

Prospecting on a Lazy Sunday

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Sunday, January 31 2010 10:00 AM - Last Updated Thursday, February 04 2010 12:52 PM



With no football on this Sunday (and no, the Pro Bowl does not count) and before you go off and order your [official 10-cent Beer Night shirt](#) , let's get loose right off the bat on a Lazy One with plenty to cover from prospects rankings to a market inefficiency and from an absurd argument getting watered down to a guest-hosting debut.

So, without further ado, we're off...

The biggest baseball-related news to come out this week that had anything to do with the Indians was the release of [Keith Law's organizational rankings for prospects](#) and his individual prospect rankings at ESPN, which generally present a good measuring stick (along with BA, B-Pro) for how the Indians stack up against the rest of MLB in terms of prospects. To nobody's surprise, the Indians came in ranked at #4 with Law explaining his reasoning thusly:

They continue to build depth without a ton of impact prospects, although Carlos Santana and Lonnie Chisenhall are exceptions to that rule, and they have a handful of low-A/short-season guys who could break away from the pack. There's still value in a system that can keep pumping out average or fringe-average big leaguers, simply because it keeps you away from the Jason Kendalls of the free-agent market.

It should be noted that in [his individual player rankings](#) , Law has Santana rated as the #3 prospect in all of baseball (top catching prospect, one slot ahead of the Giants' Buster Posey), The Chiz as the 26th best prospect (top 3B prospect on the list), then ranks Hector Rondon at #51, Michael Brantley at #71, and Nick Hagadone at #100.

While certainly appreciating the message that Law's attempting to convey in two sentences, I'm not sure how the overview and the specific rankings match up if he's saying that they don't have a "ton of impact prospects" and "a handful of low-A/short-season guys that could break away from the pack", then lists a AAA starting pitcher in Rondon at #51 (who's not yet 22 years old) and the Indians' likely LF for 2010 (who doesn't turn 23 until this May) in Mike Brantley at #71.

If "impact prospects" have to be in the Top 50, for example (if Rondon's #51 and doesn't make his list as an "exception to the rule"), then how many teams have two or more "impact

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prospects"? The answer (if you're following Law's Top 50 as "impact prospects") is 4. The Rangers, the Cubs, the Rays, and the Rockies have three players that are in the Top 50 prospects, with the Rockies' third prospect in the Top 50 at #48 (three ahead of Rondon) and the Cubs' third prospect in the Top 50 AT #50 (one ahead of Rondon).

So the Rangers (#7, #9, and #13) and the Rays (#6, #15, and #17) would have more "impact prospects" than the Indians with the Indians counting three more from #51 to #100. I know that these rankings are fairly arbitrary, but Law's intimation that "there's still value in a system that can keep pumping out average or fringe-average big leaguers" is misleading if you're looking at where he's ranking the three players in the organization PAST Santana and Chisenhall.

It sounds dismissive on the part of Law (that the prospects beyond Santana and The Chiz are almost like these Jason Kendall replacement-level players), but isn't that really how most organizations line up, touting a few top-flight prospects (and it is interesting to note that all 30 MLB teams are represented by at least one player in Law's Top 50...so do what you want with that), then hoping that a couple of guys in the lower levels "break away from the pack"?

Would it be great to have MORE potential impact players?

No question, but just to bring the pitching "situation" facing the Indians right now, in light of how it was predicted (not too long ago) that the Indians' rotation these days would consist of Carmona, Miller, Lofgren, and a couple of soft-tossing lefties filling out the back end of the rotation...with mainly soft-tossing lefties and a trainwreck of Carmona still around making up a mish-mash rotation, isn't the prudent path to take to build that depth as long as quality isn't compromised? Maybe none of the arms that make up the current Indians' depth pan out and maybe injuries and regressions take guys like Hagadone or Knapp or Alex White off of the radar, but isn't the idea that there is some strength in numbers in terms of attempting to overwhelm the attrition rate for prospects, particularly for pitching prospects?

Law says himself that "they have a handful of low-A/short-season guys who could break away from the pack" and isn't that what's been discussed here before, not necessarily placing all of the prospect eggs in one basket and building up that "depth" with the idea that not all of these players are going to pan out, but that there are more players around them that (ideally) somebody will?

Remember [the whole "Layers of Arms" idea](#) of guys that probably figure to start the 2010 season below the parent club?

1st Layer

Hector Rondon - 22 ☐

Carlos Carrasco - 23 ☐

Dave Huff - 25 ☐

Jeanmar Gomez - 22 ☐

Zach Putnam - 22 ☐

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2nd Layer

Scott Barnes - 22 □

Bryan Price - 23 □

Nick Hagadone - 24 □

Eric Berger - 24 □

Connor Graham - 24 □

3rd Layer

Jason Knapp - 19 □

Alex White - 21 □

Alexander Perez - 20 □

TJ House - 20 □

Joe Gardner - 21

Do all of those guys pan out?

