

A Very Thin Herd

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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Jason Miller, AP

There's no need for the fans to bury the Cleveland Indians before the season starts. Its management already has done the job for them.

With the announcement on Monday of the opening day roster, team president Mark Shapiro and general manager Chris Antonetti have all but scrawled it across the sky that this isn't going to be a year where fans ought to be thinking playoffs come next fall.

But it's not like the fans had unreasonably outsized expectations of this team anyway.

In Cleveland, the fans always seem to get the team they expected. No one is much to be used to pleasant surprises in these parts. Surprises, to the extent they come at all, are generally bad ones.

It's possible, of course, that the Indians can tick off more wins than a season ago and hence point to "progress" as the theme of its "Year in Review" retrospective come next October. But a few wins either way aren't going to be the best way to judge the progress of this franchise anyway. No, that will come when there is no longer a need to field a team fresh out of spring training with players whose resumes as thin as the ones on this team.

Let's start with one of the more startling revelations. When the roster was announced on

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Monday it had 4, count 'em, 4 non-roster invitees making the big league club. That was the first red flag. That was followed closely by another group of players that aren't quite in the same category, but that's only a function of the labels we choose to place on them. And that's all before we get to the prospects on this team, players short on major league experience but counted on to lead this team in the years ahead.

In the final analysis, this Indians roster is one of the most loosely constructed and shaky rosters in the major leagues. It may not be the worst, but neither is it competitive with the upper tiers.

Spring training non-roster invitees generally are of two varieties: prospects with their hands on the bottom wrung but reaching upward, brought in for some experience and big league coaching during spring training and aging veterans hanging on to the bottom rung for dear life and on their way out. In other words, putting the latter group into the same category as the former is a mere technicality because they both occupy the same space at a given moment. The latter category, though, is really just one of those great tags that general managers like to use to place on the players who essentially walked on to the team.

An occasional walk-on making a big league club can happen to any team, particularly those clubs looking to field a team on the cheap like the Indians. But if 4 making a team is not unprecedented, then at the very least it's unusual.

Call it the confluence of a small budget and the inability to develop your own players as the reason that the Indians have devoted nearly 20% of its opening day roster to guys that were one step into forced retirement before the Indians came begging.

As Terry Pluto detailed last week in the Plain Dealer (and as mentioned in my last column), the Indians have been awful at drafting, so bad that they have but one player on their opening day roster this year from the 2004-07 draft classes. In large part, that explains why holes are getting filled in with walk ons. There is nobody else.

Not included in this group of walk ons are at least two players, Chad Durbin and Orlando Cabrera, who for the most part fall into this same category, if not by label then by age. You could also lump in Austin Kearnes in this category as well and it wouldn't be unfair.

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All three will probably help out the Indians but then that seems so much related to the simple fact that the roster is so thin in the first place. It's not as if the Indians were competing with any of the league's contenders for their services.

Then there two more relievers, Frank Hermann and Vinnie Pestano, who, because of the thinness of their resumes and lack of accomplishments at the major league level, sport the same kind of split contracts as non-roster invitees. Whether either is able to make it at the major league level for a sustained period of time is unknown but the odds aren't in their favor at the moment.

To put the Indians' roster in a bit more perspective, of the five actual infielders to make the club (Travis Hafner is listed on the roster as an infielder in the same way that Britney Spears is listed on her albums as a singer), two—Jack Hannahan and Adam Everett—are walk ons and one, Orlando Cabrera, is basically just that. Similarly, 4 of the 7 relievers are of a similar status, Justin Germano, Durbin, Hermann and Pestano.

It's not so much that any of this should set off alarm bells because, well, the expectations on this club are so slight. But it does illustrate exactly why those expectations are where they need to be and why progress for this franchise won't be measured in wins but in the ability to eliminate these kinds of players for consideration from your roster in the future.

But there is some positive news on the roster. At least 20% of it is filled with players that Shapiro obtained via the trades of Cliff Lee, CC Sabathia and Victor Martinez.

In the Lee trade, Carlos Carrasco and Lou Marson will be in the dugout at Progressive Field on opening day. Jason Donald starts the season on the disabled list.

From the trade of Sabathia, both Matt LaPorta and Michael Brantley are on the 25-man roster. From the Martinez trade, Justin Masterson is on the opening day roster.

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While that in some sense offsets the holes on the roster created by poor drafting, of that entire group the only one anyone is getting particularly excited about at the moment is Carrasco and then just barely.

That doesn't mean some of the others won't develop, they can and should. There is still plenty of time for LaPorta and Brantley in particular. But Marson is a light hitting back up who doesn't appear to have a future as a starter and Masterson is merely serviceable, though there is still time for both of them as well.

What this says is that when the Indians' management had talent to trade it showed that it was a little better at making trades than in drafting young players. Unfortunately, if you had to be good at one or the other you'd probably want it to be the other way around, particularly for a team like the Indians.

The Indians under the ownership of the Dolans and the leadership of Shapiro have turned this franchise into one that will never buy its way into competitiveness but instead will get there, if ever, by being savvy in the draft, shrewd with the trades, and precise with its free agent dollars.

To this point, that formula hasn't worked all that well with the current roster, the last really for which you could fully make Shapiro responsible, being the best evidence of it. Antonetti, the protégé turned dealmaker, has a huge task ahead of him to turn this around. It won't come if all he's doing is listening to the man that got the team into this predicament in the first place.