

Revisiting The Brandon Phillips Debacle

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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In his latest, Tony Lastoria looks back on the series of events that led to Brandon Phillips being dealt to Cincinnati this past April. Lastoria has some not so kind words for GM Mark Shapiro, who he feels cannot afford to make mistakes like this with the teams payroll limitations. And as a result of this colossal error, the team still needs a second baseman. This is a great read from the talented Lastoria.



"Trading Phillips was a mistake. We probably erred on the side of trying to win now instead of what was best for the future of the franchise. We had a lot of divided opinions on that one. It was not a unanimous decision. . . . That's probably not the way we'll walk through that decision the next time we go through it." - Indians GM Mark Shapiro

As a sports fan, I find it to be very refreshing when a player, manager, coach, GM or owner admits when they are wrong. There is not a GM in any sport who does not make a mistake from time to time, but for every bad move there should always be at least two to three good moves.

Shapiro could have tip-toed around the Brandon Phillips issue or gone the denial route that so many GMs choose to take, but Shapiro is a straight-shooter and very forthright so he pretty much laid it out in his quote. This is one of the things I love about him as a GM: not only his willingness to admit mistakes, but how open he is about how the mistake was made or how he will avoid it in the future. Kudos to Mr. Shapiro.

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In working within the constraints set by the budget he has to work with, Shapiro has done a pretty good job at limiting his mistakes. Not many GMs get more bang for their buck than Shapiro, and he has shown a knack for finding good minor league talent in trades with other teams.

But my adoration stops there.

When money is tight for this franchise because of the market and the owner, Shapiro can't afford disastrous mistakes like what we saw with the trade of Brandon Phillips. He can't afford to make decisions based on what his manager wants. And, he surely can't afford to dump good talent for nothing.

If the Indians ever wanted to write a book on "How Not to Handle a Prospect", Brandon Phillips should be put on the front cover of that book. From the way the Indians basically just threw him out there as a raw rookie in 2003, to the way they hung him out to dry almost the whole season before moving him to Buffalo, to how they handled him after the 2003 season.....the Brandon Phillips debacle is easily Shapiro's biggest screw-up as a GM.

Originally obtained in the Bartolo Colon trade in June 2002, Phillips was looked at to be a centerpiece and core player in the middle of the diamond for the Indians for the next several years. Having just turned 21-years old that June, Phillips quickly impressed as he hit .283/.321/.419 with 8 HRs, 27 RBIs, and 8 stolen bases in 55 games at Triple-A Buffalo after being acquired in 2002.

His performance as a 21-year old in Buffalo cemented his standing as the Tribe's prospect going into 2003. As a rebuilding team, the Indians went into the 2003 season with a roster filled with youth and promise. One of the decisions the Indians made was to basically hand Phillips the 2B job even before Spring Training, which at the time was questioned because of how raw Phillips still was and whether or not he was ready. When the season got going, Phillips struggled. The Indians still trotted him out there hoping that as he played more he could get himself out of the funk, but he still proceeded to struggle night after night at the plate. After

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hitting .210/.242/.307 with 4 HRs and 24 RBIs in over half a season, the Indians finally sent him down on July 13th.

It is obvious that what transpired between the Indians and Phillips when he was sent down in 2003 ticked the Indians off, and the first seeds of a Phillips/Indians divorce were planted. From this point on, Phillips standing with the organization would never be the same. And, right or wrong, his ticket was pretty much punched for a one-way ticket out of Cleveland.

Phillips grumbled and was displeased with the decision to demote him, and attitude problems surfaced when he put forth a half-ass effort to hit an appalling .175/.247/.279 with 3 HRs and 13 RBIs in 43 games (154 at bats) at Buffalo. Amazingly, even after such a gutless display in Buffalo, the Indians later called Phillips back up on August 27th. Phillips finished the season with the team, and he played regularly but his numbers were pitiful even after the stint in Buffalo as from August 27th until the end of the season he hit .200 (14 for 70) with 2 HRs and 9 RBIs.