No chance, but if one or two out of the four or five in each group can fill a hole in the rotation or in the bullpen, then there's your pipeline getting filled again. Looking at those ages within each of those "layers", it's also important to remember these ages of players who figure in on the 25-man roster more prominently in 2010:

Justin Masterson - 24

Aaron Laffey - 24

Hurricane Perez - 23

Jesse Ray Todd - 23

Tony Sipp - 25

Joe Smith - 25

That's a lot of arms under the age of 25 in the system and, while the idea that not all of these pitchers are going to legitimately contribute at any point in their career is valid, quantity may not be a foolish strategy to take, assuming that the quantity is not simply in lieu of overall quality.

Off the soapbox and back to the topic of rankings (which got this whole thing started), I'd be remiss if I didn't mention [Jonathon Mayo's rankings at MLB.com](#), where he listed many of the same Tribe players as Law, just in different spots:

Carlos Santana - #11

Mike Brantley - #46

The Chiz - #55

Nicky Hagadone - #56

Putting Mayo's list of Indians' prospects up against Law's is interesting because it shows how variant these lists can be and how they can be taken any number of ways. And it's not just for the Tribe, if you compare the players listed by Law in his Top 100 and by Mayo in his Top 50 for

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our AL Central brethren Royals:

Law

Eric Hosmer - #34

Mayo

Mike Moustakas - #32

Wil Myers - #33

Aaron Crow - #41

Mike Montgomery - #43

So...if you're a KC fan, are you encouraged by having 4 prospects in the Top 50 according to MLB.com, or discouraged by having 1 prospect (who was not included in MLB.com's list at all) in Law's Top 100?

These overall MLB rankings can always be taken with a grain of salt as you wonder what forces Chisenhall to be one slot ahead of Hagadone in MLB.com's ranking and a full 74 slots ahead of him in ESPN. Ultimately, it's a lot of conjecture and presents some nice jumping points for debate and whether you think that the Indians are well-positioned, prospect-wise, to shorten that rebuilding timeframe (as they did from 2002 to 2005) or if simply you ascribe to the credo that [Carleton Douglas Ridenour](#) once preached and simply "Don't Believe the Hype", well that's up to you.

What is interesting to me is to watch the avenues that some mid-market teams are taking this offseason in an attempt to field competitive teams, with the most recent example being the Athletics' signing of Ben Sheets for \$10M. The signing strikes me as fascinating because the move can be taken for one of two ways - either that the A's feel that their young pitching is close to being ready to mature to the level of consistency with a need for a veteran at the top of the rotation to shepherd them to the next level (remember Kevin Millwood inking an \$7M deal seen as risky by most before the 2005 season with a certain team to "impart some wisdom" on CC and CP and Jake) or they signed Sheets as a sort of lottery ticket that they hope to turn into more young talent, just as they did with Matt Holliday last July.

On the possibility of the latter, [this is from The Hardball Times on the Sheets acquisition](#) :

It's possible the club might only be on the hook for half the salary as well, as there's a school of thought that GM Billy Beane would flip Sheets for prospects at the trading deadline, if (or when) the team is out of contention. Assuming Sheets stays healthy, there's a great chance of that happening.

Suddenly, are we seeing the next wave of how small-to-mid-market teams catch up with some of the teams with deeper pockets in terms of player acquisition WHILE avoiding committing signing bonus money in the draft? That is to say, if the A's signed Sheets with the idea that they can flip him for prospects to a contender (assuming he's healthy) at the middle of the season

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and the A's are out of the race, the A's are able to choose from a list of prospects (from multiple suitors) who have a track record in MiLB, with their signing bonuses already paid, at levels much closer to MLB than those available in the Amateur Draft. The A's pay half of a season of Sheets' 2010 salary to essentially acquire prospects that are more advanced than players available in the draft and gain control of those prospects for six MLB seasons with half of those seasons coming at the MLB minimum.

Is that what's to be made of the [Orlando Hudson-to-Cleveland rumors](#) ...which make zero sense otherwise with a 24-year-old Valbuena still adjusting to MLB, not to mention in the context of selling lower than low on Carmona that Rosenthal intimates?

Would the Indians sign a guy like Hudson with the idea that they think that his trade value by the middle of the season would net them more prospects to plug into the pipeline with the idea that quantity AND quality is preferable to just the latter?

