loaded with prospects, many of whom have already been rushed to the majors due simply to the lack of viable

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alternatives, and will spend the next couple of seasons sorting through their booty in an attempt to turn all that raw talent into a winning ball club.

Sounds about right as, unless something major happens this off-season (and adding a utility infielder, even if [his name is Omar](#), doesn't count as "major" or even as a good move given his age and his struggles against LHP, despite the goodwill it would create for PR), the Indians are likely going with the team as it's presently constructed, having made their major moves in July of this past year. The "booty" from those moves will have be developed and turned into a "winning ball club"...but that's old news.

Despite the opinions on the Indians' chances for contending in the AL Central in 2010 ranging from "eh...maybe I could see it if EVERYTHING goes right" to "not bloody likely", looking around the rest of the Central, it should come as no surprise that the division looks to be weak (and maybe weaker that 2009, in fact) and there for the taking for nearly any team...no, not you Kansas City.

As for the biggest news of the off-season pertaining to the AL Central, it's been reported by more than one media outlet that [the Tigers are looking to shed payroll in a big way...and fast](#) :

Owner Mike Ilitch, whose liberal spending for downtrodden Detroit bolstered the Tigers in tough times, now finally appears ready to cut back. Tigers people told competing GMs they'd be willing to listen to offers for center fielder Curtis Granderson, pitcher Edwin Jackson, perhaps third baseman Brandon Inge and others in an effort to curtail their payroll only a year before several big contracts will expire. Tigers GM Dave Dombrowski doesn't call it a fire sale. But one competing GM said, "I feel sorry for them." Sounds like some sort of sale.

In case you're wondering what "several big contracts" look like, consider who the Tigers will be paying in 2010 and what dollar amounts will be doled out to each:

Cabrera - \$20M
Magglio - \$18M
Guillen - \$13M
Bonderman - \$12.5M

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Dontrelle - \$12M
Robertson - \$10M

Excluding the Miggy deal (as he's the only name on that list that even comes close to justifiably cashing those checks), that's \$65.5M for three pitchers who aren't likely to be in the rotation or anywhere near the back-end of the bullpen, and two players who are both around 35 years old whose numbers have steadily declined in each of the last two seasons nearly to the point of mediocrity.

Counter that with the news that the Tigers are looking to move the 29-year-old Granderson (owed \$23.75M under his current deal through 2012 with a \$13M option and a \$2M buyout in 2013), the 26-year-old Jackson (arbitration eligible, but under club control for the next two years), and the 32-year-old Inge (owed \$6.6M in 2010, the final year of his deal), and it would seem that the Tigers are in a definite transitional phase here.

While moving Granderson and Jackson certainly look short-sighted given the team's lack of a suitable replacement for either and could have been blown out of proportion in an obviously slow MLB news week, the decisions made in Detroit this off-season are going to go a long way in determining not only what the team will look like in 2010, but more importantly past 2010 when a lot (but not all) of those bad contracts come off of the books.

If you're pegging the off-season in Detroit as potentially franchise-changing, what can be said about what figures to be happening in the Twin Cities, as the team is ready to move into a new ballpark for 2010 and is looking to lock up their hometown hero, their best player Joe Mauer past 2010, his final season under contract with the Twinkies?

How's that for a watershed off-season?

The Twins have already been active with their addition of JJ Hardy (who figures to get a raise from the \$4.65M he earned last year through the arbitration process in the hopes that he can improve on his .659 OPS from a year ago in Milwaukee) and by picking up the \$10.5M option on Michael Cuddyer, a move [seen by ESPN.com's Rob Neyer as a confusing move in a long line of 'double-standard' contracts](#) from the Twins:

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But the Twins have a history of overspending on decent players while complaining about the high price of truly great players. Remember, it was just a year ago that they couldn't afford Johan Santana but quite happily blew \$9 million on Craig Monroe and Livan Hernandez. And if they're not able to keep Justin Morneau and Joe Mauer in the long term, their money mismanagement is simply going to drop them from contention.

As for the Mauer situation, it unquestionably represents Priority #1 in Minnesota, but as Buster Olney points out, the Mauer negotiations (handled by Mauer's agent Ron Shapiro, who represented Cal Ripken, Jr. and Kirby Puckett, two of the last superstar players in MLB who remained with one team throughout their career...who also happens to be Mark Shapiro's dad) [could be the litmus test for baseball and the growing disparity between the "haves" and the "have-nots"](#)

On that very topic and into the Windy City, there was [an interesting quote from White Sox GM Kenny Williams](#)

concerning what he sees as "tiers of teams" and how each "tier" is able to approach the Free Agent market:

"There are actually three or four different free-agent markets. There's the Yankees, Red Sox, both LA teams, the cubs. Then there's probably that secondary market where we probably fall in. Then there's a tier below us - smaller markets, competitive teams that want to go for it in this particular year. Then you have some of the poor-market teams where they're trying to piece things together.

□

Some teams can't walk in the door and say, OK, we're going to compete with the White Sox. If we want that player, you're not getting him. And then...last year, I told (Cashman), 'I like Sabathia.' He said, 'You're not getting him. I'm getting him.'

