

A Lazy Sunday at the Kids' Table

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Sunday, December 05 2010 11:00 AM - Last Updated Sunday, December 05 2010 1:05 PM



Winter has officially arrived on the North Coast and if you were expecting your belly to be warmed by the Hot Stove, you better order twice off of the Kids' Menu if you're an Indians' fan as it has become painfully apparent that only a handful of teams are in position for the difference-making FA and an even smaller handful of teams are able to execute a transaction like the Red Sox did in netting Adrian Gonzalez for three prospects, none of whom has appeared above AA. If you think I'm kidding on the former claim, realize that 11 teams have added FA from outside their organization and, while some big names are still out on the market, it's fairly obvious that about 4 to 5 teams legitimately can realistically claim a shot at the likes of Lee, Crawford, Werth, etc.

While all of that happens, here we sit in Cleveland...relegated to the Kids' Table because of an underachieving group of talented players over the course of two years (2008 and 2009) and done in by the organization's inability to restock the cupboard on their own accord. As depressing as that all sounds, it doesn't mean that there isn't conjecture to make and items to link as it is Sunday after all...

After a week in which [Andy Marte said goodbye](#) (in the PD, no less...and yes, that's a joke) and in which [some hack made the requisite joke about the Pirates' AAA team being named the Indians](#) over at the new "Hitting the Fan" portion of TCF (which you should bookmark, if you're still into bookmarking), anything related to the Indians actually represented a welcome distraction from a Cavs' team apparently didn't read

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[the best thing to come out of ESPN](#)

since Craig Kilborn and laid down for their King.

While very little emerged that “related to the Indians”, the rest of the AL Central remained wildly active on the FA market and [the Adam Dunn signing by the White Sox](#) meant that, at the time of the contract being finalized, \$141.75M of the \$300.95M that had been committed on the FA market as of Friday night came out of the AL Central...and more specifically JUST from the Tigers and the White Sox.

While Jerry Reinsdorf and Mike Ilitch’s checkbooks are wide open, the activity of the two teams strikes me in completely different ways. As much as I haven’t liked the Tigers’ moves because of the length of the moves and the stench of spending money simply to spend money around them (and...um, Mr. Heymann should be expecting his check from Scott Boras any time now as [he continues to laud ANY money spent in FA as superb](#) and calls the Tigers’ off-season signings “excellent” without reservation), the Dunn signing is a great fit for the White Sox, whose DH production last year was abysmal. Dunn breaks up their impatient RH hitters and gives their lineup an element of patience and power (in the bandbox on the South Side no less) that had been lacking, particularly last year with no Jim Thome.

Interestingly, if you want to make the assertion that Dunn will replace Thome in their lineup and could give their toothless lineup enough bite to support their great starting pitching so much so that it would make them the favorites in the Central for 2011, I couldn’t disagree as Dunn is the perfect fit for them.

It is worth mentioning however, that it is just now December...

Of course (cue the gnashing of teeth and the wailing), news of lavish spending in the AL Central brings the focus back to the biggest bit of news from the corner of Carnegie and Ontario – that the non-tender list would provide the Indians a new batch of FA to choose from, likely at a discounted rate. That being said however, it gets back to something that I’ve been hammering away at for much of the quiet off-season, in that as much as Dunn represented a great fit for the White Sox, where is that obvious “fit” for the Indians on the FA market?

Sure, some (or maybe just me) thought that former D-Backs’ GM Josh Byrnes would be a nice “fit” in the Tribe Front Office to add a new voice by returning to his roots, but [he’s off to join some other former colleagues in San Diego](#) ...so the Indians can’t even get EXECUTIVES to come to Cleveland.

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Amirite?

Seriously though, would Lee and Beltre look great at the front of the rotation and in the middle of the lineup while manning 3B?

Sure, but let's get back to reality here and let's take a look at what's happened at the areas of "need" for the Indians and what still may be out there for the Indians to explore to improve their team, even if only for a short time.

Starting with the spot that even Abbott and Costello consistently couldn't figure out (["I Don't Know...3B](#)

, get it?), lest you think that the Tribe is taking the wrong approach on finding a 3B stopgap from the scrap heap – be it the non-tender list or from "the street", to borrow an NFL term – please consider what Juan Uribe just received from the Dodgers (

[\\$21M for 3 years](#)

) for some perspective on what FA cost and how

[Miggy Tejada just extracted a 1-year, \\$6.5M deal from the Giants](#)

. Although it appears that Uribe will be playing 2B in LA and Tejada will be playing SS in SF, in case you're not following these FA 3B signings, Brandon Inge inked a 2-year deal that will pay him \$11.5M, nearly identical to Jhonny Peralta's deal

