

## Can the Tribe Maintain a Fertile Farm System?

Written by {ga=tommoore}

Monday, June 11 2012 1:30 PM - Last Updated Wednesday, June 13 2012 8:11 AM

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If there is one thing Cleveland fans like to talk about almost as much as wins and losses it is the draft.

Doesn't matter if it is the Browns and the NFL Draft (Justin Blackmon vs. Trent Richardson? What about that back-up long-snapper they passed on with the second pick in the seventh round?), the Cavs and the NBA Draft (Michael Kidd-Gilchrist? Harrison Barnes? Trade with Portland?) or the Indians and the seemingly never-ending Major League Draft (Can you *believe* they took another shortstop in the 33rd round?), everyone is an expert and everyone wants to know when we will see these guys on a major league roster.

The recent draft in Major League Baseball got us thinking about all this and we freely admit we know absolutely nothing about any of the players the Tribe selected. Is Texas A&M outfielder Tyler Naquin, who the Indians selected with their first pick, the next big thing? Nobody knows, least of all the man whose job it is to know: John Mirabelli, the Tribe's vice president of scouting.

"I know that we scouted him very thoroughly and our process was very detailed," [Mirabelli said in an interview with Indians Prospect Insider](#)

. "We had a lot of other guys in the mix. There was not a lot of separation in the group of college position players, so at the end of the day we had to make a choice. Some of the other kids that it came down to were actually rated higher by the national media, but at the end of the day we have to go with our evaluations and that is what we did."

While even Mirabelli knows drafting college players is a bit of a crapshoot, for a team like the Indians, that can't just spend its way into the playoffs by signing high-priced free agents to fill in the holes on the roster, the draft is critical.

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Because while we may not know much about the players the Indians drafted, this we do know: for the Tribe to hope to have any kind of sustained success at the major league level, they need to be right more than they are wrong when it comes to stocking the minor league rosters. This is one of the truisms of baseball that goes back decades and is as tried and true as they come.

The Tribe's success in the 1950s – when the team finished second five times over a six-year period from 1951 to 1956 (and finished first the other year) – was driven by the farm system built by general manager Hank Greenberg. According to Jack Torry's 1996 book, *Endless Summers* :

*The Cleveland farm system, with its 368 players was Hank Greenberg's passion. Greenberg never believed he could overtake the Yankees with glitzy deals. (Some things never change, do they?) The Indians would have to beat them at their own game – developing better players in the farm system.*

*Before Greenberg took control of the Indians' minor league system in 1949, player development was haphazard. The Indians owned seven minor league teams and had working agreements with nine more, ... (but) each team trained separately and the individual team managers taught the game's fundamentals to the young players as they saw fit.*

*Greenberg instituted massive changes in his effort to build the best farm system in baseball and convinced the Indians owners to spend lavishly on it. In 1950, they spent more than \$1 million on their farm system when all of organized baseball budgeted only \$5 million for player development.*

*He instructed his minor league managers to develop future major leaguers and not worry about winning baseball games. "We want our players studied and taught in a uniform fashion," Greenberg told them. "We're in this for one reason – to make Cleveland the best baseball club in the country. Not for one year, but forever."*

Greenberg's efforts paid off as the Tribe signed such players as Rocky Colavito, Roger Maris, Al Rosen, Don Mossi, Ray Narleski and Herb Score.

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Greenberg was eventually pushed out and Frank Lane took over as general manager. Lane's addiction to making deals, combined with a succession of Tribe owners who didn't have the money needed to run a major league team, over time gutted the Tribe's farm system and led to the teams that most of us grew up with: ones that only finished higher than fourth place once from 1961 to 1993.

This is all kind of important and relevant today because if the Indians couldn't go dollar-for-dollar against the Yankees in the 1950s, there's no way they can do it today. In addition, a look at the Tribe's current roster reveals a rather unsettling situation.

Of the main players currently hanging out at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario, only four – Jason Kipnis, Lonnie Chisenhall, Josh Tomlin and Vinnie Pestano were drafted by the Tribe. Everyone else either came aboard via a trade (Asdrubal Cabrera, Carlos Santana, Justin Masterson, Chris Perez, Nick Hagadone, Ubaldo Jimenez, etc.) or are low-priced free agents (Casey Kotchman, Jeanmar Gomez, Jack Hannahan, etc.).

It seems highly unlikely that that is a sustainable model for the team to follow.

The bright side in all this is it sounds as if the current Tribe management not only understands the need for a viable farm system but also supports it.

“Our model for achieving championship success ... is going to be the same model that we talked about for 20 years here,” [team president Mark Shapiro told \*The Plain Dealer\*](#). “It's going to be relentless talent acquisition at every level, but most important, at the amateur level, through the draft, through Latin America, but also through aggressively making trades. Our player-development system has got to be the best player-development system out there ... We rank in the upper quartile of Major League Baseball (in spending on scouting and player development) in any given year.”

It's great that the Indians are committed to their minor- league system, but that is only part of the equation. They need to keep the pipeline full so they don't have to rely on getting the better end of a deal to fill the major league roster.

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Because, really, the best problem the team can have is worrying about how they are going to keep them on the farm once they've seen the bright lights of Cleveland.

*(Photo by Texas A&M Athletics)*