

## Tomahawks and The Weight of “Brass”

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Thursday, January 06 2011 11:00 PM - Last Updated Sunday, January 09 2011 9:01 PM

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Finally almost firmly back in the saddle here after a week in Milwaukee over the holidays that was highlighted by standing next to Craig Counsell at the cheese counter in a Pick ‘n Save on Christmas Eve morning (no, I did not mention how he has a hand in my sports misery as The DiaBride held my tongue) and lowlighted by a stomach bug that swept through the fam on Christmas night, let’s get back to doing what we do around here and get some Tomahawks in the air while being flabbergasted that Manny Acta is now the longest-tenured coach/manager in Cleveland sports.  
No, seriously...

Since the Hall-of-Fame debates hold only marginal interest to me even if former Indians are involved (and this grand-standing on both sides of the argument leading up to the voting for a lot of these players is getting increasingly exhausting and off-putting), let’s attempt to keep the focus on the North Coast and let’s get them up in the air...

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One of the truly enjoyable moments of my trips to Milwaukee always come when I get a chance to talk some baseball with my brother-in-law (a Cubs’ fan), who commiserates with me on the state of our teams while sipping some Fat Tire or Spotted Cow and marvelling at the money still owed to Hafner, Zambrano, and Al Soriano by our unrequited loves.

This Christmas however, provided some new baseball talk fodder as my in-laws welcomed a

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relatively new guest to the festivities as The DiaBride's cousin arrived and it was quickly revealed that he, being a Brewers' season ticket holder on the heels of the Greinke trade and knowing that the two of us are big baseball fans, wanted to talk some Brewer baseball.

Realizing that this is a forum that focuses nearly exclusively on the Indians (sometimes to an unhealthy degree), follow me on this as it's coming around to the Tribe...

Obviously, the Brewers' fan was thrilled about the additions of Greinke and Marcum and what it meant to the Brewers' chances in 2011. At one point, the pedigree of the prospects and players leaving the Brewers was introduced and it was quickly shot down by the Brewers' fan, who laid out the lines of the night (well...at least in the non-Christmas division) as he said that prospects shouldn't matter to the Brewers because Fielder will be leaving after this season and that the Brewers have a chance to really go for it in 2011...which, he said, is exactly what they're doing.

He went on to say that he didn't care about the long-term ramifications of trading prospects because the Greinke and Marcum trades showed that the Brewers' Front Office is serious about winning and that (here comes the money line) this off-season has shown that the Milwaukee Brewers have some...wait for it...“brass”

This is the money line and not just because I love when people use the term “brass” to describe the...um, “undercarriage” of a particular person or entity. Rather that “brass” of the Brewers' Front Office is what has endeared the team to the city's fanbase as Milwaukee showed some “brass” when they were in contention in 2008 by acquiring Sabathia and now are showing some serious “brass” in cashing in their prospect chips (and a lot of them) to make a serious run at the 2011 playoffs by using their young players to address the glaring deficiencies on their team that weren't going to be filled by any internal options.

This particular Brewers' season ticket holder said that he's more than happy to send his check into the Brew Crew for his season tickets this off-season because of the “commitment to winning” that they're showing through their actions and not through empty words. Keep in mind that this Brewers' team has finished the last two seasons with 80 and 77 wins, “good” for 3rd place in their division for each of the last two years, with a good portion of the same stable of young talent in place from their 2008 playoff appearance

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His zeal and his optimism got me to thinking about the situation and wondering, what is the weight of “brass” for an MLB team and how it relates to the public’s perception of them?

There’s no question that the Brewers are going for it and that their fanbase is reacting to the actions favorably, per [Biz of Baseball](#), as the club added 1,500 season ticket holders after the Greinke deal (compared to 400 new season ticket holders added in the first two months of the season last year) and also, “secured renewals on two of their Founders Suites, which are located on the Field Level...renewed five Club Suites (Club Level) and have also had a number of inquiries from potential new customers regarding Club Suite availability.”

By now, you see where all of this is going in relation to what we’ve seen since the CC trade to Milwaukee and the shrinking attendance numbers at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario. After the 2007 ALCS appearance, with one year left on Sabathia’s contract, the Indians stood pat for the most part in the ensuing off-season, content to allow their young players (who had fueled the stretch run in 2007) continue to develop and to lead the team back into contention in 2008.

Obviously, that never happened and while the team did make additions in the following off-season (namely Wood and DeRosa), the die seemed to have been cast with the Indians as “sellers” and with the Dolans as “cheap” and with the perception of an organization more likely to sit on their hands than be pro-active when the time for activity arose became pervasive through 2009 and turned toxic in July of that year and into the new decade. Further, in light of Max Ramirez (the prospect moved for Kenny Lofton in the summer of 2007) being DFA’d by the Rangers with his .699 career OPS in all of 140 MLB PA since being moved by the Tribe, the “value” of holding onto prospects is certainly a valid topic.

In hindsight, what move could have been out there that may have galvanized the Tribe fanbase, to give the sense that the Front Office had the “brass” be it during that 2007 season or after the ALCS appearance?



Looking at [the FA signings after the 2007 season](#), nothing really jumps out in terms of filling

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huge holes via FA that existed because the major hole that was revealed came from a incendiary bullpen that “boasted” first half ERA’s for what was assumed to be  $\frac{3}{4}$  of their back-end in Borowski - 7.56 ERA, Betancourt - 6.00 ERA, Jensen Lewis - 4.73 ERA, among others. Should they have done more than simply add Masa Kobayashi? Of course, but if you’re looking at that FA list, I suppose that a case could be made that the Indians should have made their bullpen addition THAT off-season, with the likes of Francisco Cordero (134 ERA+ in 2008) and Scott Linebrink (125 ERA+ in 2008) being the most attractive names available on the FA market.

