

## Indians Bullpen In State Of Flux

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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While the Indians starting rotation appears pretty much set for next season, the bullpen is a totally different story. In Tony Lastoria's latest, he argues that the team will likely look to invest a decent chunk of their off-season money on reshaping the pen, and that it will likely have a completely different look next season.



The Indians starting rotation in 2007 may be all but set; however, the makeup of the bullpen next year is a complete mystery at this point.

Unless an injury befalls one of the starters, or Indians GM Mark Shapiro uses Jake Westbrook and/or Paul Byrd in a trade this offseason to acquire a need at closer, 2B or LF, the starting five next year should be CC Sabathia, Cliff Lee, Westbrook, Byrd, and Jeremy Sowers. But, the situation in the bullpen is hardly as tranquil. In fact, it can be argued that there is not one reliever currently on the Indians pitching staff who is a lock to be in the bullpen when camps breaks next April.

Shapiro's recent comments in radio and print interviews are a clear indication that we may indeed see a major bullpen overhaul this offseason. Considering that pitchers who opened the season with the team like Bob Wickman, Scott Sauerbeck and Danny Graves are no longer here, and that Guillermo Mota will be shown the door after the season, it should come as no surprise the bullpen will have several new faces in 2007.

To succeed in 2007, it is imperative the Indians find the version of the 2005 triumvirate of Bob Wickman, Bob Howry and Arthur Rhodes at the backend of the bullpen. All three pitchers were proven veteran pitchers in backend roles, and cost a little money. Even though Howry was re-signed on the cheap for one year at \$900K, the Indians still paid almost \$10M in combined salaries for the three players in 2005. Shapiro has mentioned many times that the Indians cannot afford to sign a non-closer to \$4M a year for multiple years, but after this season he seriously may want to reconsider his position on this.

Shapiro will not be able to pick from the bargain bins like he has in recent years. Yes, there is nothing wrong with picking up a few pitchers on veteran minimum deals as minor league contract invitees, but none of these guys should be viewed as bullpen mainstays going into Spring Training. Shapiro needs to go out and either spend the money to sign the needed relievers for the backend of the bullpen, or use his minor league system as currency to trade for quality late inning relievers.

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The questions are almost infinite when you look at the 2007 bullpen, mostly because no one, including Shapiro himself, really has a clue as to who will be a part of it. If the Indians do go out and acquire the three needs at the backend of the bullpen, the rest of the bullpen likely will be filled with players currently on the 40-man roster. This would leave four spots in the pen to be filled by the following list of players currently on the 40-man roster (or 60-day DL): Rafael Betancourt, Fausto Carmona, Matt Miller, Fernando Cabrera, Tom Mastny, Jason Davis, Jeremy Guthrie, Eddie Mujica, Rafael Perez, Andrew Brown, Jason Stanford, and Brian Slocum.

There is virtually no one in the current bullpen who is a lock to return. Sure, Rafael Betancourt looks like a lock for next season, but this offseason he'll enter his first arbitration year. After three pretty good seasons he is in line for a significant increase in salary from the \$300K or so he made the last three years to the \$1-2M he'll likely get this offseason. Reportedly, the Indians shopped Betancourt some before the July trade deadline, and he could be someone the Indians use in a large deal to acquire a need in LF and/or 2B.

Also, it would seem that Fausto Carmona would stand a good chance to be a part of the bullpen next year. However, this organization has been pretty steadfast in their belief that unless Carmona is pitching in the bullpen as a closer or in a setup role, that he will not be in the bullpen. It is possible he could be the setup man next year, a role he thrived in before the closer experiment, but after his implosion as a closer the Indians likely will not rely on him as the setup man at least at the outset of the season. In the event they do go out and acquire a veteran setup man, it would be a huge mistake to not keep Carmona in the bullpen pitching in middle relief in the 6th and 7th innings, and instead bury him in Buffalo to start every five days. Carmona needs to remain in Cleveland to finish off his development, even if it means pitching in long/middle relief and not pitching regularly in Buffalo.

All of the inhouse bullpen candidates should be used to fill middle relief and long relief roles next year, and mostly likely this is what will happen. Of the entire bunch, Rafael Perez may have the best chance of making the team as he would make for a quality second left-handed reliever out of the pen provided they acquired a late inning lefty specialist. Another possibility is lefty Tony Sipp who is currently not on the 40-man roster, but will be added to the 40-man this offseason since he is Rule 5 eligible.

One problem looms with the logjam of relievers, and is something that bears watching this offseason. The Indians have a ton of intriguing young bullpen potentials who have great stuff, but have been inconsistent. Namely, guys like Davis, Guthrie, Brown Stanford, and Cabrera. The problem here is that all of these guys are out of options next year. All of these guys obviously will not make this team next year...hell, I would say only one is likely and MAYBE two....which means it looks like three to four of these guys will be gone next year. Some of these guys may get released at the end of Spring Training, or possibly get traded (like Brandon Phillips) when Spring Training ends. The Indians could also move a few of these guys as moving parts in an offseason trade or two.

In the end, this offseason fans will be clamoring for the Indians to sign one of the big name outfielders or starting pitchers. Offensively, the Indians have proven to be a pretty good team

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even without a that big bopper in the outfield, and the starting pitching is still top 10 in all of baseball even without that #1 starter coveted by fans. The offense and starting pitching is good enough on this team to where a major improvement in the bullpen could help get this team back to being a 90-win team. Right now, a position player and starting pitcher are luxuries. Bullpen help is a necessity.