

Offseason Happenings: Could Indians Be Targeting Aybar?

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Tuesday, December 01 2009 7:00 PM -

The Indians yesterday completed a deal with the Tampa Bay Rays sending catcher Kelly Shoppach to them for a player to be named later. In the wake of the trade, Tony is here to provide information on what the catching situation will be like next year in Cleveland and just who the Indians may get in return as the player to be named later. Tony also chimes in on some of the recent coaching announcements up and down the system.



The Indians yesterday completed a deal with the Tampa Bay Rays sending catcher **Kelly Shoppach** to them for a player to be named later. In the wake of the trade, here is some additional information Indians GM Mark Shapiro shared in a conference call with the media as well as some of my thoughts on the deal and other things:

- Shapiro said there were three reasons they traded Shoppach. First and foremost, he feels very strongly about the young catchers in the system who are ready to play at the big league level and considers it an area of strength in the organization. Secondly, financial considerations were certainly involved since Shoppach was heading for arbitration and a salary increase. Last, he likes the player they will get back in the trade with Tampa.
- Shapiro said numerous teams were interested in Shoppach as he was engaged in trade talks with several other teams besides just Tampa.
- Shapiro did not say this was the case, but rumblings of late have suggested that

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the Indians were indeed considering non-tendering Shoppach by the December 12th deadline. Shoppach is in line to make around \$3 million next year, and considering they wanted to go with their young catching trio of Lou Marson, Wyatt Toregas, and Carlos Santana to fill the starting and backup roles in 2010, Shoppach at \$3 million would have been a waste of what Shapiro considers "finite resources". Bottom line, they want to get a head start playing those guys every game, and it will start with game one next year.

- As for the player to be named later, Shapiro did not provide any details on what kind of player it would be other than that they have the potential to be on the 25-man roster next season. Shapiro said they have a list of a "couple players" they are choosing from, though it reportedly is a list of just two players.

- While the player to be named is unknown, it is very likely that the two players they are deciding on are currently playing winter ball for the Rays and they will use the next three weeks before the December 20th deadline to do some additional scouting on the players. Looking at the Rays list of players that are currently playing in the winter leagues combined with the Indians needs for next season, infielder **Willy Aybar** immediately stands out. He is a switch-hitter with the versatility to play anywhere in the infield, mainly at third base and second base. Aybar looks to be a good fit as far as the player to be named later goes.

- Infielder **Elliot Johnson** is another possible alternative. The one thing with Johnson is he is not playing winter ball, so there would be no need to wait until December 20th because there is no opportunity to scout him between now and then. There may be some medical stuff the Indians want to review as he was dinged up last year and only played in 68 total games. He is already on the 40-man, so this is not a situation where they are waiting out Rule 5 to see if the player is picked. It could just be Johnson and some other Single-A level player where if the medical comes back questionable on Johnson they decide to go the route of picking up the Single-A player already agreed upon. Either way, I still think the Indians are trying to address their utility infielder void with this trade. I would still prefer Aybar if he is indeed an option.

- With Victor Martinez traded in July and now Shoppach gone, there is no doubt

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the Indians are gearing up and getting ready to hand over the keys to the everyday catching position to elite catching prospect **Carlos Santana**. But Santana is set to open in Triple-A Columbus pretty much no matter what. If things go as planned, Santana will likely come up sometime midseason around the All Star break. In the meantime he will continue to work on his game at Columbus, more specifically developing his leadership skills, game calling, and improving his defense.

- With Shoppach gone and Santana not yet in the picture, this means that barring something unfortunate happening that **Lou Marson** will be the regular catcher next year at the outset of the season. The Indians like Marson and feel in his limited major league debut last year that "to draw any conclusions on that would be foolish". Shapiro said that Marson gives a quality at bat every time up and has done that throughout his minor league career and also calls a good game, has a quick release, handles a staff effectively, and exhibits good plate discipline.

- With Marson the everyday catcher, **Wyatt Toregas** is in line to be the backup catcher. **Chris Gimenez** is not considered for the backup role as the Indians are supposedly moving him away from catching and instead focusing on him more as a utility player and as an emergency catcher only.

- The setup with Marson and Toregas as the catching tandem on the big league roster to open the 2010 season is very similar to how they handled things back in 2003. Back then they also had a big time catching prospect in Victor Martinez coming up, and started him off in Triple-A to finish off his development before promoting him in late June or early July that year for good. Marson and Toregas will serve as the short term options until Santana is ready, sort of like Josh Bard and Tim Laker did in 2003.

- Shapiro said that there is really not much of a need to go out and sign a veteran catcher to help assist in the development of the young catchers because of the presence of **Sandy Alomar Jr.** on the coaching staff. They feel Sandy can provide anything a veteran backup would, and even more. They still may explore bringing in a veteran catcher as a non-roster player for a potential backup role.

- In regard to **Mike Sarbaugh** being named as the new manager at Columbus and **Joel Skinner** being named the new manager at

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Double-A Akron, Shapiro said this was the best fit for both managers based on the organization's need combined with the need of the individuals involved. Skinner wanted to remain with the organization because he lives in the area (Avon Lake), so staying in the area gives him the ability to better balance his personal and professional life. It was also a priority for the organization to keep Skinner in the organization as they feel his experience will help immensely at Double-A which they consider the most important level of development. Sarbaugh going to Columbus will help continue his development and provide him with a new experience of dealing with what will be much closer to a major league environment in the clubhouse and on the field.

- An announcement of the rest of the Indians managers and coaches throughout their system will be announced at a later date, but I am hearing that Kinston manager **Chris Tremie** will be taking on a new role in 2010 where he will split duties as the organization's Catching Coordinator and also manage the Arizona League Indians team. Tim Laker had been the Catching Coordinator for the past two years, so it is not certain at this time whether he has left the organization or will assume a different role in the organization. The Indians have also hired **Mickey Callaway**

as a pitching coach, though it is not known where he will be assigned.

- With Skinner in Akron, Sarbaugh in Columbus, and now Tremie in Arizona, the only unknowns as far as managers go is at short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley, Low-A Lake County, and High-A Kinston. **Travis Fryman** is likely to return as a manager this season, but it is not known if he will stay in Mahoning Valley or move up to Lake County or Kinston. Fryman may end up back in Mahoning Valley (his choice), with

Aaron Holbert

returning to Lake County and

Rouglas Odor

taking over in Kinston.

- And finally, a big congratulations to **Ruben Niebla** for being named to the big league coaching staff. In Niebla's role he will assist new Indians pitching coach Tim Belcher and bullpen coach Scott Radinsky in the development of all their pitchers and sort of be a third set of eyes for what truly is the most critical part of the Indians roster. Niebla paid his dues in the minor leagues as a coach, and was one of the most approachable and knowledgeable coaches I have talked to while covering the Indians farm system. He was a very good teacher and did a great job

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with his pitchers, and he will certainly be an asset to Acta's staff.