

Austin City Limits

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Thursday, May 13 2010 4:00 AM - Last Updated Thursday, May 13 2010 4:34 AM



Although the calendar tells me that it is only May, I ran across the first article attempting to identify which players are going to be possibly available prior to the July 31st Trade Deadline, a date that has become almost as active in terms of Indians' movement over the past few years as the off-season. Regardless, [Ken Rosenthal of FOX Sports listed his early-season candidates to possibly be moved in the next 10 weeks](#) (and you'll notice that Victor and CP Lee top the list) with the only appearance by an Indian coming with Kerry Wood.

Before making a comment that the Indians may have to include an MRI machine with Wood, Rosenthal writes that "the remainder of Wood's \$10.5 million salary will be an obstacle to any deal, but the Indians surely would pay some of that down to get a legitimate prospect in return." Don't forget that the last time that the Indians covered the remaining money on a traded player's salary, they paid the entire 2008 salary of Lacey Cake, which...as we all know, netted them Los Santana.

Nevertheless, the piece got me thinking as to which veterans are likely to make their way out of Cleveland this year, assuming that some team would want them. It's not even mid-May, I know, and there will be plenty of time to pore over potential landing spots for the players that the Indians are likely to move at some point, but the current list of those players is pretty well-known, fairly long, and (to date) largely undistinguished.

The obviousness that the likes of Wood, Peralta, Westbrook, and Brayan (none of whom have a guaranteed contract for 2011) has been apparent since the off-season...or in the case of Brayan, from the day that he was inexplicably signed. None of those players is going to be around in 2011 and if the second half of 2010 is going to be the continued ingratiating of the young players that WILL be around in 2010, it would behoove the Indians to acquire something of value for all of those players. Lest you think that the Indians can't find takers for these guys, the Indians were able to find a trade partner for Ryan Garko last year...sure he netted them a AA starter that has a 7.62 ERA and a 1.69 WHIP in the early going, but that pitcher (Scotty Barnes) also is likely headed for a transition to the bullpen (given his proclivity for the K as he's striking out more than a hitter an inning) adding on to that pile of arms that lies beneath.

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Beyond the obvious veterans that aren't going to be around in September, while the local media decries the payroll-slashing ways of the team, ignoring that none of the players are part of the Indians' future (just as they did in the case of free-agents-to-be DeRosa, Betancourt, and Pavano), there are the Jamey Wrights and Mark Grudzielaneks of the world. To me, those guys (and their ilk) but they fall more in line with the Jamey Carroll situation of last year where players like Wright and Grudzielanek (and maybe even Saul Rivera) are available anywhere, so their attractiveness is muted.

If you think that I'm just looking up and down the roster for everyone that isn't under contract for next year and suggesting that the Indians considering jettisoning the whole lot, realize that there is one veteran player who is not under contract for next season represents the exception to the rule – Austin Kearns.

Perhaps this is jumping the gun a little and misinterpreting a solid start by Kearns into an indication that the player that averaged a line of .265 BA / .359 OBP / .450 SLG / .810 OPS the 113 games he averaged per season from 2002 to 2007 is somewhere close to returning, but the first month and a half of the season has revealed the Indians' offense to be both left-handed centric and still wet behind the ears.

Kearns is neither of those things (LH or wet behind the ears) and he has been one of the only steady offensive performers on the team who has asserted himself into the everyday lineup the way that neither veterans (Peralta, Brayan) nor youngsters (Matt Matola, Brantley, Marson) seem to be doing with much aplomb. Whether he can continue to exceed expectations remains to be seen, but unlike the other veterans who figure to be moved this summer, Kearns may offer some value to the team throughout the 2010 season (and not just because of his \$750K salary), but also past the 2010 season.

His performance to date has been reminiscent of the way that Marty Cordova emerged from nowhere in 2001 to re-establish his MLB value. Maybe Kearns parlay his 2010 season into being assured of a starting spot in 2011 somewhere the way that Cordova did with that strong 2001 (.855 OPS with 20 HR and 20 Doubles in 122 games) in Cleveland, leading the Orioles to sign him to a 3-year, \$9.1M contract. Whether Kearns' 2010 season will prompt a team to act as foolishly as the Orioles did with Cordova remains to be seen, but with the performance of Kearns to date considered (and given the makeup of the Indians' roster, in terms of position players, going forward), the Indians have compelling reasons to keep Kearns on the North Coast past 2010, much less past July of this year.

Don't get me wrong, I still think that Brantley and Matola are the LF and 1B of the future, both near and far (present performance considered), but on a team that looks to have 3 LH OF and a LH DH in Hafner for the foreseeable future, keeping Kearns around for the remainder of the 2010 season and even exploring the option of bringing him back to the team in 2011 (on a short deal) makes more sense than simply flipping him and entrusting the LF and 4th OF spots to Mike Brantley and Trevor Crowe, the two players who would most obviously fill those spots in Kearns' absence.

Again, with the caveat that I do still feel that Mike Brantley is the starting LF of the very near

future AND of the "Future", his cumulative numbers in AAA (which include his time in Columbus this year) result in a line of a .272 BA / .353 OBP / .361 SLG / .714 OPS with just 31 extra-base hits in AAA in 592 plate appearances over 129 games. Think about that now...31 extra-base hits in nearly 600 plate appearances in AAA. For a player with Brantley's speed, that seems almost impossible to do but it has been done. Seeing as how his adjustment to AAA pitching continues (and let's remember that he does turn just 23 this Saturday), it doesn't seem as if his adjustment to MLB is going to be much smoother. Perhaps Brantley simply will need time and AB to find success in MLB, but in the interim, it's not hard to see how Kearns slots nicely as a LF, eventually moving to the 4th OF role if Brantley earns that opportunity to come to Cleveland.

With Kearns' ability to play all three OF positions, unless you feel that Trevor Crowe is anything more than the beneficiary of 1st Round Draft Pick hype (and he's not) meaning that he should be in line for that 4th OF spot, Kearns profiles quite well as a player who can fit into this lineup in either a starting capacity or a bench role...or both. Because he's been around for such a long time, it's easy to forget that Kearns is not-quite-yet 30 years old and him being a RH bat balances out both Sizemore and Choo as well as the Indians top 2 LF prospects, Brantley and Weglarz, both of whom are LH.

While I'm not advocating a perennial appearance of a Rusty Branyan or a Delichchaels to keep seats warm past this year, 2010 is providing proof that the development of prospects is not smooth or linear. Having a back-up plan that makes sense as either a part-time starter (subbing for any of the 3 OF or Hafner at DH) or as insurance for Brantley struggling or one of the OF getting injured without having to dip into the likes of Crowe is something that the Indians should consider with Kearns past 2010.

Trades are coming over the next 2 ½ months...don't fool yourself into thinking that they're not regardless of what the team's record looks like in June or July. Most of the players that will obviously be on the block find themselves there not only because of contract status, but because their usefulness to a team without an obvious timeframe of contention is not compelling. That said, not all of the veterans on the 2010 team fall into this category as the case for Wood, Westbrook, Peralta, Branyan to remain on the team is not nearly as compelling as the case to keep Kearns for the remainder of the 2010 season and perhaps beyond, with the obvious caveat that his performance will likely make that decision.

That performance to date however, should give the Indians pause when considering about including him in the next batch of players that will find themselves elsewhere by the end of the season.