

A Lazy Sunday Spent Wondering How We Got Here

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Saturday, January 23 2010 7:00 PM -

As 50 degree weather inexplicably makes its way to the North Coast on a January morning as we get ready for the NFL conference championship games, let's get rolling right into a Lazy Sunday, starting off with Paul's take on a piece from Yahoo's Jeff Passan on why he thinks the Indians find themselves where they do. In today's piece, Paul also takes a look back at the Indians performance this past decade as it compares to our division foes, hindsight on the Cliff Lee trade, and some very intriguing developments on the Cleveland microbrewery front.



As 50 degree weather inexplicably makes its way to the North Coast on a January morning and since there are errands to run before football starts let's get rolling right into a Lazy Sunday, starting off with [a piece from Yahoo's Jeff Passan](#) on why he thinks the Indians find themselves where they do. While the article in neither revolutionary nor wholly accurate, it does present some great starting points on a Sunday that actually doesn't look to be too Lazy for me:

Equal parts of the blame go to Indians ownership and management. The Dolan family runs the team on a tight budget. It doesn't spend much in the draft. Not quite the flowerbed for prosperity. And yet general manager Mark Shapiro is the one who gave Travis Hafner - a designated hitter - a contract extension that runs \$11.5 million this year and \$13 million the next two years, plus a \$2.75 million buyout for 2013. And he traded CC Sabathia and Cliff Lee the season after each won the AL Cy Young award for a grab bag of prospects, none of whom has come close to distinguishing himself.

All of which is to say: The Indians are in one of those awful spirals that never seems to stop, one issue begetting another. They locked up all that money in Hafner, which means they can't spend elsewhere, which increases the chances of a rough season, which makes the Dolans wonder why they're spending any money in the first place. It's vicious.

--snip--

Low-revenue franchises like Cleveland cannot afford wholly miserable contracts. It torpedoes them. The New Yorks and Bostons of the world aren't the best because they spend the most on players but because they can afford to take chances, completely whiff and write it off like a businessman does an expensive dinner. That cost a lot, huh? Oh, well.

The Indians will devote more than half their payroll to Hafner, Kerry Wood and Jake Westbrook this season. Such is not the formula for Rust Belt success. The Indians must develop players (which they've done) and engage in the fine art of flipping them for a new crop of young players (which they had done prior to the Sabathia-Lee miscalculations).

I highlighted the money line here (and it's not the "awful spiral" one, which feels a little premature given that the Indians are two years removed from an ALCS appearance and that two of the three contracts he mentions are coming off the books after this year...if not sooner), which is where Passan puts most of his focus on the article. This is nothing new, but despite the incendiary portion of the fan base thinking that the Indians are left with an owner "unwilling to spend money", the issues that put the Indians where they are now is that the money that WAS spent ended up being committed to players whose production dropped precipitously after inking their deals, either due to injuries or regressions caused by injuries (allegedly) as well as a lack of home-grown talent to fill the voids created in trades.

As for that home-grown talent void, I found it interesting that Passan writes "the Indians must develop players (which they've done) and engage in the fine art of flipping them for a new crop of young players (which they had done prior to the Sabathia-Lee miscalculations)". All of that means that they are actually doing things RIGHT in terms of player development, only to be handcuffed by their place in the MLB pecking order. While Passan asserts that the team "doesn't spend much on the draft", I found [this little snippet from FanGraphs as they were doing a recap of the Red Sox 2009 draft](#)

:

Despite the possibility of being hamstrung during each amateur draft due to consistently-late picks from finishing with such a good record each season, this first-class organization uses its considerable finances to award above-slot contracts to deserving talents. Over the past four drafts, the club has handed out 19 above-slot deals worth \$200,000 or more, the highest number from any one

club.

Realizing that you're tired of hearing about the disparity in MLB from me recently (and I've just as tired of thinking about it), it puts into context what the Indians are up against here. With large-market clubs getting smarter at all levels of organizational development the Indians have struggled to keep up in terms of "out-smarting" large-market teams in the areas that the small-market teams used to still be able to utilize for player acquisition and development.

Going back to the piece, I'm not sure what Passan is intimating in the "Sabathia-Lee miscalculations"; if he's ready to dub both of those deals as failures by the Indians in terms of player acquisition. He writes that CC and Clifton Phifer were dealt for "a grab bag of prospects, none of whom has come close to distinguishing himself "; despite 2 players from the CC deal likely getting the majority of AB at 1B and in LF this year (a year and a half after the deal) and the fact that the Lee deal was just consummated 6 months ago, meaning it's still wildly early to denounce the trade, regardless of early returns.

Additionally, doesn't it strike you as odd that small market teams can to perennially succeed in development AND master the fine art of flipping players (as Passan says the Indians have done)...and still they can be undone by a couple of "misjudgments" to the point that a particular fan base has tuned them out just two years after nearly making the World Series?