Remember all of that talk about "market inefficiency" being OBP or defense or whatever a team who finds success (even if it's one year of success) focused on to outsmart everyone in constructing a winner?

Is this the new "market inefficiency" for small-to-mid-market teams to exploit?

Unquestionably, it's been established that the lifeblood of these small-to-mid-market teams is young (read: cheap) talent that can continuously be filtered through to consistently put a competitive team on the field. When that lifeblood of prospects being churned out runs dry or slows to a trickle, the process starts all over again.

Ultimately, it goes back to the draft and to prospects and how the large-market teams are starting to use the rules in place to stack their organizations from top to bottom because of their deep pockets and their ability to take risks because of those deep pockets. And to that end, [Kevin Goldstein at Baseball Prospectus has an interesting piece on how the Red Sox have built a strong farm system](#)

(Law rated them as #2 in his organizational rankings) because they are taking advantage of the rules and procedures in place.

Realistically, they're not doing anything but choosing prudent uses for their money and building a dynasty at the top, but also from the ground up and the way they're accomplishing it is something that should worry any team not located in major markets:

*It's important to note that while there is a slotting system for the draft, it's not etched in stone. It's merely numbers that are suggested by the powers that be at MLB, and if a team is willing to have some people from central office yell and claim it is ruining the game via a few phone calls, a team can skirt the suggestions whenever it wants. Money, as much as talent, defines the draft order. **Can you imagine Kevin Durant or LeBron James dropping to the end of the first round, and therefore to what is already a good team, because those drafting early fear their contract demands? It happens all of the time in baseball, and no team takes advantage of this more-or better-than the Red Sox.***

--snip--□

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So, by taking advantage of the situation presented to them, the Red Sox, who are always drafting towards the end of the first round, and often losing first-round picks due to free-agent compensation, have been able to pick up the equivalent of seven first-rounders in the past four years, while adding 15 second-round talents, if we go purely by bonus. That's why the system is always so loaded, as this year's squad at Triple-A Pawtucket will be filled young, big-league ready talents should the need arise via injury, while the lower levels of the system have some of the most intriguing high-ceiling prospects in the game.

The money line (which is brilliant in terms of putting it into the proper outrageous context) is bolded here, but there's something more than that because the Red Sox have instituted a system that not only recognizes talent (with the money there to back it up), but also puts other teams' money spent on the MLB draft to shame, over-slot or not.

Unfortunately for teams like the Indians, they're now caught in a vicious game of catch-up with the only path back to contention (albeit short-lived contention) is to have all of the aspects of player acquisition and player development firing on all cylinders to get that steady stream of talent flowing onto the parent club, with no contract "mistakes" made in retaining that talent.

Moving on (if only because I can't stomach the previous topic for much longer), while realizing that prospect lists and projections and predictions are just that (particularly at the end of January), I thought I would pass along some [projected CAIRO standings](#), which are generated by [Diamond Mind's player projections](#), for the AL Central (brought to my attention by [Rob Neyer's Sweet Spot](#)) which may surprise some people:

White Sox - 88-74

Twins - 82-80

Indians - 76-86

Tigers - 75-87

Royals - 71-91

As long as we're looking at how the AL Central will look eight months from now, here's how [Baseball Prospectus' projections see the division shaking out](#)

:

Twins - 82-80

White Sox - 79-83

Tigers - 79-83

Indians - 77-85

Royals - 66-96

For the most part, both see the divisions as pretty tightly clustered (with the exception of the White Sox running away with it according to CAIRO and the Royals being...well, the Royals in B-Pro's), but the interesting thing to me is how these projections come about, which is to project

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Runs Scored and Runs Against for each team. These projections then essentially rank how each team's offense and defense stacks up against the rest of the American League.

Looking at it from that standpoint, here's how the Indians and the rest of the AL Central teams rank among the 14 AL teams in each category in each projection:

Indians' Runs Scored

CAIRO - 8th of 14

B-Pro - 10th of 14

Indians' Runs Against

CAIRO - 10th of 14

B-Pro - 8th of 14

Twins' Runs Scored

CAIRO - 5th of 14

B-Pro - 6th of 14

Twins' Runs Against

CAIRO - 8th of 14

B-Pro - 9th of 14

White Sox Runs Scored

CAIRO - 6th of 14

B-Pro - 11th of 14

White Sox Runs Against

CAIRO - 5th of 14

B-Pro - 6th of 14

Tigers' Runs Scored

CAIRO - 7th of 14

B-Pro - 12th of 14

Tigers' Runs Against

CAIRO - 12th of 14

B-Pro - 7th of 14

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Royals' Runs Scored

CAIRO - 11th of 14

B-Pro - 8th of 14

Royals' Runs Against

CAIRO - 14th of 14

B-Pro - 13th of 14

Why do I find this so fascinating?

