

Holiday Tomahawks

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With Christmas rapidly approaching and the Family Truckster getting packed up soon enough for some Holiday goodness in Wisconsin, since a Lazy Sunday will not be forthcoming this weekend – you know, day after Christmas and all – I thought I'd put some Tomahawks in the air up amongst the snowflakes.

And with that, let 'em loose...

Starting off with the newest Minor League signing on the Reservation, the Indians inked former A's prospect Travis Buck to a Minor League deal earlier in the week and, while this signing seems to have been received more "huzzahs" than the deals meted out to Jack Hannahan and Adam Everett, I'd put Buck on the same par as Hannahan and Everett as "depth signing", in the hopes that it improves the overall talent level at the upper levels, however unlikely Buck is to make an impact.

Some optimism exists that a healthy Buck can re-capture some of the career momentum that he established as a 23-year-old rookie in 2007, when he posted a .805 OPS (127 OPS+) and hit 22 2B in 82 games. However, since Buck's rookie season, he has posted a cumulative .662 OPS (77 OPS+) at the Big League level in 335 PA over 3 years and while that rookie season seemed to portend a bright future for Buck, he has been undone by injuries and inconsistency since bursting onto the scene. What Buck represents is a reclamation project for the Indians – one who probably isn't going to see time in Cleveland in 2011 with Choo, Brantley, Sizemore,

and Kearns in the fold – who doesn't cost the Indians anything more than AAA PA at this point.

While some would ask what the point is of even adding Buck, I suppose that it goes along with the idea that having Austin Kearns on the roster over Trevor Crowe on the roster makes the team better. To that end, I would say that having Travis Buck around as an option as an OF probably makes the 40-man better, as opposed to keeping some of the other 40-man options, like Jordan Brown, around into 2011 or beyond.

Since the name of Jordan Brown has been invoked, while Brown has long been the object of much affection (some of it misguided), take a look at how the two players compare, particularly last year:

LH Travis Buck turned 27 in November

LH Jordan Brown turned 27 last Saturday

2010 in MLB

Buck - .167 BA / .255 OBP / .286 SLG / .541 OPS with 1 HR in 48 PA

Brown - .230 BA / .272 OBP / .310 SLG / .582 OPS with 0 HR in 92 PA

2010 in AAA

Buck - .298 BA / .364 OBP / .463 SLG / .827 OPS with 3 HR in 141 PA

Brown - .298 BA / .341 OBP / .463 SLG / .804 OPS with 8 HR in 355 PA

2009 in AAA

Buck - .285 BA / .366 OBP / .438 SLG / .804 OPS with 5 HR in 266 PA

Brown - .336 BA / .381 OBP / .532 SLG / .913 OPS with 15 HR in 455 PA

Sure, Brown had better numbers in 2009 in AAA, but can we establish that we're not looking at players that are all that dissimilar, as neither of them have displayed the power that you would like to see from a corner OF or from a 1B/DH and both are now entering the "prime" years of their career?

The biggest difference would be that Buck has proven that he can play the OF capably, something Brown (who has always been a 1B) has not. And to that end, assuming that he shows some aptitude with the bat, Buck is likely a better depth option than Brown going forward because of that versatility and because of the promise of that age-23 season, when he was healthy and thriving.

If "a better option than Jordan Brown" is all Buck amounts to, there's still not a lot lost in terms of taking a chance on Buck getting healthy and justifying his former status as a top prospect. Interestingly, in going through Buck's page at B-Ref, [one of his closest comps through his age 26 season](#) is the newly-minted \$126M man, Jayson Werth. Werth struggled through his early-to-mid-20s with injuries, changing organizations and missing the entire 2006 season before the Phillies took a 1-year, \$850K

gamble on him...one that obviously paid off for the better part of three seasons.

Am I saying that Travis Buck is going to do what Jayson Werth did?

Certainly not as the number of former top prospects who succumb to injury and ineffectiveness is too long to even begin to compile, but Buck had the prospect pedigree and limited success at the start of his career as Werth did, only to see his career deep-sixed by his own fragility.

If the Indians can hit on resurrecting Travis Buck's career to the point that he becomes a useful MLB player, bully for them. Even if he upgrades roster depth and represents a more versatile and valuable option than a guy like Jordan Brown, it still represents a decent find. At the very worst, he flames out, spends the year in AAA and makes his way out of the organization.

Regardless of the ultimate outcome, signing him doesn't cost them much in terms of a Minor League deal with a non-roster invitation to Goodyear.

