The way things are looking, the only move the Indians may make this offseason with their starting lineup is out in left field. Kenny Lofton won't be coming back, David Dellucci is coming off a major injury, Jason Michaels can only play against lefties, and Ben Francisco may not be ready for prime time. The Indians have been tied to several rumors regarding left fielders ... most notably Pittsburgh's Jason Bay, Seattle's Raul Ibanez, and the Cubs' Matt Murton. In Paul's latest, he offers up a detailed breakdown of who's available, and whether or not they make sense for the Indians.

With the Hot Stove talk in full swing, the Indians face few decisions this off-season (particularly after picking up the options on Byrd, JoeBo, and Fultz), but the idea that the Indians need to address and improve their offense remains a common theme, regardless of what reports you're reading or what you're listening to (I listen to the classical music of 104.9 to keep me even-keeled). With most of the offense spoken for and with the youngsters asserting themselves in RF and 2B to close out 2007, few real issues or arguments exist when discussing the Tribe lineup...until you get to LF.

The Indians' LF in 2007 posted a .715 OPS (which ranked 25th of 30 MLB teams) with 15 HR (25th of 30), and while the argument exists that the Indians get production from unlikely sources (the C, the SS) allowing the Tribe to carry less-productive players in LF, is this a position that needs to be manned by an entity known as Dellichaels - as it looks to be now.

If 2007 proved anything, it proved that David Dellucci and Jason Michaels are strictly platoon players...and rather poor ones at that. Consider the numbers of how these two performed against the pitchers they were supposed to thrive against:

Dellucci vs. RHP - .709 OPS, 4 HR, 20 RBI in 154 AB
Michaels vs. LHP - .800 OPS, 5 HR, 28 RBI in 136 AB

Those numbers aren't deplorable, but they certainly don't scream that either "mash" a certain type of pitcher. The problem became more transparent when Kenny Lofton arrived to, essentially, take Trot Nixon's spot in the RF platoon and ended up taking over LF full-time to close out the season and for the playoff run.

Now, before the idea of going outside the organization to add this LF is dissected, let's acknowledge that there are internal options that exist for the Indians in The Ben Francisco Treat, The Big League Choo, and Ms. Jordan Brown (sorry, it sounds like a girl's name). First off, let's recognize that the BLC has undergone Tommy John surgery and won't be able to get involved in the "derby" until after Spring Training. But Francisco, Choo, and Brown all present legitimate options for the Indians...some more so today than others.

Ben Francisco won the International League batting title last year with a .318 average while posting an .878 OPS with 12 HR and having the versatility to play all three OF positions. He, like Michaels, is RH and could simply need a shot to show off his talents in The Show - something that unfortunately is unlikely to be handed to him as he will have to follow the Coco Crisp path to the lineup, working his way up from the 4th OF into the everyday lineup. The Frisco Kid is a player who intrigues in that he and Frank the Tank have matched each other, stride for stride, through the Minors (with Francisco displaying more consistent hitting) and Gutierrez (when given his chance) thrived in RF down the stretch in 2007. At the very least, Francisco should exist as an option for LF (or somewhere else) in 2008 with the possibility of being much more.

The BLC, unfortunately for him, is a LH hitter who seems destined to fill ½ of a platoon as he has yet to show an ability to hit LH pitching. His stint with the Tribe in 2006 resulted in a .795 OPS vs. RHP and a .437 OPS vs. LHP. Choo is a fine OF with speed and a rocket arm; but until he shows an ability to hit LHP, he will remain a strict platoon player...and that's something that perhaps the Indians should be moving away from.

The Dark Horse candidate in the race is Jordan Brown, who has won consecutive MVP awards the past two years in Kinston and Akron. He posted a .906 OPS with 11 HR (but 36 doubles) and 76 RBI in Akron last year with no discernable platoon

split. The LH Brown played mainly 1B for the Aeros, but a position change has been discussed to the OF. He was drafted out of the Universtiy of Arizona so he is 24 (in December) and figures to start the season in Buffalo; but, if Brown slices through AAA pitching the way he has at his other stops in the sticks, he could become an option rather quickly for the Indians to explore.

