So…any significant news coming out of the Indians lately? Other than pitchers and catchers reporting, signing the 2nd major free agent in the same offseason and inking one of the best pitchers in the history of Japanese baseball to a minor league contract? This has been the busiest and most newsworthy week or so in any offseason I can remember, and for once all of the news coming out of Cleveland is good news. Everyone was excited enough at the prospect of spring training getting started, as the Indians had several new additions to the club that fans were going to finally get a look at in Wahoo red, white and blue. Then Chris Antonetti and company went out and did something totally unexpected, inking speedster Michael Bourn to bat leadoff and patrol CF, sliding fellow offseason acquisition Drew Stubbs over to RF. It was a move that had been rumored for a couple of weeks, but I don't think anyone really *expected* it to happen. I certainly did not. I was happy with the moves the Tribe had already made in the offseason, and was thrilled to see spring training finally getting underway in earnest. But while pitchers were popping fastballs into catcher's mitts all across the desert, the Indians front office remained busy at work getting manager Terry Francona one last(?) piece to help with sorting out the lineup puzzle. So with an eye towards Goodyear, we're off on another exciting Lazy Sunday in February…

Even after the Indians signed Mark Reynolds and Nick Swisher, the club still had a gaping hole remaining at the designated hitter slot. There was talk about bringing back Travis Hafner at a deeply discounted rate from what he would have received if the Indians had picked up his 2013 option, but Hafner signed with the Yankees and is currently salivating over the short RF porch in Yankee Stadium. Some speculated that the Indians would look to another hero from times past and bring back Jim Thome, but that was never really an option. I even saw one site speculate that the Indians could be interested in bringing back Manny Ramirez, but that line of "thinking" was never rooted in any sort of reality. Conventional wisdom led most to assume that Francona would use the DH as a rotating day off for his various position players, a couple of which (namely Kipnis and Asdrubal) seemed to tire and tail off towards the end of last season.

Supersub Mike Aviles' presence on the 25-man roster would have made that scenario easy to work out, as Aviles can play 2B/3B/SS and even LF to give pretty much anyone in the lineup a day off. But rather than leave the DH to such a rotation, Antonetti went out and signed Bourn. Bourn was negotiating with the New York Mets, and the Mets were attempting to get major league baseball to soften on the draft pick compensation rule that would have seen the Mets lose their 1st round pick to the cross-town Yankees if they'd signed Bourn. The deal stalled while the Mets petitioned the Commissioner's Office, and the Indians swooped in with a contract that guarantees him at least $48 million over the next four years. If Bourn accumulates 550 plate appearances in 2016 (and passes a physical following the season), then a $12 million option kicks in to make the final total of the deal a whopping $60 million over five seasons. Add that to the $56 million that the Indians guaranteed Swisher (with a vesting option that could push it to $70 million), and a quick math tally shows us that the Indians have committed as much as $130 million to two players in a single offseason , albeit two of the top-10 free agents available this winter.
That is completely unprecedented in the history of the franchise.

Bourn is one of the fastest players in major league baseball, and that speed helps him to be an elite defender in CF. He's a two-time all-star and has a pair of Gold Gloves sitting on his mantle, and the defensive metrics rank him as the top CF in all of baseball. By baseball-reference.com's Wins Above Replacement (WAR) measurements, his glove alone was worth three wins last

season in Atlanta. He'll patrol CF as part of the fastest outfield in baseball, flanked by two other guys who played CF last season in Michael Brantley and Drew Stubbs. Stubbs and his cannon arm will slide over to RF while Brantley and his…less than cannon arm will be running down balls in LF. The grass at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario really will be the place fly balls go to die this summer, provided the front office doesn't move one of the former CF for pitching depth. And we haven't even talked about Bourn's impact with the bat or on the bases yet; he hit a solid .274/.348/.391 with 9 HR and 57 RBI last season, while stealing 42 bases with Atlanta. He's swiped at least 41 bags in every season since becoming a full-time player in 2008. Every time Bourn gets on base, he's a real threat to turn a single into a triple like no player we've seen in Cleveland since…dare I say it…Kenny Lofton. The Indians as a team stole 110 bases last season. Bourn and Stubbs (30 SB last year, 40 in 2011) have the potential to do that between the two of them in 2013. Bourn's presence will also let Terry Francona rest Drew Stubbs against lefthanded pitching, as he's put up some pretty ugly splits against southpaws throughout his career. Lineup flexibility is always a good thing, and we're not talking about Garko to the OF type of flexibility here.