Outside of the corner of Carnegie and Ontario, since much of the baseball world has been consumed with the Grienke-to-Milwaukee move last weekend, here's an interesting diversion that you can think of while you're wrapping Christmas gifts. It comes from [the terrific John Perrotto of Baseball Prospectus](#)

and how Zach Grienke actually did Royals' GM Dayton Moore a favor by requesting a trade, at least in terms of public perception:

Dayton Moore faced the decision that all small-market general managers seem to eventually be forced to make: do you hold on to your most marketable player, or do you trade him for young and affordable players in bulk?

--snip--

This time, though, Moore was a GM who had help in the decision. That help, ironically, came from the player.

Greinke told the Kansas City Star in August that he was tired of losing and felt the Royals' much-anticipated crop of top prospects would fail to make an impact at the major-league level until after his contract expired following the 2012 season. Greinke continued to push for a trade behind the scenes, and his demand grew stronger last week when he changed agents with the objective of forcing a deal.

That worked out well for Moore in many regards. Unlike most GMs in his position, he does not have to bear the brunt of negativity from the media, public, and even his own players for trading a star player.

Whether Moore got enough for two years of Grienke is up for debate (and Joe Posnanski [initially hated it](#)

, then

[warmed to it](#)

...somewhat, until he read that Melky Cabrera could keep Lorenzo Cain on the bench) and certainly comparisons are going to be drawn to the players received for Cliff Lee from Philly, as each deal contained "ready-for-MLB" position players that had struggled to date in MLB, an "almost-ready-for-MLB" pitcher with issues, and a low-Minors arm to dream on.

Since I'm not going to spend my days analyzing the Grienke return, what I'm initially interested in is the fact that Perrotto acknowledges that the Royals' GM "faced the decision that all small-market general managers seem to eventually be forced to make: do you hold on to your most marketable player, or do you trade him for young and affordable players in bulk", which perpetually makes me wonder – in what universe does this acceptance of an obviously flawed system continue?

This off-season, we've seen both Adrian Gonzalez and Zach Grienke moved for packages and Matt Garza and/or James Shields may not be that far behind as the Padres and the Royals made the same decisions that the Indians did in 2009, essentially punting on a season (or two) well in advance of the start of a season in the best interests of the health of the organization in the long-term view.

That frustration is not new nor is it going to be easily solved by MLB, but the crux of Perrotto's piece intrigues me as he asserts that Grienke basically took the onus of being the "bad guy" off of Dayton Moore in terms of making a decision. Moore's tenure in KC has not earned him the "benefit of the doubt" as future success still looks a few years off with a stacked Farm System, but Grienke demanding a trade publicly freed Moore to a degree, in that he didn't have to come off as the "guy who decided to trade Grienke" (which was in the best interest of Kansas City), and rather is simply the GM who accommodated the trade wishes of Grienke and attempted to maximize value in a return for him.

It's logistics...I know, but it's also tied to public perception and since we've gone around and around about this Indians' PR "problem" (self-created as it may be), it got me wondering as to how things would have played out if the Indians hadn't traded Lee (most notably) when they did and whether the situation that took place in Kansas City over the past few weeks would have transpired last off-season for the Tribe with Lee.

Truthfully, I have no advance knowledge that Lee was going to demand a trade as he certainly has been traded enough in the last 2 years without ever demanding a trade, and the whole discussion is really akin to attempting to jump into the Silver DeLorean.

However, how would the Indians be perceived today if CC had left via FA for the biggest contract ever signed by a starting pitcher instead of being traded? What if it was Lee who forced the Indians' hand in trading him and his departure was not compelled by the sudden change in stance from the Front Office and ownership that saw him make his way to Philly...the first time? Would the Indians have been saved from the "brunt of negativity from the media, public, and even his own players for trading a star player", as Perrotto puts it?

Ultimately, we'll never know as the moves that were made on the North Coast were made when they were and were all initiated by the Front Office. Whether they turn out to represent the right moves for the organization remains to be seen, but with Grienke "forcing" his way out of Kansas City this week, it is interesting to think about the situation in comparison to the Indians in the summer of 2008 and 2009.

Keeping the topic with the Grienke trade and attempting to find some relevance to that trading post at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario that was open from July of 2008 until this past August, [Dave Cameron of Fangraphs](#) takes a look at the “buyers-and-sellers” aspect of the trades consummated this off-season and concludes that it is “almost universally agreed that the buyers did better on the rest of the deals, as established major league players have simply not been generating the types of returns in trade that we’ve seen in prior years” chalking up that trend to the fact that “teams are reacting to the rise in prices in free agency by increasing their valuations of cost-controlled players”.

