

## Decreasing Marginal Utility: Indians Don't Need More Bench Players

Written by Lewie Pollis

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The Indians' front office bigwigs have been a lot busier this offseason than a lot of fans give them credit for.

In addition to re-signing Grady Sizemore [for a below-market price](#) and pulling off the great deals [for Derek Lowe](#) and [f or Aaron Cunningham](#)

, Cleveland has been in on almost every notable outfielder on the market (trade or free agent) this winter. The Indians might not have landed all the players they've been connected to, but you can't say they're not making the effort.

But not every pursuit is something for Tribe fans to be excited about. There's a certain type of player the Indians seem to be targeting: utility men. And adding more of them could hurt the team, both now and down the road.

In addition to [signing Andy LaRoche](#) and [Jose Lopez](#), the team has expressed interest in quite a few former Indians: [Casey](#), [Blake](#), [Mar](#), [k DeRosa](#)

, [Jamey Carroll](#)

, and

[Kevin Kouzmanoff](#)

. Each would provide the Indians with another warm body at multiple positions on the depth chart. The problem is, they'd just get in the way.

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Let me clarify: I'm not bashing bench guys or putting down platoon players with no permanent position. When I was a kid, Enrique Wilson and Wil Cordero were two of my favorite players. Where would the 2011 Indians have been without Shelley Duncan and Jack Hannahan?

Nor am I suggesting that the Indians are wrong to be spending time on utility men. Given the choice, an everyday player or a pitcher should be the higher priority, but they're not mutually exclusive. You never want or plan to have to count on your duct tape or Swiss Army knife, but in an emergency you want to have a reliable backup plan.

The problem is how the Indians are trying to fill their bench: bringing in low-ceiling veterans from outside instead of using the better, younger, and cheaper options already in the system.

Take Jason Donald. He has experience at second, third, and shortstop. He's 27 years old and he's due to get the minimum wage for the next two years. Right-handed hitter, so he'd be a good complement to Cleveland's projected everyday players. Last year he hit .318/.364/.402 in his brief time in the majors. How about Cord Phelps? He posted an .868 OPS with Triple-A Columbus last year, and prospect guru John Sickels just rated the 25-year-old switch-hitter among the [Tribe's top 10 prospects](#) for 2012.

Of the six utility players the Indians have acquired or been connected to—LaRoche, Lopez, Blake, DeRosa, Carroll, Kouzmanoff—is there anyone who would be better than Donald or Phelps? Not one of them projects as better than the Tribe's in-house options in either the short or long terms, and with the possible exception of LaRoche none of the new signees or possible targets have as high ceilings.

It's possible that I'm blowing this out of proportion—nothing's been decided yet in terms of playing time or roster spots. Neither LaRoche nor Lopez are guaranteed spots on the roster, and even if they wanted to it's too late for the Indians to sign Blake, DeRosa, and Carroll. But I'm concerned that both the presence of the new options and the desire to find external candidates could mean trouble for Donald and Phelps' playing time.

Last year, Orlando Cabrera held onto his starting job at second base long after it had become clear that he was a below-replacement-level player. Luis Valbuena didn't do very well in his limited time, but he didn't have much of a chance; same goes for Phelps. But Cabrera was

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pretty much guaranteed a place in the lineup despite his poor performance on both sides of the ball, even though there were younger players available with far higher ceilings.

I'm afraid—and, I think, justifiably so—that we may be looking at a similar situation next year in the competition for bench spots. If LaRoche or (worse) Lopez wins a spot on the roster, it will come at the expense of Donald or Phelps. Every plate appearance LaRoche gets or inning in the field Lopez plays is time that could have gone to Donald or Phelps. Playing inferior players not only hurts a team that wants to contend in the short term, but also impedes the younger guys' development in the long run.

I don't have a problem with the LaRoche and Lopez deals—they're minor-league contracts so there's nothing to lose, and I actually think giving LaRoche a try in the spring [could be a risk worth taking](#) —but I think there's legitimate reason to be concerned about the team's plan for Donald and Phelps and what place (or lack thereof) they have in Cleveland.

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