In a relatively unexpected move, the Indians signed outfielder Trot Nixon to a one year deal last week. The addition moves Casey Blake to 1st base and leaves Ryan Garko (pictured) and Shin Soo-Choo as question marks to make the big league roster, and at best ... scavengers for at bats. In his latest, Tony Lastoria talks about Mark Shapiro's obsession with bringing in average veterans for starting roles over more promising prospects, a practice that started began with the Brandon Phillips Debacle.

In an unexpected move last week, the Indians signed free agent outfielder Trot Nixon to a 1 year $3M deal that also included a total of up to $2M in incentives.* At this point, however, it is hard to get a true grasp of what purpose this signing serves. One thing is certain: Indians GM Mark Shapiro is antsy and had concerns with some of the youth on the roster.

After signing Nixon, Shapiro commented that he was indeed concerned with the youth of this team, and took advantage of the opportunity to get a player of Nixon's ability and makeup. The idea to replace an unproven young player with a proven veteran that has a track record is good in theory, but this is a theory that Shapiro has subscribed to all too often the past few off-seasons. And, in just about every case, the decision to go with a stop-gap veteran proved to be the wrong decision.

Somewhere along the way, Shapiro has lost some of the confidence he once had with young, unproven players at the major league level. This most likely may stem from how the Brandon Phillips Debacle was handled - how Phillips performed as a rookie in 2003 and how he is now out of the organization because the organization lost confidence in him, and Phillips lost confidence in the organization. But, for whatever reason, Shapiro has been extremely gun-shy the last few years to give a highly regarded prospect chance to fill a role with the team right out of Spring Training. Only in the cases when a player is out of options do you really ever see him get a chance to make the club.

Ever since Phillips crashed and burned in 2003, the organization has gone to great measures to try and not break camp with young players when the season starts and instead start them in

the minors and use veteran stop-gaps in their place. The notion to pick up a few veteran pieces parts at this stage of the off-season is somewhat inviting. While the pickings are slim, there are bargains to be had. Of which Shapiro is a renowned Bargain Hunter.

Enter Trot Nixon. Nixon is not a horrible signing because if he is healthy, not only will he help this club off the field in the locker room, but he is a pretty solid player. He can hit, play defense, and has a play-style that fans have learned to adore from Grady Sizemore. But, that said, what is the point? Shin-Soo Choo was very impressive in his brief stint with the club last year, and arguably provides just as much defense, hitting, hustle, and intestinal fortitude as Nixon does, and is much younger and healthier to boot. But, again, Shapiro seems a bit squeamish when it comes to giving the kids a chance to play. A veteran Choo is not, therefore, to Buffalo he goes.

We have seen this charade a few times recently under Shapiro. After the 2004 season, the pressure was on him and the team to start winning ("we will be contenders again by 2005"). Because of the pressure to win, and probably their failure in handling Phillips, it has affected some of Shapiro's decision making, especially when it comes to trusting the farm system the Indians speak of so highly.

We have seen his judgment affected numerous times the last three years. We saw it in 2005 when he decided to sign free agent "bargain" Juan Gonzalez for $600K. Near the end of Spring Training, Gonzalez was tabbed as a starting outfielder and Sizemore was about to be shuttled to Buffalo before an injury derailed Gonzalez's career once again. Sizemore ended up putting up incredible numbers in his first full season with the team, and immediately became a star.

Shapiro did the same thing last year with Fausto Carmona, Jeremy Sowers, Ryan Garko, and Phillips. Again, once free agency began to die down and bargains became available in January, Shapiro elected to go with "proven" stop-gap veterans Jason Johnson and Eduardo Perez instead of letting Fausto Carmona and Jeremy Sowers duke it out in Spring Training for the #5 starter spot, and letting Ryan Garko be the right-handed hitting portion of the 1B platoon. They also chose to quickly resign Ramon Vazquez early in the off-season rather than go with Phillips in the utility role.

Again, Jason Johnson crashed and burned while Sowers was putting up Johan Santana-like numbers in Buffalo in April and May. When Sowers finally got the call, he quickly established himself as a core piece of the Indians starting rotation for the next several years. The decision to go with Perez as the right-handed hitting portion of the 1B platoon worked from a numbers standpoint, although the dip in production from Garko in Buffalo was a side-effect of that decision. Garko struggled with the decision to send him to Buffalo again, but when Garko was called up late in the year, he did nothing but hit, and performed at a level equal to or greater than Perez did.

So, here we are again. Once again, we have young players in Choo and Garko who when the off-season started looked to be the leading candidates to get a shot at the everyday gig at RF and 1B, or at least the lion's share of playing time in some sort of platoon. And, as the off-season progressed, once again they both now appear destined to start the season in Buffalo (well, at least Choo) since "veterans" Nixon (RF) and Casey Blake (1B) will be the primary

starters at those positions.

For those wondering, Choo does have one option remaining, so the Indians do have the flexibility to option him out to Buffalo in a reserve role where he most likely would be the first call-up if an outfielder were injured. At this point though, it is very unlikely the Indians would keep a 5th outfielder on the team, especially since Casey Blake is essentially the 5th outfielder on the team (and hits right-handed). Also, add in that this team is left-handed heavy in the outfield, and there is no way that Choo makes this team out of Spring Training unless an outfielder is injured or traded.

Garko may end up in Buffalo, but with so many left-handed hitters in the lineup, the Indians will need a capable right-handed hitter to use as a pinch-hitter off the bench. Also, it has yet to be determined who the starter at 1B will be against left-handers. With Casey Blake slated to start at 1B against right-handed starters (Nixon in RF), when a left-hander is on the mound Blake will replace Nixon and start in RF. Ryan Garko and Victor Martinez are the two main options to replace Blake at 1B against lefties, but the distribution of at bats is unknown. We know that Martinez will get at least some playing time at 1B this season against left-handed starters, but he probably won't get all of the time or even most of it. This is why Garko probably will make the team as he will be the main starter at 1B against lefties and our first pinch hit option off the bench, all of which could get him around 300 at bats this season. He'll make the team when they break camp, but in a reserve role instead of the starting role many thought he earned with his play last year.

Shapiro has done a very good job of filling holes this off-season and adding the pieces needed to this team so they can try to pick up where they left off after the 2005 season. But, before the Nixon signing, the Indians off-season was for all intents and purposes over, so the hope here is that Shapiro is not sitting in his Jacob's Field office manically perusing the 40-man roster finding ways to mix in more "veterans" in lieu of youth the next 3-4 weeks before Spring Training starts. With the Nixon signing, you only hope he has not tinkered with the team too much.

---

* Incentives pay Nixon an additional $250K to his $3M base every time he reaches a plate appearance threshold that breaks down as follows: 200, 250, 300, 350, 400, 450, 500, and 550 plate appearances. For more Indians contract info, go here:

http://www.swerbsblurbs.com/teamContractDetail.php?theme=indians&season=2007