But would that kind of addition (Cordero or Linebrink) generated the type of excitement that we’re seeing in Milwaukee?

They could have added a “big” bat (Jason Bay was always the name bandied around), although it is worth mentioning that the 2008 team scored the 7th most runs in MLB. Sure, most of those runs came in the second half as they made their improbably push to .500 and it would have to be argued that the team would have had to have foreseen the nauseating team-wide slump in the first half ( [seriously, look at these numbers](#) ), the injuries to Martinez and the stunning drop-off from Hafner or the startling regressions from Gutierrez and Cabrera.

Perhaps you could make an argument that another starter would have helped given what we know about Carmona’s disappearing act in 2008 (although [he did start out much better than a certain Hefty Lefty](#) ) and with Westbrook hitting the shelf in May, but that would have taken more than just a little crystal-ball gazing and would have meant that Cliff Lee (the 5th starter to start 2008) would have likely been traded to accommodate such an addition.

This is all an exercise in futility, I know - attempting to re-write the past and wondering what the future would look like with that altered past (forgive me, “Back to the Future” was on AMC the whole time I was laid up sick at my in-law’s house), but the actions of the Brewers this off-season - trying to burst through that open window - and the inaction of the Tribe prior to the 2008 season - attempting to let “The Plan” follow through as the course of “action” - is fascinating as both small-market teams have taken a much different approach to their “window” of contention with their fanbases responding accordingly at the Box Office.

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Of course, it bears mentioning that the additions of Greinke and Marcum could result in

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nothing more than another 3rd place finish for the Brew Crew with injuries, regressions, and a lack of depth submarining any hopes of them taking the NL Central title away from Cincinnati or the Cardinals as it takes a while for these things to shake out and...well, that's why they play the games.

However, it is more than a little interesting to note that [the Indians reportedly kicked the tires on the former Cy Young Winner Greinke](#) (and for a fascinating trade breakdown on a Cy Young Award winner being traded, here's one... [the Luis Tiant deal from the Tribe to Twins that occurred over 40 years ago](#)), in that the reports regarding the Indians' "pursuit" of a legitimate starting pitcher are rare this off-season.

To that end, here's a little blurb on whether the Indians were in on Brandon Webb (since signed by the Rangers for an incentive-laden deal that likely took the Tribe out of the running) from Jordan Bastian, who also touches on Huff and Laffey in an ["Inbox"](#). As for other arms that have found new homes, Chris Capuano has gone to NYM in a deal that I wouldn't have minded the Indians (\$1.5M base), given his performance down the stretch for the Brewers last year and his left-handedness.

Not allowing themselves to be totally shut out of the "Arms Race", the Indians acquired [RHP Joe Martine](#)

z from the Pirates, a soon-to-be-28-year-old who doesn't miss many bats and while he has some groundball tendencies, likely figures to play some role as a swing man/spot starter for 2011 as he has two options remaining that the Indians are likely to burn as the back-end-of-the-rotation and front-end-of-the-bullpen figure to have some major turnover as 2011 progresses. You may recognize the name as Martinez came up in the Giants' organization and was involved in

[a gruesome batted-ball-off-of-the-head incident in 2009](#)

. Last year, he was dealt to Pittsburgh, where he briefly came out of the bullpen as a long man, logging multiple innings in 3 of his 5 appearances...so, meh.



Further, the Indians inked [RHP Doug Mathis](#) to a minor-league deal (OH, THE HUMANITY!) with Mathis spending most of his 2010 in Oklahoma City playing for the Rangers' AAA club. Last year, he posted a 5.56 ERA in AAA over 18 games (15 starts) and had a brief stint with the Texas parent club, posting a 6.04 in 13 relief appearances. Like Martinez, Mathis played

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the role of multiple inning reliever from time to time with Texas, throwing more than 1 IP in 5 of his 13 appearances. While his ERA is frightening, 8 of the 15 ER he let up in MLB in 2010 came in one appearance against the Blue Jays, when he gave up 3 HR in 1  $\frac{1}{3}$  IP.

In 2009, Mathis was a serviceable reliever for the Rangers, posting a 3.16 ERA (148 ERA+) and a 1.15 WHIP over 42  $\frac{2}{3}$  IP in 24 games, 13 of which he finished as a member of the bullpen. He'll be 28 in June and doesn't strike anybody out (44 K in 87  $\frac{1}{3}$  MLB IP), so figuring on him to be much more than rotation/bullpen fodder isn't realistic, but effective relievers can come from unusual places and Mathis' 2009 showed that he can be a “part” in a bullpen, albeit a relatively minor one.

All told, maybe Martinez is an upgrade over Justin Germano, who he ostensibly replaces on the 40-man, maybe he is not. Maybe Mathis can re-capture some of the success he enjoyed in 2009 coming out of the Rangers' bullpen, maybe he can not. Ultimately, the warm body filling the 40th roster spot or a reliever on a Minor League deal with some modicum of MLB success is not a major concern of mine.

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Much more concerning to me is the fact that the Indians suddenly look like the 2nd best team in Cleveland and, depending upon the direction the team that plays at the Lakefront takes may be the furthest along in terms of a “rebuild” as it would seem that Square 1 is what the Indians look to be stepping up from in 2011.

Whether they do or not remains to be seen, but pitchers and catchers report in 39 days, so answers (and probably more questions) are not far off...