One of the reasons that the Indians were able to sign Bourn is the new rules regarding draft pick compensation. In case you need a refresher on the new CBA that was agreed upon last season, teams losing free agents are subject to draft pick compensation from signing franchises if the free agent has been offered a one-year tender of $13.3 million by his original club. That dollar amount will vary from season to season, but for this offseason it was set at $13.3 million. Both Swisher and Bourn were tendered that offer by the Yankees and Braves, respectively. "Fortunately" for the Indians, they finished with one of the 10 worst records in baseball last year, and the top-10 picks in the draft are protected. So instead of losing their first and second round picks, the Indians only had to forfeit their 2nd round pick and the pick they were awarded in the new competitive balance lottery, a sandwich pick between the 2nd and 3rd rounds of the draft. There's a good chance that Bourn would have signed prior to mid-February if the signing team wouldn't have been forced to give up their 1st round pick as compensation, so the Indians really lucked out under the new rules. In fact, the Indians can actually thank superagent Scott Boras, because if his client Mark Appel had signed with the Pirates last season, then the Mets would have had the 10th (and protected) pick in the draft and likely would have signed Bourn. Some are hailing this as proof that the new CBA works; I think it was just a lucky break for this season. The new CBA doesn't protect small markets as much as it rewards incompetence. The Red Sox have the 7th pick in the draft, which of course is also a protected pick this year. If the small-market Pirates had signed a marquee free agent, they'd have been penalized by losing their first round pick, #14 overall. The only way the CBA is structured to protect small markets is if you assume that small market teams have no chances to compete and will consistently finish among the bottom

10 teams in baseball year in and year out.

The Indians benefited from the system this time around, but that hardly means that the system works the way it should. Small market teams are still penalized by the hard slotting system in both the draft and the international market, something the Indians are going to have to deal with much more this year than last year because when the club lost their 2nd and competitive balance sandwich pick, they also lost the corresponding money that went along with the picks. So going way overslot on their 1st rounder and way underslot on their 2nd rounder is no longer an option. I hate to include a CBA rant in every one of my articles, but the system just makes so little sense overall that I'm constantly finding new issues with the rules. Such is life though, and credit the Indians front office with seizing on the opportunity to exploit a loophole in the system this year and going all-out. It's clear that Antonetti and company intend to pick outside of the top-10 next year, and are using their free agent capital this season while that invaluable first round pick is protected. Small market success is about identifying and exploiting inefficiencies, and kudos to the Indians front office for doing just that this offseason.

So with all that said, I do have a couple of minor concerns with the Bourn signing. One, he's a player who's value is tied almost entirely to his legs. He's been a very, very good player due to his legs, but if his speed goes, so does his value. As we've discussed, Bourn offers slightly better than league average production at the plate. He strikes out too much and doesn't walk as much as you'd like from your leadoff hitter. His primary value to the team is in the field and on the basepaths, and if he suffers an injury that saps him of his speed, that's a huge problem. Back when everyone's favorite political forecaster Nate Silver was still just a baseball numbers guy, he wrote an article for Baseball Prospectus that illustrated the steep decline that MLB CF undergo around age 32. Bourn will play the 2013 season as a 30 year old. I'm not saying that I expect a dramatic drop-off in production for Bourn after the 2014 season, but the situation bears monitoring. It's not like Bourn can just slide over to LF and let his bat carry him if he loses a step.

My second concern is that while Bourn is an overall upgrade to the roster (of course), his presence in CF actually lowers the value of all of the players that he's displacing. Drew Stubbs slides over to RF, where his bat will be slightly less valuable that in CF. Nick Swisher moves to 1B, where his bat will be a little less valuable than in RF. Mark Reynolds moves to DH, where…well, you get the idea. So while Bourn could be worth as many as six wins over a replacement player based on his recent performance, the player he's replacing is an above-average defender himself, so the upgrade won't be as dramatic as if he were replacing, say, Johnny Damon in CF. But the overall team defense is definitely upgraded by the move, and

it really is going to be fun watching the highlight-level plays day in and day out in the Indians outfield this summer.