That's all well and good, but if I'm not mistaken, Williams traded for Jake Peavy and claimed Alex Rios on a waiver claim in the second half of last year. In consummating those deals, Williams added the following numbers to his payroll:

2010 - \$19.7M (\$10M for Peavy, \$9.7M for Rios)

2011 - \$28M (\$16M for Peavy, \$12M for Rios)

2012 - \$29M (\$17M for Peavy, \$12M for Rios)

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2013 - \$16.5M or \$34.5M (\$22M option for Peavy or a \$4M buyout; \$12.5M for Rios)

2014 - \$12.5M (Rios only)

2015 - \$1M or \$13.5M (Rios option buy-out amount and cost of picking it up)

Williams correctly asserts that the White Sox are likely on that "2nd tier" of teams, but it is interesting how Williams' apparent strategy for getting around this inability to compete with the likes of the Yankees and the Red Sox on the open market is to be an inordinately aggressive risk-taker on the trade market and on players like Rios, in the hopes that he can build his team with talent (and I use that term loosely with Rios) that may be high-priced, but is talent already under contract when acquired.

As for the Royals, after the Mark Teahen to the White Sox deal, [GM Dayton Moore said](#)

"Our motivation behind this deal - and any deal that we make this winter, is to acquire as many zero-to-three service-time players as we can. That was certainly what we did here." It's actually not a bad strategy if you are where the Royals are as an organization (and not all that different from what the Indians did the last two summers), but they have to hope that the zero-to-three service time players they acquire in this new grouping of youngsters does better than those that have played a role in the past five to ten years.

It sounds almost absurd to say, but the clock is already ticking on the Royals to contend with Zach Grienke still at the top of their rotation. He's signed through the 2013 season and the Royals would have to hope to take advantage of having one of the best LHP in MLB at some point during his tenure there. If the players that they've drafted in the past few years or have recently acquired fall into the John Buck/Mark Teahen category of average MLB players, you have to start to wonder what direction they take with Grienke as he is undeniably their most valuable asset. If the Royals don't improve appreciably in the next year or two, you would have to think that they would consider moving Grienke to net multiple young players. In one sense, it could probably even be argued that the time to entertain offers for Grienke may be coming faster than Kansas City wants to admit as the Royals are pretty far removed from contention (and I should point out here that they had an identical record to the Tribe last year) and the haul that Grienke would net them would certainly put their rebuild on the fast track...or at least faster.

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Moving away from the Central and back to the North Coast, John Perotto of Baseball Prospectus puts [The BLC on his 2009 MLB All-Star Team as the best RF in MLB](#) this past year:

Right fielder: *Shin-Soo Choo, Indians. His season was the classic case of a tree falling in a forest, as he finished with 5.8 WARP1, a .309 EqA, .300/.394/.489, 20 homers, and 21 steals. Yet it seems no one heard it amidst the Tribe's disastrous 98-loss campaign.*

The "tree falling in a forest" line hurts...it's appropriate, but it does hurt.

It doesn't change the fact that SS Choo is seen as the BEST by ANY RF in MLB and that he's under club control until the end of the 2013 season. Assuming his military obligation in South Korea REALLY isn't an issue, there's a tangible goal for this off-season - buying up Choo's arbitration years and maybe even his 2014 FA year to keep The BLC in an Indians' uniform.

As for the idea to put Hot Carl Pavano back into an Indians' uniform, didn't his 2009 performance price him out of the Indians' plans (hopefully...fingers crossed) in that some team is going to give him a multi-year deal, even if "multi-year" means two, that he doesn't justify?

Plus, take a closer look at [the quote by Chris Antonetti from the piece that generated the "Pavano as an option for the rotation" talk](#) without the noise from Pavano's agent regarding the Indians' "interest":

"We appreciate the job Carl did for us. He continued to pitch well for the Twins. We'll have to see what Carl's expectations are."

His "expectations" (or at least those of his agent) are that Pavano's going to be looking for a multi-year deal because he just did his one-year/prove-himself deal and he's ready to get back into the multi-year deal business. Knowing that the Twins have an interest (allegedly), isn't the agent just trying to create that "second suitor" for Pavano (real or imagined) to get the best deal for his client?

That's all well and good for Pavano in terms of him getting the deal he wants...as

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long as the announcement of that deal doesn't take place at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario. If Carl Pavano is the baseline from which the Indians should be looking to improve their rotation, bringing him (or anyone else like him) in on a deal, particularly a multi-year deal, doesn't make a whole lot of sense if you're talking about an innings-eater whose only going to be eating innings that could be going to some of the young arms. If a pitcher brought in, he should represent an appreciable upgrade from the arms already in-house and should be figured on being a contributor to the team past 2010 and into the next "window" of contention...that is "scheduled" for 2011 and beyond. [Terry Pluto asserts](#) that the team "will probably add a veteran starter/reclamation project in the Carl Pavano mode", but let's hope that the motivation for doing so is not based on the idea that they can potentially flip said "veteran starter/reclamation project" in July of 2010 after that player has taken 100 or so innings that could have gone to the likes of Dave Huff or Aaron Laffey, two players that still could figure into the post-2010 plans.

As for potential Free Agent adds (though that doesn't seem too likely) on the North Coast that would represent an upgrade (assuming health), here's a list of the ["10 Riskiest Free Agents"](#), which include SP Rich Harden and SP/RP Justin Duchscherer...and even those guys are likely to find deals more attractive than what the Indians are likely to be offering.

Things remain quiet on The Reservation these days and are likely to stay that way, outside of the random coaching hire announcements and the 40-man/Rule 5 talk (which [Tony Latoria has been](#) and will be all over) that should fill out November. With that in mind, it's time to head off to the park on a gorgeous Fall day in Cleveland to see if a nearly-3-year-old can throw a cut fastball.