For some context on those numbers and the performance that is likely to be expected for \$5M to \$7M a year on the open market, consider this:

OPS+ in 2010

Tejada – 104 OPS+

Uribe – 99 OPS+

Inge – 94 OPS+

Peralta – 92 OPS+

Nix – 87 OPS+

While Nix appears at the bottom of this list, realize that the numbers that Nix compiled as an Indian last year amounted to a 96 OPS+. That doesn't make me feel that much better about 3B as I still think that Nix was likely playing over his head (and it just makes me think that the Tigers and the Giants and the Dodgers are spending money foolishly on the FA market) and...this may come as a surprise...the issue for me is still defense at 3B. As much as the Indians are saying that Nix will be fine with a Winter in Puerto Rico playing exclusively 3B, I'm still on the prowl for that 3B...it's just that the pickings are pretty slim.

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In case you don't believe me that the pickings are slim, [the signing of Jack Hannahan](#) (to a minor-league deal...and I'll link the Indians.com, so no eyeballs are seared by the vitriol at the cle.com story) and the

[news of "mutual interest" for former Twin Nick Punto](#)

makes a fair bit of sense if you look at what is out there. Certainly, you would like to see a better option than Hannahan being signed and Punto being shown interest, but if we're at the idea that the Indians are going with this "3B Derby" like they did back before the 2003 season (when Lacey Cake "beat out" Greg LaRocca and Bill Selby), guys like Nix (career 77 OPS+ in 718 PA), newly signed Jack Hannahan (career 78 OPS+ in 981 PA), and Punto (career OPS+ in 2,818 PA) at least have MLB resumes...as underwhelming as those resumes may be.



The Hannahan signing is the first sign that the "3B Derby" is coming and looking at the OPS+ that Nix and Hannahan and perhaps Punto certainly doesn't elicit much confidence. However, while it is true that Hannahan and Punto simply cannot hit (Punto posted a 69 OPS+ in 2010, and the aforementioned 73 OPS+ on his career...and for some context on that, Trevor Crowe had a 79 OPS+ in 2010 and has a 74 OPS+ in his brief career) and are likely to never hit, if the Indians are truly interested in upgrading 3B defensively, Hannahan and Punto do represent an obvious upgrade over Nix in that department and would be able to (like Nix) move around the diamond, mainly to 2B, depending upon promotions for the likes of The Chiz and Kipnis and the performance of Jason Donald. If Punto is brought into the 3B mix (with a low price tag) to join Hannahan and Nix, it doesn't do much harm – though it will cause some...um, consternation among a segment of the fanbase – in that it adds a versatile player to the mix while the Indians let their prospects shake out (think Mike Redmond with Santana and Marson last year) who is expendable when his usefulness is exhausted.

If you're wondering what the point of bringing a guy like Hannahan or Punto is at all, since I'm on the record for not trusting these defensive metrics any further than I can throw them, I will refer back to that voting for John Dewan's Fielding Bible, where [Jack Hannahan was rated the 8th best defensive 3B in MLB in 2009](#)

(he did not play an inning in MLB in 2010...ahem) and where

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[Nick Punto was ranked as the 11th best defensive 3B in MLB](#)

and probably the highest ranked name on that list that is readily available. Some of the names above Punto on the 2010 voting (namely Kouzmanoff and Jose Lopez) were thought to be made available perhaps by the non-tender deadline, but both will be paid at rates commensurate with their service time.

The reason for that being that Kouz was tendered a deal by the A's and Jose Lopez (who actually bested K2 in the Fielding Bible voting as the 6th best defensive 3B) was traded to the Rockies for a non-prospect arm. If you're wondering why the Indians weren't willing to part with a non-prospect arm for a guy like Lopez (who, it should be noted can't actually get on base...he's just a good defensive 3B, just like one Nick Punto), realize that Lopez wasn't non-tendered, he was traded to the Rockies who will now tender him a contract, meaning he's going to get paid by the Rockies at a rate that the Mariners were (rightfully) reticent to commit to.

Truthfully, the only name of note that was non-tendered that was a 3B (in name only) is Edwin Encarnacion, a noted butcher at 3B. If you want to look at Encarnacion as a RH bat that crushes LH pitching (.914 OPS vs. LHP in 2010, .847 career OPS vs. LHP), that's about the only place I could see the Indians pursuing him as his glove is appreciably worse than that of Nix and has actually earned him the nickname E5...so that should be that on Encarnacion.

Just to check in here, anyone see those types of moves as ones that the Indians are obviously missing out on, even at their most obvious position of need?