With those internal options being known, and most people hesitant to simply "hand the job" to an unproven youngster (regardless of what Cabrera, Gutierrez, Perez, Lewis, and Laffey did last year), what else is out there for the Indians to acquire?

Obviously there's the FA market and trade possibilities, but really...who's out there?

On the FA market, the pickings are truly slim as I'm going to limit the list to players that would constitute an upgrade over Dellichaels (.743 OPS, 11 HR, 59 RBI in 445 AB), even if it's slight, so if you're looking for the "Sign Brady Clark" movement - you're in the wrong place. Milton Bradley will also not get a mention because...well, if you really need to know, I'm questioning your "fanhood" right here and now.

**2007 Stats - OPS / HR / RBI**

Barry Bonds - 1.045 / 28 / 66
Mike Cameron - .759 / 21 / 78
Luis Gonzalez - .792 / 15 / 68
Shawn Green - .782 / 10 / 46
Jose Guillen - .813 / 23 / 99
Torii Hunter - .839 / 28 /107
Geoff Jenkins - .790 / 21 / 64
Andruw Jones - .724 / 26 / 94
Aaron Rowand - .889 / 27 / 89
Sammy Sosa - .779 / 21 / 92
Shannon Stewart - .739 / 12 / 48
Brad Wilkerson - .786 / 20 / 62

On top of those, you have the likes of Cliff Floyd, Reggie Sanders, Rondell White, and Preston Wilson - the perennial FA OF who always seem to make this list year after year...with good reason.

Can we say, outside of the "jewels" of the FA class that we KNOW won't make the trip to the North Coast to play LF (Hunter, Rowand, Jones, etc.), that the FA options to upgrade the outfield are pretty underwhelming?

Players like Sosa and Wilkerson may get some run, but the upgrade over what the Indians currently have is minimal and probably not worth committing years and dollars to a player when internal options exist.

With that in mind, if the Indians do decide to upgrade the LF position and acquire ONE player to man the position instead of playing the platoon, the player is going to have to come via trade (unless there are those who think that the Frisco Kid or Brian Barton, another farmhand, is just going to work their way into the plans suddenly and forcibly) - so what would be out there for the Tribe?

Without getting into the George Costanza scenarios ("I've figured out a way to get Griffey and Bonds...and it wouldn't cost us that much" - remember the episode is about 10 years old before mocking the players involved), what teams would have depth in the outfield to deal from and needs that may match up with what the Indians could offer?

Taking a quick gander around the league, some possibilities:

**ARIZONA DIAMONDBACKS**

*Carlos Gonzalez*
*Carlos Quentin*

With Eric Byrnes and Chris Young locked in at CF and LF and Justin Upton knocking on the door in RF, these two could be made available by GM Josh Byrnes (Shapiro's former co-worker under John Hart and Dan O'Dowd) to significantly upgrade a thin Diamondbacks rotation. With Livan Hernandez a FA and Randy Johnson coming off of back surgery, this team could be a place that the Indians could send a young (or older) arm in exchange for one of the aforementioned OF.

Gonzalez would likely need another year of seasoning at AAA (10 career AB in AAA), but there's no questioning his talent as he's accounted for at least 88 RBI in his last 3 seasons. Waiting for Gonzalez (unless the Tribe deems him to be ready) and moving MLB players for him sounds like a step back in the organization to a

time of projecting a few years out, regardless of Gonzalez's long-term potential. As nice as Gonzalez would look, the Indians have probably moved past the point of trading for "prospects", especially if it means creating a hole on the roster.