All in all, those two concerns are outweighed by the positive aspects of the deal, summed up best (as usual) by the fantastic Jonah Keri over at Grantland. Bourn makes the Indians a better team, of that there can be no doubt. He gives manager Terry Francona more options with the outfield and with the DH position. The dollars in the contract, while significant, are actually extremely reasonable in today's market; Josh Hamilton, B.J. Upton and Nick Swisher all got more money than Bourn, and it's entirely possible that Bourn outperforms all of them next year (if Hamilton gets hurt again, that is). Even Torii Hunter got a higher annual value than Bourn when he signed a 2-year, $26 million deal with the Tigers. Shane Victorio, coming off of a .704 OPS, got $39 million for three years! Bourn was looking for a deal in the 5-year, $100 million range earlier this offseason, and the Braves actually moved on to sign B.J. Upton because they thought Bourn would be too expensive. So the deal is an excellent value, particularly with the huge influx of MLB TV revenue that will be flowing into teams' coffers in the near future. Salaries are poised to explode in the coming seasons, so obtaining an asset of Bourn's talent for a reasonable cost can be seen as a good investment in talent if nothing else. If Bourn helps headline a new "window of contention" sometime in the next one to five years, then great! Mission accomplished. If not, Antonetti has a reasonably-priced asset that he can flip for younger parts. The signing makes all the sense in the world from both a talent and financial perspective, and if the Indians have acquired their mid-2010's version of mid-1990's Kenny Lofton, so much the better. Oh, and the Indians reportedly sold as many season tickets this past Tuesday night as they did in a month last offseason, another added benefit to creating a little buzz in the cold winter months.

Bourn was not the only free agent the Indians brought into the fold this past week, as there were

a couple of interesting minor league deals (with accompanying invites to MLB camp in the spring, of course). Jason Giambi, now 42 and fresh off an interview for the Colorado manager's seat, will compete this spring to be a pinch-hitter and lefthanded DH when the club breaks camp to head North and start the regular season. His career OBP is still a remarkable .403, and Giambi actually had a pretty good season for Colorado in 2011. He hit 13 HR and put up a .260/.335/.603(!) line in 131 at-bats, most of them as a pinch hitter. He hit just one HR in 89 AB last season, and can only be considered a long shot to make the Indians opening day roster. Still, prior to the Bourn signing, that did not stop the twitter GM's from lamenting the cheapness of the Dolans and the clear bout of insanity that Chris Antonetti was suffering in thinking that Giambi was anything but washed up. People who get worked up and bent out of shape over minor league non-roster invitees (NRI's) never cease to amaze me, but those fans were quickly quelled by the Bourn signing and we (mercifully) only had to put up with them for a day or so.

The second NRI is a little more intriguing and has a better shot to break camp with the team, as

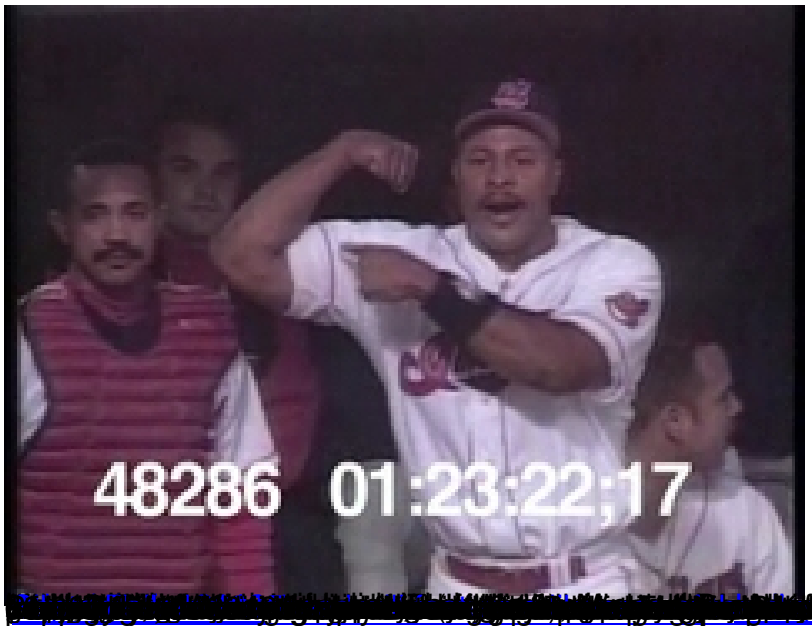
Daisuke Matsuzaka directly addresses the Indians biggest weakness; their starting pitching. Matsuzaka battled injuries and ineffectiveness last season when he went 1-7 with a (hide the women and children) 8.28 ERA and 1.70 WHIP in 11 starts for the Red Sox. It was his first season back on the mound after undergoing Tommy John surgery, so some rust is completely understandable. But he's now four seasons removed from his outstanding 2008 campaign that saw him go 18-3 with a 2.90 ERA for the Sox, and he's really never been close to that level of success since. That 2008 season is looking more and more like a BABIP fluke than anything else as the years go by. In 2008, Matsuzaka's BABIP against was just .260, a full 76 points below his career average of .336. BABIP usually regresses to the mean, and when a guy who is always among the league leaders in walks suddenly stops getting lucky, bad things tend to happen. Maybe 2008 was the last season he was really healthy, or maybe it was the last season he was really lucky. Either way, it's more than worth a NRI to find out, and Matsuzaka will make just $1.5 million if he makes the 25-man roster out of spring training.

