

Indians Looking at College Arms in MLB Draft

Written by {ga=mikeperry}

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For years Indians fans have heard a familiar tune from the organization when it comes to big-name free agents leaving the team for bigger dollars and longer contracts in bigger markets

; the team is concerned with keeping payroll flexibility and the player that left did not fit in the budget.

This was why CC Sabathia was sent to Milwaukee for Matt LaPorta, Michael Brantley and others in 2008. This was why Cliff Lee and Ben Francisco were dealt to Philadelphia for Carlos Carrasco, Lou Marson and others in 2009 and why Victor Martinez was dealt to Boston for Justin Masterson, also in 2009.

As much as fans might not like it, the economic realities of Major League Baseball dictate such transactions, and unless a smaller-market team can catch lightning in a bottle and be in the thick of the pennant race when the trade deadline rolls around, teams will look to move higher-priced veteran star players for younger, cheaper players with upside.

Of course, there is another route; let the player stick with the team through the end of the season and make him a contract offer when his deal expires. As long as the team offers said player binding arbitration (where an independent party hears both sides and on an amount on a one-year contract) that team will receive a compensatory selection in the next MLB Amateur Draft and, depending on where the player is slotted, the team that signs the player surrenders its first round pick to the team the player left.

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The compensatory picks, also called "sandwich picks" are between the first and second rounds of the draft.

This season's draft will take place June 6-8 at the MLB Network's studios in Secaucus, N.J. The Indians have the eighth overall selection, and will be looking to improve what has been a terrible draft slot since Major League Baseball began its amateur draft in 1965. More on that later.

The Indians have no compensatory picks this season, but do own (along with the eighth overall) the 67th, 97th and 128th selections.

The Tampa Bay Rays, who lost Carl Crawford to the Red Sox and Rafael Soriano to the New York Yankees, have a whopping 10 of the first 60 selections in this season's draft. The Rays, as a franchise, have always eschewed the high-dollar free agents and built the franchise's foundation through the draft...providing what has become the model for small market success in the Major Leagues. Two years ago Tampa Bay ended up in the World Series two seasons ago.

The Indians have made trades at the trade deadline in recent years, but were awarded pick in the not-so-distant past when Manny Ramirez left for Boston and when Jim Thome ripped the Indians jersey off his own back and left, with his rock/wife Andrea, for Philadelphia to join the Phillies. In choosing not to trade these players at the deadline the Indians were awarded two draft picks for each.

That is the decision that must be made...do you take a package of prospects and move the free agent at the deadline or do you try to sign the player, knowing the compensatory picks will be there as a fallback.

The picks teams receive help soften the blow when they lose a frontline player.

"You definitely want to get something back if you are a team that just had its star player walk," Indians director of amateur scouting Brad Grant said. "It gives you that incentive to keep that

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player all the way through the season. That was the difficulty with us when we had to make decisions on CC and Cliff Lee and those guys...do we take a player where there's a little more certainty. Do we make that trade or do we wait and take those draft picks and the compensation?"

However, in early June Grant and the entire Major League scouting community is not thinking about anything but their draft boards, player rankings and the players that may be available when they are on the clock in the first round.

"At this point we're not eliminating anything," Grant said. "It's difficult to predict what's going to be there at eight so we've got a deep list with eight to 10 names on top of the guys we think that will probably go in front of us as well. We'll take the player that we think fits best for us."

There are four players who, chances are, sit right on top of that list. It should come as no surprise that they are all college pitchers.

Sonny Gray is a righthanded starter who pitched for Vanderbilt last season, and the rumor is that he is the first target on the Indians' list. Gray is not big, at 5-foot-11, 180 pounds, but he does have a big arm. His fastball tops out at 97 and consistently sits in the mid-90's. He also has an excellent power curve he throws in the 80's and a change-up that needs work.

In his career with the Commodores he has a record of 26-9, but he has steadily improved during his college career. In 2011, his junior season, Gray went 11-3 with a 2.01 ERA. In 107.2 innings he allowed 28 earned runs, 73 hits (including four home runs) and struck out 115 while walking 39.

If Gray was four or five inches taller and 20 pounds heavier he would be looking at being either the top pick in the draft or the second selection.

Jed Bradley is a 6-4, 244-pound lefthander who pitched collegiately at Georgia Tech. He is probably the most MLB-ready pitcher in the draft, sporting three above-average pitches...a fastball that can hit 97 and that sits around 92-94, the best change-up in the draft and a slider

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that has shown a lot of improvement this season.

He has a tight, compact delivery and is a competitor. He pitched in the Cape Cod League two years ago and was selected as the fourth-best prospect in the league by Baseball America.

The next player is Matt Barnes, a 6-4, 203-pound righty from UConn. Barnes went 11-4 this season with a 1.62 ERA. Barnes played on the USA Collegiate National Team last year and had his best season as a college pitcher with the Huskies.

Barnes was dominant, spinning 3 complete games and striking out 111 in 116.2 innings, allowing just 21 earned runs, 71 hits and 31 walks. He is expected to have a quick trip through whatever organization drafts him to the Majors.

The last player is Taylor Jungmann, the ace pitcher for the Texas Longhorns. Jungman, a 6-6, 220-pound righty was 13-1 this season with a 1.40 ERA. Opposing batters hit just .168 off him and he struck out 119 in 128.1 innings pitched.

Jungmann is considered a safe pick. He is a lot like vanilla ice cream...very good, but if you could get rocky road instead you probably would. Jungmann's upside is expected to be that of a No. 3 starter, not an ace. But the chance that he will become a productive Major League pitcher is almost certain.

Grant is excited about the pitching in this draft, but has no idea how it will unfold. Usually the top 15 or so players can be slotted pretty easily, but this year all bets are off.

"Depth-wise, for this year's draft class as we've gone through it, I feel it's deep in power arms," he said. "There are a lot of guys who throw 94, 95 (mph) both at the high school and college level. There's depth, as well, down to the position players but it seems to be exceptionally deep in power arms."

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"There's college pitching, there's high school pitching, there's position players and college position players mixed in there so it's difficult to know what's going to go on at the top. We'll be ready for any scenario that plays out."

The Indians will be selecting eighth overall in the first round, a draft slot that has not been very successful in the past. Since the MLB First Year Player Draft was created in 1965 the top player selected No. 8 overall was Todd Helton by the Colorado Rockies. In 2009 Cincinnati selected pitcher Mike Leake, a young player that has shown promise at the Big League level and, in 2008, the White Sox took their everyday shortstop Gordon Beckham.

Other than these three players the top player selected with the No. 8 pick was one of the following: Drew Stubbs (2006 by Cincinnati), Todd Walker (1994 by Minnesota), Jim Abbott (1988 by California), Pete Incaviglia (1985 by Montreal), Steve Trout (1976 by the Chicago White Sox) or Gary Roenicke (1973 by Montreal). The Indians are hoping to do better than this.