

## Making Sense Of The Bixler, Brito Swap

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Tuesday, January 19 2010 7:00 PM -

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This past Monday, the Indians made a trade, sending 22-year old third base prospect Jesus Brito to the Pirates for 27-year old infielder Brian Bixler. Bixler was immediately added to the 40 man roster, and is expected to compete with Mark Grudzielanek and Jason Donald for the utility infielder role in spring training. Many fans had a hard time understanding this deal, as Brito is still very young, and is coming off a season where he hit .353 at Mahoning Valley. And he was dealt for a 27 year old with little upside. Enter Tony Lastoria to help us make sense of this, and give us what he feels was the Indians perspective in doing it.



After having about 24 hours to digest the trade where the Indians, on Monday, sent 22-year old third base prospect Jesus Brito to the Pirates for 27-year old infielder Brian Bixler, I feel the deal makes a little more sense today than it did yesterday. A little.

Bixler is not much to get excited about as he strikes out way too much and has had a very questionable showing at the big league level in the limited time he has been there. But, he does have above average speed and is solid average defensively. People within the industry also believe he will play better in a second base role, which is exactly what the Indians were looking for in this exchange: a young, cheap, right-handed second baseman who could fill in temporarily as the platoon partner at second base with incumbent Luis Valbuena. While the Indians would prefer that Mark Grudzielanek be that guy, he has to prove he is healthy and still has something left in the tank. So Bixler is Option B until Option C in Jason Donald is hopefully ready by mid-season.

Another place where the acquisition of Bixler has value for the Indians is that he is

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middle infield depth that they really needed in the upper levels and a potential utility option to start the season, two things the Indians do not currently have on the 40-man roster. Again, Donald is not an option to start the season with the Indians as they are committed to having him open the season in Triple-A to prove his back is healthy and to also get him back on track before reassessing him six to eight weeks into the season. There may have been better options for the Indians to pick up for the utility gig, but they had a need in the middle infield as aside from Donald there was no one else of interest ready to be his keystone partner since Carlos Rivero and Josh Rodriguez likely open the season in Double-A Akron. In addition, the Indians lacked a utility player for the big league team and at the same time were able to pick up a player who has some roster flexibility because he has one option year left. So, it is not *that* bad of a move.

In regard to Brito, fans of the Indians and Pirates will surely point to his very nice statistical season last year at rookie level Arizona and short-season Single-A Mahoning Valley where in 60 games he hit a combined .353 with 3 HR, 43 RBI, and .998 OPS as well as a nice 31 walks to 42 strikeouts ratio. But people should be careful in not getting too caught up in his numbers last year as a 21 year old spent mostly in Arizona which is a league he was old for and where offensive numbers are inflated. Had he only played in the Arizona League all year, even with the .366 average and 1.081 OPS there he likely would have been a borderline Top 50 guy for me, but I had him in the mid 30s because I was intrigued with what he showed in Mahoning Valley. The numbers were certainly impressive for him last year, but there's obviously a lot more to it than that and when you dig a little further under the surface you get a better idea of his true value.

Brito is still somewhat young at 22 years old, so some more power and weight could come, but he is already about 175 pounds or so (the 160 may be his signing weight) and he only managed three home runs last year in 60 games (224 at bats). He has the \*potential\* to be a 20 HR a year guy, but that's because of his solid doubles total last year and I think he settles more in the 10-15 a year category. So while there is certainly some upside still it remains to be seen what kind of prospect he can become.

The problem with Brito is he lacks a position as I don't think he can be a major league defender at third base. He really struggled at times last year with the transition there from the outfield, and I bet he ends up back in the outfield for the Pirates. He has a strong arm, but the range is questionable and he is barely

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average with his speed. Plus he has yet to even play for a full season team, which for a Latin player at 22 years old is a serious red flag.

My biggest problem I had with ranking and evaluating Brito is I have a hard time believing he suddenly figured it out last year. I mean the guy was in the Dominican Summer League (DSL) the previous three years and hit .223 in 2006, .210 in 2007, and .239 in 2008. His slugging in 2006 was .319, in 2007 was .314 and in 2008 was .283 and then all of a sudden last year his slugging percentage jumped to .642 in Arizona and .456 in Mahoning Valley. I can buy the slugging increase in Mahoning Valley, but not in Arizona and to me is the product of the league which favors offense as well as a cumulative BABIP on the year of .405 which is unsustainable going forward.

Maybe things did come together for him, who knows, but it looks very much like a flash-in-the-pan year considering he was 21 years old and had done nothing in his previous three years in the organization. He was not considered a high level prospect going into last season and was not one after last season even after his very good performance and Nintendo-like numbers. Plus, high level Latin prospects do not spend three years in the DSL as the Indians have historically moved the guys they deem high level/value out after one year and bring them stateside at 18-19 years of age. When you are brought stateside at 21 years of age, those guys tend to be fringe players.

We'll see in time how this shakes out. Brito definitely put himself on the map with a great showing last year, and ultimately I would have preferred that he remained with the Indians another year to prove himself one way or the other. But in the end I don't have a problem trading him because he may have been at his peak value, though I would have preferred to maybe get a little more in return than Bixler (though we always tend to over-value our players in trades).

One thing is certain, and that is the Indians have a lot of third base depth in the lower levels of their system with just as much prospect pedigree as Brito had and more to offset his loss. With a healthy Jeremie Tice and fast-rising newcomers like Kyle Bellows and Giovanny Urshela, the third base position should be well stocked at High-A Kinston and Low-A Lake County next year. So in the end, this simply may have been the Indians dealing from a position of strength in the lower levels to fill a position of need in the upper levels. For as questionable a talent as Bixler he has already proven to be successful in Triple-A and has limited value as a major leaguer, while Brito has yet to set foot in Low-A. So there is the tradeoff.