The Indians made the right choice to send him down. But, the Indians not only made a colossal mistake of keeping him up with the big league team too long, but they also made a mistake in the previous off-season by not considering a platoon option to team up with Phillips to help ease his way into the big leagues. Of course, they did learn from this mistake as they signed veteran Alex Cora to help ease Jhonny Peralta's transition as the everyday SS in 2005 (although, it lead to another mistake....more on that later).

In addition to not having a backup plan for Phillips and keeping him too long, the Indians also compounded the mistake by seemingly giving up on him after the 2003 season. How else do you explain how Phillips was jerked around in 2004 and 2005? Again, the Indians made the right choice in 2004 to go out and sign a veteran 2B (Ronnie Belliard) and let Phillips figure things out in Buffalo. And, after the tumultuous season he had in 2003, Phillips seemed to be in better spirits going into 2004 and open to spending most of the year in Buffalo re-proving his worth and finding his lost game.

Unfortunately, this would be the last time the Indians would handle the Phillips situation

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correctly.

Phillips went on to have an All-Star season at Buffalo in 2004, hitting .303/.363/.430 with 8 HRs, 50 RBIs and 14 stolen bases. He appeared to focus more on being a disciplined hitter, as he put together an impressive 44:56 walk-to-strikeout ratio in 521 at bats with the Bisons. He split time at SS and 2B and was rock solid defensively, and was one of the key contributors to Buffalo's 2004 International League Championship. Once Buffalo's season finally finished, he received a late September callup to Cleveland and only played in six games. Overall, in 2004, Phillips rebounded very well from the disaster of a season in 2003, worked hard and was a model citizen, which should have put him back into the Indians plans in 2005.....right?

Wrong.

For whatever reason, the Indians again stuck Phillips in Buffalo in 2005. It can be argued that there was no spot for Phillips on the Indians roster in 2005 as the 2004 International League MVP Jhonny Peralta was set to replace Omar Vizquel at shortstop. Also, the Indians learned from their 2003 mistake with Phillips and signed veteran Alex Cora to help Peralta's transition as the everyday SS, as well as backup Belliard at 2B.

But, this is where a GM earns his money when making roster decisions, and Shapiro failed here big time. The Indians had already almost lost the flamboyant Phillips once when they demoted him in 2003, but were able to convince him to come back strong in 2004, which he did. Could they seriously risk losing him again? Especially after Phillips pretty much did everything the organization asked in 2004 and was moreorless a model citizen in the clubhouse and had one of his best seasons ever? The Indians had to know that if they sent him down again, Phillips was finished in this organization.

Wouldn't it have made more sense not to waste two roster spots on Alex Cora and Jose Hernandez, and instead go with Phillips and Hernandez? Hernandez provided what we needed (or at least at the time it seemed), which was a utility option who could play virtually anywhere on the field and specialized in hitting left-handed pitching. Shapiro made a good roster decision

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getting Hernandez who was a guy with perceived value at the time.

But, with Hernandez in the fold, what did Alex Cora bring to the table that a combination of Phillips and Hernandez could not provide? Cora was a reliable defensive middle-infielder, but so was Phillips. Cora was a good backup plan for Peralta, but so was Hernandez (and even Phillips). Cora provided some veteran experience on the bench and in the infield, but Hernandez provided this as well. Cora had a questionable bat, but so did Phillips. So....what was the purpose of the Alex Cora signing again?

Yes, some may also argue that unless Phillips is playing everyday he will not be happy in a utility role. But, if you recall, early on in 2005 Peralta was in somewhat of a platoon with Cora in that he played roughly 4-5 games a week. Before being traded by the Indians at the beginning of July, Cora played in 49 games and received 146 at bats in half a season. Had we not signed Cora, that playing time would have gone to Phillips. Does anyone think Phillips would have complained about that amount of playing time (playing roughly every other day) versus being shuttled off to major league purgatory in Buffalo once again? I think not.

Once Shapiro signed Cora, he sealed Phillips fate with the Indians.

The writing was on the wall, and it was only a matter of time before Phillips would be released or traded. Clearly, Phillips appeared to be on the outs in the organization and was only being kept on for depth purposes and because he had still had one "option" remaining. It was only a matter of time before Phillips' personality issues resurfaced, and they did.