Now think about this in the context of how the Lee and Martinez deals, in particular, are viewed today and how the Indians’ last “tear-down”, mainly the Colon deal in 2002, seems to almost be the exception to the rule, and an antiquated exception at that. If what Cameron writes is true, the Indians’ decision to tear it down in July of 2009 and since has coincided with those increased “valuations of cost-controlled players”, which may speak to how their returns on Lee and Martinez underwhelm many.

While I think it is still extremely early to judge the majority of these deals (as Sizemore and Lee weren’t contributors for a solid 2 ½ seasons after the Colon deal), the importance of 2011 to guys like LaPorta, Carrasco, and Masterson (all of whom were, let’s be honest, the big “prizes” in those deals based on age, advancement, and prospect standing) cannot be understated as the excuse that “it’s still too early to judge these deals” has an expiration date and (particularly for LaPorta) it is not a terribly long way off.

As for the other Midwestern team involved in the Grienke deal, there has been some scuttlebutt about how the Brewers getting Grienke debunks the notion that only large-market teams are at the card table for these players, which is patently absurd as Grienke was acquired VIA TRADE and not on the FA market. While a good deal of attention has been paid to how the Red Sox have figured out a way to work the system to their advantage by stockpiling that valuable commodity – young, cheap talent – what the Brewers have done is actually more impressive.

By that I mean that the Brewers’ player development system has allowed them to pull the deal for Grienke (and for Marcum...which is a deal I LOVE for Milwaukee) in that they had a pipeline full of mainly position players, with established position players ahead of them at the MLB level, and some intriguing low-level arms, ultimately turning those “prospects” into trading chips.

Don’t take this to mean that the Brewers are this model franchise (as they’ve finished with 80 and 77 wins in a weak NL Central the last two years with some serious talent in place), but they had an organizational deficiency in pitching and an abundance of corner players in 2008 and snatched CC from Cleveland. Going into this off-season, they still had that organizational deficiency in starting pitching, but were more or less set up the middle of the diamond with pitchers in their organization that were promising, but unlikely to contribute in the near future, which allowed them to move those fungible assets to add Grienke and Marcum.

At this point, the Brewers should be lauded for their aggressiveness at this time in their franchise’s history...and, as a quick aside, I do hope this works out for them with Prince about to

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leave in FA after this year and them really putting everything out there for this year. However, more admirable than their aggressiveness in the here and now is the slow and steady player development that put them in this position, where they had highly-sought-after young players outside of their "core" group of players already in MLB and they have now flipped those younger players to help the parent club for the 2011 season.

To bring that idea to the events of the last few years in Cleveland, if there is one main segment of the "The Plan" that failed miserably it was unquestionably that of player development. The idea that the prospects would come to fill holes and other prospects who represented redundancies in the system could be flipped to fill other holes never took shape because...well, because those prospects turned out to be sub-par players, unable to crack the Indians' starting lineup, much less generate much interest on the trade market.

This is not breaking new ground, I know, but to see the manner in which the Brewers utilized their young, expendable players brings it back to the continued failure of the Indians' player development, which led the organization to make the Vic and CP Lee deals as they acknowledged that the team's internal prospects would cause a drop-off of biblical proportions, not difficult to see if you take away the players acquired for the likes of CC, Blake, Victor, Lee, DeRosa, and others from the current roster and see what remains.

It's a scary prospect (thinking of what 2011 would look like without Santana, Perez, Masterson, Carrasco, LaPorta, and Brantley) and it speaks to the undoing of the organization from 2008 to today, on display as Minor League FA represents upgrades over former 1st Round Picks (like last year with Kearns and Crowe) or players who were once highly thought of in some circles (like this year with Buck and Brown...potentially).

As the player development in place in Milwaukee has allowed them to extend their look at realistically making the playoffs (and the Brewers have won ONE playoff game since 1982), the failure of the Indians to continually augment their system with players that could either help the parent club OR be used as trade bait to improve the parent club (Max Ramirez being the lone exception) is what the Grienke-to-Milwaukee deal brings into sharper focus.

With that final thought to keep you warm on these cold winter nights...you know, because your blood pressure is rising, let me take the time to wish everyone out there a very Merry Christmas, wherever you and yours may be this weekend.

Merry Christmas everyone...