It's been said time and time again since the middle of the 2009 season, but teams in markets like Cleveland attempt to build a group of players that develop and compete together, get good for a couple of years (with the hope that they get some hardware to show for their trouble), then watch a couple of those developed players go off via trade or FA as the team blows it all up and attempts to build it all over again.

Fans may not want to hear that, but that's the reality of MLB these days...and if you're looking for teams and GM's that have thrived given their team's specific economic standing in MLB, you may find [this piece from Baseball Prospectus rather interesting as Shawn Hoffman did a comprehensive analysis of the performance of each MLB GM through the decade that has just passed](#), using a criteria based on team revenue and performance.

You'll have to read the story to get to Hoffman's criteria, but after all of the computations to rank all of the General Managers of the "Aughts", [Shapiro comes in at #6](#)

, with Jocketty, Hunsicker, Gillick, Friedman, and Beane all grading out higher in this particular grading system which takes available resources (hence the exclusion of Cashman and Epstein) and results into consideration in ranking the 40 GM's evaluated.

Interestingly, the Indians are pegged as the 3rd best run organization over the past decade (behind the Athletics and the Cardinals) in the piece using Hoffman's criteria and while everyone will be quick to point out that the Indians are coming off of a 97-loss season and are looking at an approaching season of uncertainty (to be charitable), the Indians compiled four 90+ win seasons in the "Aughts" (two under Shapiro) and have two playoff appearances (one under Shapiro) to show for the decade.

Using 90+ win seasons and playoff appearances as a barometer then, how did the Indians stack up in the 2000s compared to their Central rivals?

Twins - four 90+ win seasons, five playoff appearances

White Sox - three 90+ win seasons, three playoff appearances

Indians - four 90+ win seasons, two playoff appearances

Tigers - one 90+ win season, one playoff appearance

Royals - zero 90+ win seasons, zero playoff appearances

It should be noted that the last time the Royals had a 90+ win season was 1989. To put that in perspective, that was the same year that John Hart replaced Doc Edwards in the Tribe dugout to manage the last 20 games of the season.

But I digress...back to the "best-run organization" piece, did anyone else notice that the Athletics (who came in at #1 in the article) have been attempting to open their next "window of contention" over the last three or four years, stockpiling young arms just like another team you may know?

The A's have turned the pieces and parts from their success of the early-to-mid-90s (6 of 7 seasons with 90+ win seasons) into a talented group of youngsters. While those teams haven't been above .500 for the past 3 years, the seeds sewn from their trades of the past few years has finally started to blossom, most notably in their starting rotation as all but 15 of their games last year were

started by players that were 25 or younger on [a staff that had an identical team ERA in 2009 \(4.26\) as the Yankees did](#)

.

Both the Indians and Athletics realize what they are and while the off-season may be boring for Indians' fans and may cause an inordinate amount of hand-wringing over Mike Redmond and his ilk (present company included), how does the alternative look for teams that aren't nearly as self-aware of their place in the MLB pecking order?

Would you prefer an off-season where our team "adds" a guy like Rick Ankiel (who posted a .285 OBP last year...Trevor Crowe's was .278) for \$3.25M, leading [Joe Posnanski to evaluate his Royals-related stages of grief](#) ?

It goes back to the Passan piece in that he asserts that "the disconnect between the Cleveland Indians and their fans has spread from fissure to full-fledged canyon, and this offseason is doing nothing to heal a relationship gone rocky"; and while I don't disagree with that, it points to the idea that people want activity for a team to point to in an attempt to show that the team is improving, even incrementally. However, the quiet offseason that "is doing nothing to heal a relationship gone rocky" shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone who was around last July when Lee and Victor were dealt with a club option for 2010 on their contract. Debate all you like about whether adding those two to the 2010 Indians' team makes it a contender, but in the case of Lee, there's no question what he has his eyes on this coming offseason, at least [according to Jayson Stark's sources](#)

:

"Everyone in baseball knows," said one AL executive, "that the two things Cliff Lee and Derek Braunecker will want next winter are a lot of years and a lot of dollars. This guy just played with a Cy Young (CC Sabathia) who got seven years on the open market. So why would anyone think he wouldn't be saying, 'Why shouldn't I get that, too?'"

If that was the Lee's position when he approached the Indians before 2009 about a contract extension and the Indians were sitting at 42-60 at the time he was dealt, is there any question that Lee wasn't going to be around for 2010?

That being said, did the Indians get enough for him?

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We're not going to know for a while, though people are quick to forget that Carrasco, Marson, and Donald were among Baseball America's top 100 prospects entering 2009 with [Carrasco at 52](#) , [Marson at 66](#), and [Donald at 69](#) . While each started 2009 off slowly in the Phillies' system (causing much of the consternation when the trade was made), the bodies of work that put them at that level in prospect rankings still exist.

In terms of why the Indians included Lou Marson and Jason Donald in the deal (in the context of the addition of Mike Redmond and, to a lesser extent, Brian Bixler and Mark Grudzielanek), I had an e-mail exchange with a consistently insightful reader (who asked not to be named) who had some interesting thoughts as to why the Indians opted to acquire Marson and Donald instead of OF Michael Taylor, who was reportedly available to them and has now been traded twice this off-season, once to the Blue Jays in the Halladay deal, then [to the Athletics for Brett Wallace](#) last month.

