

The Band-Aid for a Passive Offseason

Written by {ga=edtherevelator}

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It's been a frustrating off-season to be an Indians fan. Many baseball fans, myself included, see the AL Central as ripe for the taking, especially in light of the injury former Indian Victor Martinez has suffered, leaving the Detroit Tigers a bat short as Vic is now out for the year.

Unfortunately, the Indians haven't really done much to catch up to the Tigers, even without Martinez, preferring instead to wait and rely on good health. The Indians have made only three moves of major significance, in the acquisitions of Derek Lowe and Kevin Slowley, and the re-signing of Grady Sizemore. Unfortunately, the Slowley addition was really more to offset the potential loss of the man who claimed to be Fausto Carmona (real name: Roberto Hernandez Heredia) for part of the season due to visa issues (and lying about who he really was, of course).

While the Carmona drama has been annoying, it hasn't been nearly as difficult to watch as the inactivity by the Indians, who seem to be ignoring that, even when healthy, this team is very flawed. And although at times I'm the biggest Indians apologist on the planet, even I am losing my patience with the Tribe's passiveness and unfortunately, I feel that this desire to keep flexibility will end up costing the Tribe a shot at the playoffs this year.

The Tribe seems to be in denial about their realistic options at first base (and, to a lesser extent, the outfield). The Indians flirted with free agent first baseman Carlos Pena, although there are conflicting reports to how serious their interest was, as they apparently never made Pena an

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offer. He has since signed with Tampa Bay. Before you grab the pitchforks and torches and head out towards the Dolan household, I'd like to point out that Pena wasn't even the best realistic first base option remaining for the Indians on the free agent market. That guy is still out there, in the form of Casey Kotchman, who does everything better than Pena, except in the home run category. I'm a little perplexed as to why the Indians don't just field Kotchman an offer, even if it's a low-ball offer, to get the dialogue started. This offseason is almost over, and he's going to want a job. Why not see if he's willing to play on the corner of Carnegie and Ontario?

I know what you're saying - the Rays could have kept Kotchman, and instead signed Pena. I think the Rays were swayed by Pena's better power numbers, but really, Kotchman was the better player last year (not by much though, 2.8 fWAR for Kotchman, 2.6 for Pena), and I'm sure Pena's previous history with Tampa Bay helped ease the Rays' decision (Pena previously played for the Rays from 2007-2010). And I'm still not considering Carlos Lee of the Astros a realistic option. Houston doesn't seem to be in a hurry to eat any more of his salary, and really seems to have more sutors with Detroit now needing a DH. I just don't see him landing in Cleveland easily. As for free agent first baseman Derek Lee, yes, he hit 19 home runs last year. But he's going to cost more money than Kotchman, and you're really not getting better production for that dollar (1.4 fWAR). Oh yeah, he's also 37 years old.

I realize this isn't my money I'm spending, but instead of hoping to catch lightning in a bottle with the host of minor league free agents that have been signed (and before anyone starts complaining, you need those guys in your camp, just in case, for depth), why not spend some coin on a guy who can make a bona-fide impact? That's really all most of these spring training invites should be - insurance policies for the worst case scenario. Although trading Carmona/Hernandez Heredia (really wish he'd decide who he is) is probably out of the question now, the Indians will still have the option of putting Carmona on the restricted list while his visa issues are sorted out, and they will not have to pay him during this time. While he still may pitch this season, it's almost assured the Indians will not have to pay all of his \$7 million salary this season. And while I understand why the Indians would be wary to start spending that money, the team still has that glaring hole at first base. I don't think anyone in their right mind wouldn't take Kotchman and his 2.8 fWAR over incumbent first baseman Matt LaPorta's below-replacement level production (-0.8 fWAR!). The Indians could basically get a three-win swing, simply by replacing LaPorta with Kotchman, and I doubt Kotchman gets an offer from any team anywhere close to the \$7.5 million Carlos Pena received.

The Indians told fans they were serious about contending in 2012 with the acquisition of Ubaldo Jimenez in July last season, but this lack of activity seems to suggest otherwise. When the Tribe landed Jimenez, it served notice that the Indians were serious about contending in 2011, 2012 and 2013 (the length of Jimenez's contract), but their passiveness this offseason is sending an

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altogether different message. Everything else has fallen through, and the Central is there for whoever wants it. Kotchman would be one way of making sure the bounty paid for Jimenez doesn't go to waste. Kotchman is not a savior, but he's a huge band-aid over a hemorrhaging hole in the offense. Even if Kotchman isn't the answer at first base, the problem with that position at the major-league level seems to be as plain as day. My question is, why don't the Indians see it?