Back to it, perhaps you see a fit there as a RH bat in Encarnacion, but the fact that he would represent (another) defensive liability would cause me to look for another player that was non-tendered that would be more versatile for the Indians that could provide some production from the right side of the plate. To that end, I'll go back to the [ol' roadmap for the off-season](#) and pull a little copy-and-paste to submit once again the idea that "the choice here would be Matt Diaz, who can play all 3 OF positions and is RH so he can sub for any and all of the LH OF and can spell Hafner, when needed, as the DH or allow one of the OF to slide over to DH when Hafner needs a break."

Well, Diaz was non-tendered and granted, he's not a great defender and is not a perfect "fit" by any stretch of the imagination, but the Indians (with their LH heavy lineup and with lingering concerns about the readiness of Grady Sizemore lingering...in my head at least), Diaz could be

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a nice ancillary piece. Truthfully, Diaz may generate some interest among contenders looking for a complementary platoon player, given his career .907 OPS vs. LHP, but the Indians would do well to inquire on Diaz, if just to remove Trevor Crowe from my greater consciousness, which will make it much easier to send in those season ticket checks.

As for the other interesting names on that non-tender list at areas of "need" for the Indians, the starting pitchers that join the FA fray are some names you may recognize. If you do though, it's not for any recent performance as CM Wang, John Maine, Andrew Miller, and Ryan Rowland-Smith were all non-tendered by their respective teams and could be had on the open market. The most interesting name belongs to John Maine, who had the lowest ERA among the quartet last year...with a 6.13 ERA. He's interesting because he is still just 29 years old and had a career ERA of 4.22 (ERA+ of 101) with a WHIP of 1.30 going into 2010. He walks too many guys (4.1 BB/9 in his career), but his numbers in his first four years as a starter for the Mets resulted in a 4.01 ERA and a 1.27 WHIP, so perhaps a change of scenery and some new tutelage will allow him to re-capture his old success.

Really, that's all we're talking about with these guys as Wang hasn't pitched in MLB since posting a 9.42 ERA for the Yanks in 2009 and Miller and Rowland-Smith are both former prospects whose ERA in 2010 were 8.54 (Miller) and 6.75 (Rowland-Smith). Not that it necessarily matters, both Miller and Rowland-Smith are LHP, and just to give you an idea of why these are the types of names that you're going to be looking at, in case you missed it, [Zach Duke \(5.72 ERA, 1.65 WHIP in 2010\) signed a deal worth FOUR AND A QUARTER MILLION DOLLARS guaranteed](#) instead of being non-tendered by the Diamondbacks, who acquired him from the Pirates.

If that's where we're at with SP on the open market, just get ready to don your treasured Josh Tomlin jersey all of 2011 or wait for the Ryan Rowland-Smith updates in this sweltering Hot Stove season.

While the names that figure as starting pitchers are...um, less than compelling, if you think that the Indians could use some RH bullpen help this off-season (and I do), there were a couple of names that were non-tendered that may merit some interest, most notably DJ Carrasco, Zach Miner, Manny Delcarmen, and Joel Peralta.

A reliever, you say...after the way that the Tribe bullpen performed down the stretch? Well, if you remember that ["roadmap" to the off-season](#) , Jesse Crain was mentioned as the

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type of arm that I'd like to see the team target saying that "adding a Jesse Crain suddenly gives the 7th and 8th innings a more fleshed out feel with Crain, R. Perez, and Sipp serving as the set-up men, allowing the likes of Joe Smith, Jenny Lewis, Justin Germano and the gaggle of MiLB arms to sort themselves out and force themselves into that late-inning mix instead of simply being handed the keys to the 7th or 8th innings."

You can scratch Crain's name out of the start of that sentence as there are apparently [9 teams lining up for Mr. Crain's services](#)

and, if we're using the Benoit deal (3 years, \$16.5M) as the basis for what a RH set-up guy is going to get on the open market, then Crain is about to get a deal that's probably not far off what Benoit netted in terms of years and dollars.

Anyone want to give 3 years to a set-up guy?

Yeah...me neither. That being said however, I still go back to the idea that adding a RH arm would accomplish the stated desire above, to settle the 7th and 8th innings at a date earlier than the Fourth of July. Apparently I'm in the minority on this one though as there's a note in [a Hoynes' "catch-up" piece earlier in the week](#)

that caught my eye though as it related to Josh Judy perhaps being a factor in 2011 as Hoynes says that Judy "has a chance to crack the Tribe's stacked bullpen".

"Stacked"...where, exactly?

Yes, C. Perez looks like a bona-fide closer and Rafael Perez pulled himself off of the sharp rocks to save his nearly-shipwrecked season while Tony Sipp (who, it should be mentioned, had the highest BB/9 rate for players that threw more than 6 innings and who was second to Heck Ambriz in HR/9) showed some promise...but "stacked"?

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