Quentin represents a far more interesting option as he is a young RH OF out of Stanford (remember the Tribe's predilection to Stanford guys - Garko, Guthrie, Gerut) who has battled injury (right hamstring, then rotator cuff) since coming into MLB after cruising through the D-Back's system

His OPS, by year, level, and age is pretty impressive:

2007 - AAA - Age 24 - 1.004
2006 - AAA - Age 23 - .906
2005 - AAA - Age 22 - .942
2004 - AA - Age 21 - .976
2004 - A - Age 21 - .990

This, to me, looks like a player simply blocked, organizationally, while producing at every level he's been at (up to MLB). While his HR totals have never been eye-popping, he has always had a consistently high OBP (something the Tribe deep thinkers love) and has high 2B totals which could translate to HR as he adjusts to MLB pitching.

Quentin did **just undergo rotator-cuff surgery** (non-throwing arm), which will keep him out of action until April, so his health concerns would be comparable to Choo; but, if the Indians are happy to do the same thing that they did in the bullpen last year (let the veterans keep a place warm for the youngsters to assert themselves) and they feel that Quentin will bounce back from the rotator cuff (not a certainty), they could find themselves a RH bat to handle LF...and possibly buy low on him because of the injury concerns.

## CHICAGO CUBS

*Matt Murton*

Baseball Prospectus' Joe Sheehan threw this one out there in last week's edition of Sports Illustrated, with Jhonny Peralta going to Wrigleyville for Matt Murton and RP Sean Gallagher. Murton does have some value to the Cubs as the RH

complement to Jacque Jones (.891 OPS vs. LHP in 2007) in an OF that figures to have Soriano and Felix Pie, but doesn't figure to get the full-time gig as long as Jones is still under contract.

The idea of giving a full-time player (Peralta) up for less than a finished product is more based in the imagination of this writer than it is based in reality. Taking the "Peralta" factor out of the idea of acquiring Thunder Matt, Murton would certainly be an upgrade over the likes of Jason Michaels, David Dellucci, and even Casey Blake, mainly because of the fact that he lacks the pronounced splits of Michaels and Dellucci. Murton is a good looking player who may simply need consistent AB to establish himself as a legitimate everyday player.

The difficulty could arise that the Cubbies (and namely Lou Piniella) are not looking for youngsters or projects to fill out their team; they're looking for veterans to get the Cubs into the Fall Classic...now. The Indians don't possess (or aren't willing to part with) that type of player if Matt Murton is the only return.

**CINCINNATI REDS**

*Josh Hamilton*

While Junior Griffey or Adam Dunn are the most likely in a crowded Reds' outfield (both of whom the Indians should have no interest in) to be dealt, the Reds are inexplicably trying to make room for Norris Hopper and Josh Hamilton could be dealt. It would make no sense from the Reds' perspective given Hamilton's affordability and versatility, but the Reds are in DESPERATE need of pitching in that bandbox they call GAB and one of these days they're going to figure that out.

Hamilton has an enormous split (1.028 OPS, 18 HR vs. RHP - .588 OPS, 1 HR vs. LHP), so he would basically play the "Dellucci" role in a platoon (for far less money) unless the Indians decided to let him play everyday with the idea that he could eventually hit LHP. Unfortunately, because of his substance abuse problem, few stats exist for his minor-league totals above the AA level - but, if the Tribe feels that he could eventually project as an everyday player (and his substance abuse problems are truly a thing of the past), the Reds would love to bolster their rotation from the Tribe's depth.

**FLORIDA MARLINS**

*Miguel Cabrera*
*Josh Willingham*

If the Marlins are willing to listen to ANY trade offer, how about throwing a line in the water on these Fish? Cabrera is obviously the "Marlin" (thanks, I'll be here all week...try the veal), but the bidding figures to get pretty hot and heavy pretty quickly for Miggy. For some perspective, it would likely take a package of Atom Miller, Franklin Gutierrez, and Asdrubal Cabrera (as a starting point) to get Cabrera out of South Florida. While he would obviously fill a hole in the lineup, is it worth creating more holes on the current team for 2 years of Cabrera before he becomes a FA after 2009 and pay him about $10M and more per year through the arbitration process in the meantime?

