

What To Do on A Lazy Sunday?

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Sunday, October 24 2010 9:12 AM -



On a morning after which the World Series is set, with the inclusion of the Rangers and Giants sure to give the MLB offices one more year of “see, competitive balance in the league has never been better because small-market teams can succeed (despite the fact that San Francisco and Dallas are the 6th and 7th largest Metro areas in the US)”, it seems that the WS match-up discussion is ancillary to what the Yankees and the Phillies are going to do this off-season to return to the Fall Classic next year.

As the assumption that Cliff Lee (and perhaps Carl Crawford) will head to the Bronx has become a foregone conclusion (and might I remind you that [I pointed out that he'd end up going there when he was dealt to Seattle last December](#)) and as the Phillies attempt to figure out WHY they traded CP Lee in the first place, the events of the League Championship Series showed us, once again, that pitching rules the day in the MLB playoffs.

So while everyone (or at least the folks in Bristol) wonders what the Yankees and Phillies will do to enhance their chances of getting back to the WS next year, let's take off on a Lazy Sunday with other types of off-season “plans”...but “plans” for a team that don't occupy the same airspace as New York and Philly. With that all being said, let's get loose on a Lazy One...

In case you don't remember because Cleveland Beer Week hit you pretty hard, last week's edition involved [one man's \(probably flawed\) perspective on how the Indians should be approaching their off-season](#), in terms of dealing with arbitration cases and attempting to fortify some of the obviously weak spots of the Indians. If you need the Cliffs' Notes version, in terms of acquiring talent from outside the organization, I had the Indians targeting a defensive 3B, a RH 4th OF, a RH set-up man, and adding some arms to the mix in the rotation.

The whole “GM for a Day” idea was certainly not mine as Baseball Prospectus has utilized the concept for the last few years, titled...actually, “GM for a Day”. Earlier this week, [the Indians' piece was posted, written by Tommy Bennett](#), who surmised that uncertainty is the only certainty in terms of the Indians' future at most

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positions. While this is certainly true, the entire piece was poorly-researched and lacked any kind of real proposed “actions” that you would think be highlighted in a piece, if the premise is to be “GM for a Day”. To wit, one of his “gambles” was to “fill out the outfield with Michael Brantley in center, and then I’d move him to left when and if Sizemore returns.”

Um...be careful on that limb out there as that sounds pretty risky, unless you’ve been paying attention at all to the Indians.

As much as I’ve enjoyed this series from B-Pro (as they do every team), it really is too bad that John Perrotto was not on the Indians, as in this particular piece 3B isn’t mentioned AT ALL, much less as the primary position that needs to be addressed, and the lack of perspective comes through as clearly as possible when the absurd claim that “the Indians should turn their eyes squarely to Jason Knapp, who came back from a shoulder injury to blow away his competition in the low minors” makes an appearance.

In terms of recommending specific player acquisition, the analysis gets as insightful as finding a “Joaquin Benoit c.2009” for the bullpen...because every team isn’t looking for a wildly effective reliever at a low cost. Past that, Bennett also suggests a reclamation project for the rotation (specifically mentioning Brandon Webb), but the disappointing piece ends with the idea that development should rule the day, saying that “the Indians are well set to field a competitive – and inexpensive – team.”

The angle of the focus being player development is not a new one (as we all know that the success or failure of the Tribe in the next three to five years is going to depend on players already in house) and it is at the crux of [a piece from Jon Steiner at WFNY](#), who questions whether the Indians should be looking to spend on adding an arm, among other proposed additions from outside the organization:

Since it’s unlikely that 2011 will be a contending year, I believe we need to separate the wheat from the chaff in that list, and adding another arm to the pile on a short-term deal doesn’t make a lot of sense unless the goal is to flip him at the deadline for prospects. It would just muddy the waters.

While this line of thinking certainly is not without merit, I suppose my answer to that would be that I’m not overly convinced that the likes of Talbot, Tomlin, Gomez, and Huff are much more than “Cleveland to Columbus” fodder and past Carmona, Carrasco, and Masterson (who, frankly, still could end up in the bullpen), the next group of arms is a fair distance away from legitimately contributing. To that end, Alex White excites me and Corey Kluber, Zach McCallister, and Yohan Pino intrigue me at some level (and in that order), but I don’t think that those guys are going to be ready when the season starts to be in Cleveland, just like I don’t think that Tomlin or Gomez should join Huff in some sort of less-than-compelling “competition” for the 5th spot.

