

Rodriguez Gets Nixed

Written by {ga=consigliere}
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The Cleveland Indians sent struggling second baseman Luis Valbuena to Triple-A Columbus on Thursday, a move that was long overdue after he hit a miserable .166 with two home runs and 14 RBI in 49 games with the Indians this year.

Kudos to the Indians for finally making the move.

But the pats on the back stop there.

Instead of pulling from within and calling up infielder Josh Rodriguez or even Brian Bixler to fill the short team second base void, the Indians instead went out and claimed infielder Jayson Nix off of waivers. So the end result is that for at least the time being - until shortstop Asdrubal Cabrera returns from his broken arm in three to four weeks - the Indians now plan to go with a second base platoon of Anderson Hernandez and Nix, two players who arguably are just as bad as Valbuena at this point as far as Major League options at second base go. Joy.

Now, for those that have followed me over the years, you will know I am hardly one of those types to blow a gasket at what really in the grand scheme of things is a minor move. This is because most of the time I rationalize a move to some degree where I at least understand it (though may not always agree with it). That said, every so often a move is made like this where it makes absolutely no sense and is impossible to rationalize, and while a minor move in nature, is the straw which in this case has broken the camel's back.

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In the long term, the Nix pickup is probably just temporary and we could see someone like Rodriguez at some point later in the year at second base or as the utility infielder. But in the short term it looks like an opportunity lost not only for Rodriguez, but for the Indians as well to get a long look at an infielder in their system who has had a very good bounce back season this year. A player who was a high level draft pick that they selected in the second round of the 2006 Draft out of Rice University and paid him \$625,000 to sign. A player who is also a former top ten ranked prospect in the Indians system. So, as you can see, while his value is questionable there is a lot invested in him.

Yet, the Indians passed on Rodriguez for a journeyman utility player who was dumped by the White Sox this year after hitting .163 with one home run and five RBI in 24 games for them. In addition to that, Hernandez was also kept on the roster, another player claimed off waivers earlier this year after being dumped by the Mets and Nationals and who has a career .247 batting average.

On the positive side, Hernandez and Nix bring much better defense to the second base position, something Valbuena was not bringing at all. But, by the same token, Rodriguez is no slouch as a defender either. He has an excellent throwing arm and good lateral range to his left and right. He may only be an average at best defensive shortstop, but he is a pretty solid defensive second baseman.

But the real reason I rang on this is Rodriguez deserved a look in Cleveland. He was hitting .341 with six home runs and 20 RBI with a 1.031 OPS at Triple-A Columbus in 26 games, numbers that the Indians desperately could use in a punchless lineup in Cleveland, especially at the black hole in the lineup that has been second base this year. Obviously, those numbers would not necessarily translate to the big league level and there would be some expected dip in performance, but how much the numbers would drop or be sustained will never be known because he is not in Cleveland getting a chance to show one way or another what he can do.

Rodriguez is viewed as a fringe Major League player, a once highly touted prospect who fell off the radar the last two years only to burst back onto it with his sensational play to date this year. With that, his window of opportunity is very small and the chances will be limited for him to get a big league gig. There arguably was no better time for him to get that big league opportunity than now, a time when the window may be as wide open as it will ever be based on his offensive outburst in Triple-A along with the Indians needs at not only second base but also utility player in the short term.

The time was now to take a look at Rodriguez while Cabrera continues to rehab his broken arm and Valbuena is in Columbus rehabbing his broken game. Once Cabrera comes back the opportunity to call up Rodriguez will be limited the rest of the year, and there is a strong possibility that Valbuena comes back to Cleveland later in the year to play second base again or in a utility role. Yes, he only had a total of 105 plate appearances at Columbus, so the data sample is small, but in a case like Rodriguez they need to find out now what he can do. It's not so much because he is up for roster protection again after the season, it's mostly because of

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what's coming up behind him.

Triple-A second baseman Cord Phelps and Double-A Akron second baseman Jason Kipnis are entering into the big league picture quickly, and while they are not viewed as utility players in the near future like Rodriguez is, by the end of the season both players are going to leap over him as "now" Major League options, if not sooner, at second base. At shortstop the Indians have Cabrera and Jason Donald there. In addition to all that, Donald and Valbuena will likely get first dibs at a utility gig later this year or at the outset of next season. So where does Rodriguez fit in in the long term?

These things have a way of always working themselves out with attrition, injuries and performance, but the better choice may have been to in this case roster Rodriguez now and see what he can do with a three to four week audition in Cleveland. It couldn't hurt. If he comes up and performs well, maybe they found something. If he struggled, then send him back to Columbus for the rest of the year, or keep him on as the utility option once Cabrera comes back. Wasting an option in this case would not be worth worrying about since if in three years time he still needs to be sent to the minors and is out of options, then good riddance anyway.

Roster spots will be at a premium this offseason because of the placement of so many young players on the roster, and a guy like Rodriguez is a player we need to find out about. There is still well over half of the season left, so he could surely get some meaningful time in Cleveland before the season is up, but you have to wonder that if he can't get an opportunity now given the current state of the Indians' infield and is passed up for the likes of Nix and Hernandez, then how will he get an opportunity later once health and performance improves for other higher priority players?

No matter how low profile of a player he may be, Rodriguez is an asset to the team. Part of the reason the Indians are doing what they are doing this year was to supposedly find out about guys, but to date have not because of this vicious circle of bringing in retread after retread after retread. Moves that leave them doing nothing but spinning their wheels. Opening the season with a couple of veterans on the roster was fine and made sense, but we are at the point of the season where veterans should be on their way out the clubhouse door and not coming in it.

To make matters worse, with Valbuena going to Columbus they sent Rodriguez to Double-A Akron. Ouch. The move may be temporary, but wow, what a message it sends to a guy who has been on fire in Columbus. And now not only is he not getting a look in Cleveland, he is also not accruing plate appearances in Triple-A and is spending yet more time in Akron. Double ouch.

Bottom line, the Nix pickup is just a needless move, and yet another example of the Indians picking through the scraps left at the table by other teams hoping to find something useful. It hasn't worked in over half a decade when they picked up the likes of Bobby Howry, Casey Blake, and Rafael Betancourt when they went bargain bin shopping back in 2003-2004. But I think it is time to take a hard look at our internal process and figure out why we cannot fill in the 20-25th spot on the Major League roster with players from our own system, a system we are supposed to live on but instead are always picking up retread after retread to fill utility and

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middle relief roles. Player Development has made the commitment in the minors to push the kids through the system more aggressively this year, so let's follow through now and apply that same logic to Cleveland.

This is not to make a spectacle of the player that is Josh Rodriguez. He's just the example in this case. While I've talked to many baseball people who think he is Major League caliber, it just may be that GM's Mark Shapiro and Chris Antonetti at this point think otherwise. Minor move or not, it sends the wrong message to a player in the farm system like Rodriguez and all the other players in the system who now may have just a little bit of doubt cast on how realistic their chances are of ever getting a big league shot with the Indians.

We know what guys like Hernandez and Nix are, so the Indians are not going to uncover any hidden gems with either of them. In the case of Rodriguez, he is a guy who may have some upside still and has yet to have the book written on him at the big league level. The page is blank, so why not let him go out and play and see how the pages unfold and what is written? Instead, all the Indians have done is closed the book before he even had a chance to do anything.