

Hit or Miss on the 2012 Indians

Written by {ga=edtherevelator}

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If you're a gambling person, you're gonna love the 2012 Cleveland Indians as they are presently constructed. It's been awhile since I've seen a Cleveland team bank on so many players that could be huge misses.

Some of these players are tethered to the Indians' decisions of the past. Designated hitter is penciled to be Travis Hafner, the albatross around the Indians' payroll, has averaged 106 games the past two seasons, which sadly makes him one of the better bets on this team. No longer the offensive monster he was in 2005 and 2006 (with SLG% of 1.003 and 1.097 respectively), Hafner recovered from unproductive, injury-plagued seasons in 2008 and 2009 to turn in two productive, injury-plagued seasons in 2010 (2.5 WAR) and 2011 (1.4 WAR). The Indians would like to rely on Pronk and count him in for over 100 games this year, but for an aging slugger who hasn't been the same player since he signed his extension, the Indians have to realize that Hafner has become a sunk cost and doesn't deserve at bats if he isn't producing, because Hafner isn't impressing any teams at this point in his career.

The other of the Tribe's "older" gambles actually was re-signed to a one-year deal this offseason. Indians' fans are well familiar with Grady Sizemore and his injury history. For what it's worth, I'm all for the gamble on Grady; prior to his injury woes, his last full season was 2008, when he posted a 5.1 WAR, and was an MVP-candidate on a disappointing .500 Tribe squad. Grady also isn't yet 30, which should give Cleveland fans some hope for some kind of return to form for the former face of the franchise.

Earlier this offseason, the Tribe also took a \$5 million gamble on starting pitcher Derek Lowe. Lowe was acquired in exchange for minor leaguer Chris Jones and the Braves agreed to pay all but the aforementioned \$5 million of his remaining salary. To say Lowe had an off-year last year is probably a misnomer, as he's most likely on the decline and in the twilight of his career. However, as Jones isn't really much of a prospect, I kind of like this gamble by Indians GM

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Chris Antonetti. If nothing else, Lowe has been durable throughout his career, never starting fewer than 32 games (in seasons where he has been a full-time starter, Lowe was a reliever early in his career), and was probably the victim of extra bad luck last year, as he still had 14 quality starts, and his BABIP was an absurdly-high .327, and his FIP shows this, with 3.70. Worst-case scenario is that Lowe still sucks, but I can almost guarantee he'll be better than the Mitch Talbot roller-coaster ride that was at Progressive Field the past two seasons, so Lowe is an improvement as the fifth starter.

Two more gambles that I also agree with (although they're pretty much no-brainers, given the Indians' budget and internal options), are the decisions to allow second baseman Jason Kipnis and third baseman Lonnie Chisenhall to have not only cracks at the starting gigs on their respective positions, but also to give them a bit of a long leash. Tribe fans have heard about these guys for years, and seeing as they are both still developing, and both actually have potential, Kipnis and The Chiz should be given every opportunity to learn at the big league level.

But the biggest gamble the Tribe has, was also the biggest gamble the Indians pulled off in 2011. I was admittedly cautiously optimistic about the acquisition of Ubaldo Jimenez from the Colorado Rockies, and the trade that sent RHP Alex White and LHP Drew Pomeranz (along with others) to Denver for Jimenez has been dissected time and again and doesn't need to be re-hashed here. Jimenez is an Indian, and all that's left is to see whether the Indians made a shrewd move, or a terrible mistake. I still think it was the right choice (anytime you can make change for a dollar, you should), and I'm hopeful that the Indians allowing Jimenez to pitch in winter ball will let him fully recover from the nagging injuries that plagued him the past year. I find it hilariously ironic listening to all the Indians fans who pine for big-name acquisitions every offseason, not realizing that Jimenez is exactly that, he was just acquired in July.

However, that's not to say Jimenez is a sure thing, as he's not. Jimenez's peripherals looked great when the Tribe acquired him last July, however the results didn't translate. His FIP was much better than his ERA would have you assume (3.67 FIP to 4.68 ERA) so bad luck definitely played a part (.314 BABIP). Jimenez labored through many of his starts, and will need to pitch deeper into games in order to live up to his label of workhorse. But before we go writing off Jimenez as an overpriced #3 starter, realize that the talent and stuff are there for Ubaldo. If Jimenez performs as the Indians hoped when they acquired him last July, the tandem of Masterson and Jimenez will be a formidable 1-2 punch that ranks among the best in baseball (and certainly the best in the AL Central).

And thus, you have the gamble that is currently the Indians 2012 roster. You may wish the Indians had never met the likes of Hafner, Sizemore, Lowe, Kipnis, Chisenhall or Jimenez and

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stuck to something safer. But like it or not, the Indians are a small-market team, and can't afford the sure things. So instead they are rolling deep with high-risk, high-reward players, and whether or not Indians fans will be in tears this season depends likely on these players.