Steiner’s absolutely right in that the team needs to separate the wheat from the chaff, but I would allow some of that to continue to happen on the AAA level and see if the team could add an arm (or two) to that mix of the parent club to push guys like Tomlin, Gomez, Huff, and the group below them into a position where they’re forcing THEMSELVES into an opportunity

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instead of an opportunity being forced upon them, perhaps prematurely. Certainly, the Indians need to find what they have in their back-end-of-the-rotation grab-bag, but given that all of those guys have options (save Talbot), I'd utilize those options and add some legitimate depth in the rotation for next year. If Tomlin/Gomez/Huff or White/Kluber/McCallister/Pino force themselves into the conversation – terrific, but putting them squarely in the conversation when they may not necessarily belong there is what frightens me.

Going further with what frightens me, Steiner asks the question of whether the Indians should even be spending money on 3B, evoking my favorite Billy Beane quote...you know, that teams can win the same amount of games with a \$40M payroll and a \$75M payroll. Regardless, after surveying the scene of what would be available at 3B, Steiner asks about the most prudent path at 3B and, more importantly, about how the Indians should be approaching this off-season as a whole:

Are there any 3B out there in the \$3 to \$5 million range who are significantly better than what we have? Guys who can add wins to the team? And if not, does it really make sense to go after anyone? Should the team spend an extra \$10 million just to say that it did?

It's a valid question and I'm not sure that the team shouldn't just squirrel away the money for next year's draft (and yes, I know that budgets theoretically exist for each...but you can't tell me that they're unrelated) or the draft after that and continue to go overslot with draft picks to continue to add to what could and should be the lifeblood of the organization – young, internally developed talent. As a quick aside here, [Tony Lastoria mentions that the Indians' 2010 draft was ranked as the best by Baseball America recently](#) ...which I hope means something in about two to three years.

However, I'll go back to the notion that the team is flawed (obviously) and that money should be spent to essentially avoid the avoidable for 2011. What I mean by that is that finding a 3B prevents the Indians from playing Jayson Nix out of position at 3B in 2011 and allows him to play a more valuable role as a super-utility player. Just as important, looking for a RH reliever allows the Indians to go into 2011 with a RH set-up guy not named Jensen Lewis and/or Justin Germano. Continuing to go down the line, is anyone interested in seeing Trevor Crowe as the 4th OF next year and wouldn't it behoove the Indians to find a RH OF to replace him?

All those answers are fairly obvious, though the question becomes at what cost should the Indians find these "band-aids", whether they're meant to cover a minor scratch (4th OF) or a gaping hole (3B). Just to use the \$10M number, spending \$10M may buy some time at 3B while improving defense appreciably and it could add a RH bat to the OF while adding some stabilization to the back of the bullpen and putting another arm into the rotational mix, allowing the Tomlin/Gomez/Huff troika time to separate themselves out in Columbus, not in Cleveland.

Unfortunately for the Indians, if they hand out \$2M here on a RH OF, \$3M there on a 3B and \$3M over there on an arm, the price tag adds up pretty quickly to that \$10M number. While some will equate these types of signings with Dellichaels of our past and the Bryan of our recent past (and there is a valid argument there), the holes on this team are obvious, or at least the ones that don't have a natural internal answer as an option.

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How much money they end up spending (and where they spend it) remains to be seen, but I do think that they add a 3B and a RH OF at the very least, then will probably pick through the reliever market for a player that can hopefully inspire more confidence than Lewis/Germano/Smith in the 7th and 8th innings while perhaps getting creative on adding a rotational arm or two.

With money “on the table”, it is interesting to take a look at [the committed dollars to players for 2011 for the Indians in the context of the rest of MLB, courtesy MLBTR](#)

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Padres - \$1.1M

A's - \$11.48M

Pirates - \$16.75M

Rays - \$17.67M

Marlins - \$19.75M

Diamondbacks - \$19.99M

Indians - \$27.46M

Orioles - \$28.7M

Rangers - \$32.11M

Giants - \$76.93M

Phillies - \$143.73M

Yankees - \$144.61M

The link is worth a click for the whole list and those last two are included for some perspective (and remember that Jeter, Mo Rivera, Pettitte aren't under contract next year for the Bombers...nor is CP Lee) as to how out-of-whack MLB truly is in terms of payroll. To that end, it should be noted that the totals for the bottom seven (that's up to and including the Orioles) ADD UP to a number lower than committed salaries for the Phillies and Yankees for 2010.