It's the topic I addressed at the top (when the butterflies were still fluttering) of the "All Bets Are Off" show that I guest-hosted on Thursday, in that (it's not new ground here) looking at those projected runs scored and runs against for each of the Central teams, which unit, offense or pitching, stands out in the division?

The Twins' offense and the White Sox pitching?

Figure in that Joe Mauer and Miguel Cabrera could find themselves elsewhere this July or next offseason and the Central looks weak...and getting weaker.

You wouldn't know that though if you simply took today's PD as Paul Hoynes took his weekly opportunity to point out that [the Indians haven't done much this off-season](#) . Maybe I'm mistaken, but didn't he write about this two weeks ago?

[He did](#)

, and did it not already cause

[this response to point out the absurdity of the premise](#)

?

For anyone who REALLY is upset about this offseason and what it means to the chances of contention in 2010, here's a news flash - the Indians effectively made it known that they weren't going to contend in 2010 last July and any moves made to simply put warm bodies on the roster in an attempt to pacify the fan base is counter-productive.

Does anyone REALLY not remember the 2002 team that was designed to "compete while rebuilding"?

Do the lessons of Matt Lawton and Ricky Gutierrez mean nothing anymore?

Teams in MLB are either contending or they're building toward contention...the Indians aren't contending (and neither are the Royals or likely the Tigers), so why should they spend uselessly to pretend like they're going to?

I wrote this two weeks ago in summation to this faulty logic that the inactivity Indians' offseason

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is "startling" (as is written today), but just to reiterate in response to this continued lunacy from Hoynes (who it seems is just writing to enrage the masses these days, which is right in the PD's wheelhouse, I suppose)... "there's plenty to complain about with the Indians' performance over the past two years, but their inactivity in Free Agency this off-season falls so far down the list that it doesn't even merit a second thought. Maybe their inactivity ranks a little higher than the irrationally fanned outrage over Luis Isaac's dismissal, but it's pretty far down the list of organizations issues since the end of 2007."

Additionally, the assertion that "complements" the argument that the Indians are being out-spent again comes from Hoynes (print edition only, [not online](#)) as this:

The scope of the Indians' activity is startling. In preparation for their 97-loss season last year, they spent over \$20M on free agents Kerry Wood and Pavano. In 2007, the most recent time they made the postseason, they spent almost \$29 million on free agents David Dellucci (three years, \$11.5 million), Aaron Fultz (one year, \$1.65 million), Joe Borowski (one year, \$4.25 million), Keith Foulke (one year, \$5 million), Roberto Hernandez (one year, \$3.5 million), and Trot Nixon (one year, \$3 million).

Pardon me while I attempt to take a step back here, but seeing THESE names along with the players being signed elsewhere in the Central is the argument for the Indians to make moves and to not simply let their young talent get exposed to MLB with the idea that the team needs more answers than questions past 2010?

If anything, the argument that the Indians should be needlessly spending money is so flimsy (and getting flimsier) that it brings more credence to the very topic was something that was discussed in detail when I guest-hosted this past Thursday's edition of "All Bets are Off" on Sportstime Ohio in that the Indians' offseason has gone about as expected, given the moves of last July and any assertion that the Indians should be doing "more" only conveys ignorance of the events of the last two seasons.

While I don't have the complete video to prove that the topic is what I talked about on the show and put the whole argument that the "offseason has been a disappointment" into its proper place, Tony Lastoria (who joined me in studio for an hour) has posted up the 60 minutes of the show, with help from Michael Taylor of past Tribe Report and Baseball Digest fame, in which he and I talk.

Those segments can be found [here](#) , [here](#) , [here](#) , [here](#) , [here](#) , [here](#) , and...wait for it... [here](#) .

A lot of the topics that we covered are not going to be anything new if you're to this point in the column or if you've been reading here for a while, but there's your humble host hacking it up on STO on a random Thursday afternoon, taking phone calls from people whose biggest concern that afternoon was to wonder whether a Workmans' Comp claim can be filed if an NFL player doesn't wear knee pads....no, seriously. If you don't want to click all of those YouTube links, Tony did embed [all of the clips over at his site in an easier to watch format](#) , where he also admits to some...um, issues with his earpiece.

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I'm still looking to see if I can get the whole show, which also included Cavs' beat writer Sam Amico as an in-studio guest and a call-in from Anthony Castrovince from Columbus (where he was as part of the Winter Press Tour), to stream somewhere and may link that at some point, but for now we'll give a hearty thanks to Tony and Michael Taylor for posting these.

Enjoy!