As could be expected, the way the Indians were jerking him around affected his play. Phillips' numbers regressed in 2005 at Buffalo, as he hit .256/.326/.409 with 15 HRs, 46 RBIs and 7 stolen bases. Most notably, that walk-to-strikeout ratio that he improved so much on in 2004 dipped to a 39:90 walk-to-strikeout ratio in 465 at bats. Phillips went from striking out once every 9 at bats in 2004 to striking out once every 5 at bats in 2005, which is a huge increase in strikeout rate.

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The Indians even called Phillips up after they traded Cora, yet inexplicably in the 20 games he was with the team from July 9 through July 31, he played in only 4 of them, and had a meaningless 9 at bats. Contrary to what the Indians were saying in that they wanted him up so they could work directly with him on certain areas of his game, flat out not playing the guy was inexcusable.

The Phillips Era pretty much unofficially came to an end in September of 2005, when Buffalo's season finished and players were called up to Cleveland. Phillips was not one of the call-ups. Reportedly, after hearing he was not being called up, Phillips got into a heated exchange with Indians Farm Director John Farrell that was pretty ugly, and a lot of nasty things were said by Phillips. After the way the Indians jerked him around in 2005, can you blame Phillips for venting his frustrations?

Going into the off-season, the Indians went with Ramon Vazquez and Brandon Phillips in an "alleged" battle for the utility job in 2006. But, we all know that the Indians had already decided on Vazquez long before the trucks were loaded up to get ready for Spring Training. Phillips even went on to outplay Vazquez in Spring Training, yet the Indians kept Vazquez on board because he was "a better fit."

Reportedly, Indians manager Eric Wedge wanted nothing to do with Phillips, especially after he caught word of Phillips tongue-lashing of Farrell. If you go back to the quote from Shapiro above, you can clearly see that Shapiro allowed Wedge to win out in this argument (Shapiro wanted to keep Phillips), but you can also see that Wedge now may not have as much pull as he maybe once did after Shapiro alluded to them taking a different approach in that its "probably not the way we'll walk through that decision the next time we go through it."

The Indians ended up trading Phillips at the end of Spring Training to the Cincinnati Reds for minor league pitcher Jeff Stevens, which is like when you dump a player from an NFL team for a 7th round pick...in other words, the player you are getting in return is irrelevant. In the end, Vazquez stunk. He hit .209 with an atrocious .551 OPS on the season, and was gone in August. Meanwhile, Brandon Phillips established himself as one of the National League's top 2B with the Reds, hitting .276/.324/.427 with 17 HRs, 75 RBIs and 25 stolen bases.

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So, this brings us to the present.

The Indians reportedly are in search of a 2B this off-season either through free agency or trade. Of course, had Shapiro had a little foresight, he could have realized that with Ronnie Belliard in his free agent year in 2006, and with nothing in the minors ready to take over in 2007, that Phillips DID have some value with the Indians still. And, by taking this into consideration, it should have trumped anything Wedge was hammering into Shapiro about Phillips not being "the right fit." Instead, Phillips will star at Cincinnati at 2B for the next several years, while we try to find a suitable option for the position.

Shapiro's handling of Phillips was a complete and utter breakdown as a General Manager. Not only did Shapiro make the mistake of choosing the likes of Ramon Vazquez and Alex Cora over Brandon Phillips, but he also mistakenly listened and acted upon the wishes of his manager. Worse yet, the Indians never gave the prized prospect a second chance to prove himself. Seriously. After he was demoted in the middle of 2003....when did he ever get another shot at proving himself with the team? In 2004 and 2005, he played in a grand total of 12 games and had 31 at bats.

The Indians should have kept Phillips. Granted, at the time of the trade, only a very small percentage of fans actually cared to retain Phillips (I was one of them). Shapiro has learned a tough lesson with the Phillips Debacle. He always has been one to learn from his mistakes, but giving up on young and potentially productive players is a mistake that this organization cannot afford.