Seriously...

However, the inclusion of the Rangers (and the Giants) is not coincidental as the build-up in Texas is the soup du jour these days in terms of how a team can be constructed from the ground up. To that end, there's [an interesting piece on the Rangers](#) – and their GM, Jon Daniels, specifically – from ESPN's Jerry Crasnick that reminds those who may not follow the Rangers that closely about their ascent to their current place.

In the piece, Daniels admits that the Rangers aren't trying to do anything different than 25 or so other teams, that it just happened to work out for them with some strong drafting, strong player development and (after a couple of misfires) a trade that infused young talent:

“Our plan isn't rocket science. We're not the first team that said, ‘Hey, let's build from within.’ We've had success to this point because our evaluators are good. Our scouts are good. Our development people are good. They care and they put the work in. I like to think we have a very clear idea of who we are and what our identity is.”

--snip--

Flash back 3½ years, and Daniels wasn't exactly baseball's flavor of the month. In his first significant move as Texas GM, he sent Adrian Gonzalez and Chris Young to San Diego for

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Adam Eaton and Akinori Otsuka. In his second, he traded John Danks to the Chicago White Sox for Brandon McCarthy. He was like a hitter down 0-2 in the count and trying to foul off Mariano Rivera cutters amid the shadows.

But in 2007 Daniels sold Hicks on "the plan"-- a commitment to long-term building through the draft, Latin America and all other available sources -- and the Rangers have since enjoyed a stunning run of success:

The foundation for Texas' turnaround was laid at the July 2007 trade deadline, when Daniels sent Mark Teixeira to the Atlanta Braves in a seven-player deal that brought pitcher Neftali Feliz and shortstop Elvis Andrus to the Rangers.

Certainly you can say that the addition of Lee was instrumental in getting the Rangers to the WS (and that's an understatement), but the fact is that the Rangers had to part with their top positional prospect in Justin Smoak (who was drafted by Texas) to pry Lee out of Seattle. However, the Rangers did seem to have everything come together all at once as they benefitted from internal development with guys like Ian Kinsler and Tommy Hunter, some rewarded patience with guys like Nelson Cruz (career OPS of .794 coming into this year as a 29-year-old OF), and a little luck with guys like Colby Lewis (career ERA+ of 73 entering 2010 as a 30-year-old fresh out of Japan) and converted reliever CJ Wilson (6 MLB starts prior to this year as a 29-year-old)...all of which seemed to work for them.

Going back to that piece though, look at those Gonzalez/Young deals and the Danks deal that absolutely tanked for the Rangers and how the Teixeira deal represented the watershed moment in terms of adding outside talent to what was already in the organization to give the Rangers that young, talented bedrock to build upon.

Compare that to the to 2007 Indians as, after Shapiro missed on the first couple of trades (Alomar, etc.) in his tenure, he hit paydirt on Colon and the players received combined with the in-house talent (Victor, CC, Peralta, etc.) as well as some other players acquired via trade (Westbrook, Hafner, etc.) to create that special opportunity for the Tribe.

Now, remember that the Teixeira deal occurred in July of 2007 and here we sit, 2 ½ years later with the Rangers heading to the WS. Interestingly, while Jarrod Saltalamacchia (who was the closest to the big leagues and posted an OPS+ of 80 in 721 PA for the Rangers) and LHP Matt Harrison (MLB ERA of 5.39 in 225 1/3 IP) haven't contributed to the current success of the team, the timeframe is worth noting as CC was moved the summer after Teixeira and Lee and Vic were moved two years later. Again, the timeframe of those building blocks acquired via trade being mixed with the in-house talent is what should be watched here.

While it's folly to think that the Indians will follow a similar path in 2011, the development of those players acquired via trade over the last two years combining with the players added to the organization via the draft (particularly in the last three drafts) will determine if ...let's say the 2012 Indians have a similar story – with pieces from the CC and Lee deals blending in with other players, drafted and/or traded for in leading a young and relatively inexpensive team into uncharted waters?

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The blueprint was followed by the 2007 Tribe and is now being used by the 2010 Rangers, and whether or not the Indians decide to add players via FA this off-season or not, it bears repeating that the success or failure of this team in the next three to five years is going to come from the players that are already in house.