In his first interviews with the Cleveland media after signing, he said that there were two factors that brought him to Cleveland. One, he would get to pitch for manager Terry Francona again. Two, he would be in the American League and get to face his former team, the Boston Red Sox. A healthy, happy and motivated Matsuzaka might just surprise some people this season, and if so Antonetti will look like a genius. If not, it costs absolutely nothing. While the dramatic upgrades in the lineup are nice and were badly-needed, the Indians still have serious issues with their starting pitching. The starting rotation is currently occupied by five "ifs." IF Masterson can get back to his 2011 form, IF Ubaldo isn't the complete disaster he was in 2012, IF Brett Myers can return to a starting role, IF Carlos Carrasco comes back healthy and IF Trevor Bauer has learned from his struggles in 2012, then the Indians might have a decent rotation. That's a lot of "ifs," and adding Matsuzaka to compete for a spot certainly isn't going to hurt anything. Anthony Castrovice came up with the most creative (and accurate) analogy for the Indians starting rotation that I've seen so far; highway rest stop fast food. In Castro's words, "You know they're not likely to blow away your expectations, but you do need them, they do serve a purpose, and you just hold out hope they don't leave you violently ill." Well put, Anthony, well put.

Speaking of Trevor Bauer, his former catcher with the Diamondbacks, Miguel Montero, continues to work as hard as possible to shove his entire cleat down his own throat. Montero again this week felt the need to run down Bauer to the media at the Diamondbacks fan fest, saying that the 22-year old "never wanted to listen" to him, among other things. I've made my feelings on the Bauer-Montero relationship pretty clear, and I see no reason to change those now. I still think Montero is coming across as the bad guy in this relationship, and I really can't believe that Arizona sportswriters don't have anything more interesting to ask the team about than a player who was traded away two months ago. Maybe they're trying to justify what was seen as a poor trade by their team's GM in dealing a

top pitching prospect for a great defensive shortstop who has struggled to hit in the minor leagues. Maybe they're just not that creative, or maybe Montero keeps bringing it up and the quotes make for good copy and are still driving page clicks. Whatever the reason, the controversy doesn't seem to be going away, and that's really no fault of Bauer's at this point. Bauer was contrite and apologetic after the season, calling his teammates and coaches in an attempt to smooth over perceived slights and identify just what it was about him that seemed to rub everyone the wrong way. But his former teammates just can't seem to let it go, for whatever reason. The more Miguel Montero talks, the better Trevor Bauer sounds.

Tucked away in that article from Arizonasports.com is a quote from Montero that might be the real reason behind the tension between the players. Montero talks about spring training last year, and says, "since day one in Spring Training I caught him and he killed me because he threw about 100 pitches in the first day." Seems innocuous enough, but I'm about to share with you a secret known to catchers everywhere; we HATE catching bullpens. We really hate catching bullpens in unseasonably hot weather. And we really hate catching bullpens in hot weather in the preseason when our legs aren't in shape yet. The first bullpen of the spring is supposed to be like syllabus day. You show up, get to know each other, throw 30 or so pitches and hit the showers. Montero prepared for syllabus day, and Professor Bauer came with a full day's lecture ready to go. That started the relationship off on the wrong foot, and it just deteriorated from there. To his credit, Bauer has remained extremely professional with respect to his issues in Arizona. Asked about the Montero comments on twitter, Bauer responded "Great thing about the United States. We have the freedom to say whatever we want. Thanks to all the men who fight for that." Despite many members of the media irresponsibly assuming that one of Bauer's rap songs that was recorded in December was a response to Montero's February comments, he's kept everything above board with respect to his former catcher. Just my additional $.02 on the matter, and I'm really looking forward to Spring Training this year when I can ask Trevor Bauer about it.



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