His thoughts on the inclusion of Marson and Donald (as well as perhaps why the Indians chose Carrasco) do make sense on a number of levels and it goes a little something like this...hit it:

The Lee trade ... I've been saving this one, but as a very belated baby shower gift, I'll give it to you...

A-21(A-): 227/300/365, 23:53 BB/K

B-21(A-): 263/347/362, 23:42 BB/K

A-22(A/A+): 346/412/557, 50:89 BB/K (671 mleOPS)

B-22(A/A+): 304/395/473, 64:109 BB/K (603 mleOPS)

A-23(AA/AAA): 320/395/549, 48:70 BB/K (730 mleOPS)

A-23(AA): 307/391/497, 47:86 BB/K (689 mleOPS)

You probably guessed: Player A is Michael Taylor, Player B is Jason Donald. The grains of salt here are that Donald is about 15 months older, and spent all of last year hurt. On the other hand, Donald is a middle infielder. Taylor's a left fielder. Taylor's numbers are gaudy, for sure, but his viability as a major leaguer will be contingent on his making the power translate; otherwise, he's Ben Francisco the Younger. Donald's defensive value -- and, look closely, his roughly equal

effectiveness as a baserunner -- mean that even if his pop falls off a little against MLB pitching, he's still pulling his weight.

And remember the Andy Marte Rule: Do not get worked up because a minor leaguer hits 20 home runs.

So how's this for a trade narrative: The Phils offer Taylor, and the Tribe counters with Donald -- a legitimately better prospect but for the injury -- and Marson to make up the difference, thereby filling the need for a right-handed, MLB-ready middle infielder, and getting a young, solid, cost-controlled catcher who serves as Santana insurance, and whose presence allows the Indians to clear payroll and beef up the starting depth by moving Shoppach.

You could make a similar case for Carrasco/Knapp over Drabek, except, of course, for the fact that Carrasco compares favorably to Drabek already, as you've pointed out plenty.

So, Dave Cameron at FanGraphs (who ripped the deal saying Shapiro got "taken to the cleaners" or something to that effect) would be happy if we'd hauled in Drabek/Taylor. But the reality is, we needed two pitchers more than we needed one, and we needed skill position players more than we needed Yet Another GD Left-fielder, and Cameron, bless his heart, wouldn't have to live with the Lee trade failing to equate to long-term MLB production.

Perhaps it was that idea of quantity in light of the attrition rate of these prospects (particularly the pitchers) and perhaps the Indians have put more stock into the idea that Carrasco, Marson, and Donald were "undervalued" a bit because they didn't positively light up AAA Lehigh Valley in their first 3 months there. Perhaps it was the idea that a body of work longer than 3 months could be leaned upon more heavily in terms of taking a guy like previous flavor-of-the-month Carrasco over current flavor-of-the-month Drabek and likewise with Marson and Donald over Taylor (who did not appear among Baseball America's Top 100 prospects entering 2009) in that they put more stock in three years of performance over three months of performance.

At this point, only time will tell if the Indians chose the prudent path...

Changing lanes and apropos of nothing, but attempting to leave this on a positive point, news that [Andy Tveekrem is returning to the North Coast](#) hit recently and if

you don't know who Andy Tveekrem is, allow this to enlighten you:

Tveekrem, 46, has moved back from Delaware, where he was the brewmaster for Dogfish Head Craft Brewery for the last five years. He and his wife, Vickie, who was a waitress at the Great Lakes Brewing Co. when he began his brewing career there, are renting in the Tremont neighborhood for the time being.

--snip--

He began with Great Lakes Brewing Co. in 1991 and was brewmaster when he left in 2000. During his time there, Great Lakes went from producing 850 barrels a year to 18,000. Pat Conway is one of the founders of the company.

Even if you're not familiar with what Dogfish Head Craft Brewery has been putting out for the last five years (Esquire Magazine called their 90-minute Imperial IPA "perhaps the best IPA in America"), that timeframe of when Tveekrem was brewmaster at GLBC would mean that he was the brewmaster when Dortmunder and Christmas Ale were first put into production.

Anywho, Tveekrem is teaming up with the owner of McNulty's Bier Market/Bar Cento to create a microbrewery "directly across from McNulty's Bier Markt, just north of the West Side Market", it's safe to say that the West 25th Street/Lorain area is quickly becoming quite a hub for phenomenal craft beers (call it "The Brewery District")...something that can keep us warm throughout our North Coast winters.

Finally, it should be mentioned that I've been asked to guest host this Thursday's "All Bets Are Off", sitting in for the vacationing Bruce Drennan. The show will air from 3 PM to 6 PM, so be sure to set those DVR's (if you happen to work at those times) or watch live and interact as much as you'd like as I'll be talking Tribe, Browns, and Cavs while welcoming Tony Lastoria and others as guests for the 3-hour live show.