As for Willingham, he's not in the same tax bracket as Miguel Cabrera, but if the Tribe could offer some rotation help (particularly if the D-Train is moved), it could be a match. Like Hamilton, Willingham has pretty drastic split (.897 OPS, 19 HR vs. RHP - .621 OPS, 2 HR vs. LHP), but the numbers actually show what's known as a "reverse split". That means that the RH Willingham had better number against RH in 2007 despite going the complete opposite way in 2006 (.785 OPS vs. RHP, 1.030 OPS vs. LHP) - so, essentially, the jury's out on whether Willingham projects as an everyday player. If he is determined to be, though, the Indians have the young and affordable talent that the Marlins desire - a starter, Francisco or Marte (if Cabrera is dealt) - so the Tribe could find a solution to LF in Florida.

## LOS ANGELES DODGERS

*Matt Kemp*
*Andre Ethier*

In most situations, these two would have no business being "trade bait" as they represent essentially what most teams are looking for - affordable, developing corner OF under club control for the foreseeable future. But, the events in DodgerLand of the past few weeks have changed that as Joe Torre probably isn't going to be content to start two generally unproven OF to flank Juan Pierre or preside over a "developing" team. While reports out of LA say contrary, I can't imagine Torre or GM Ned Colletti not making a splash on the FA market to sign a big bat, possibly making one of these players expendable.

If, in fact, the Dodgers decide to "fortify" their team with known quantities, the Indians should have Colletti on speed-dial for these two youngsters with the idea that the Tribe's depth in the rotation could help fill out a thin Dodger starting staff.

Kemp, or "The Bison" as he's known, played extremely well in his 2007 MLB stint, compiling an .894 OPS over 292 AB with success against both LHP and RHP. Kemp possesses power (10 HR in 2007) and speed (10 SB in 2007) and his RH bat would nestle into the middle of the lineup quite well. He just turned 24 in late September and may be deemed to be expendable, in part because of a locker room altercation with Jeff Kent where he and teammate James Loney (allegedly) got into it with Kent regarding the young Dodgers "not caring" and Kent "not being a leader". Since Kent's history with teammates is...um...checkered, the attitude factor shouldn't come into play the way that it has for other Tribesman.

Kemp's platoon partner in 2007, the LH Andre Ethier, also had a successful 2007 season as a 25-year-old OF, posting an .802 OPS with 13 HR over 447 AB. His plate discipline and speed are inferior to Kemp, but Ethier seems to be at the edge of becoming a viable everyday OF, a chance that may not present itself in Chavez Ravine with a new regime probably hesitant on "waiting" for players to develop.

The Dodgers, to me, look like one of the most viable trade partners with their young corner OF and needs in the rotation. Considering that they play in the weak-hitting NL West, they could survive with one of the pitchers who could be made available by the Indians filling their #3 or #4 spot in the rotation. Torre's arrival could grease the wheels to the Dodgers transitioning to a "win-now" team, making these young OF available.

## NEW YORK METS

*Lastings Milledge*

The perpetual prospect that has either been overhyped by the New York media or simply hasn't had a full-time opportunity to flash his wares as we've heard his name for about 2 ½ years now as one of the "Next Great Things" with marginal performance to show for it. He is extremely young as he's 22 and has already logged 350 career AB, but he hasn't posted an OPS over .900 since his

days in the Sally League (the Lake County Captains' league) in 2004. Granted, he was 19 at the time, but it seems that he's been living off that "potential" tag for quite some time.

If the Indians feel that Milledge projects into a run-producing corner OF, the Mets are desperate enough for starting pitching (and are craving the big splash in FA for a bat that would make Milledge expendable) that a deal could be made. His September as a Met (.887 OPS, 4 HR in 49 AB) show that the hype that's been out there may be warranted (as he was one of the few Mets to show up during September) - but the hauntings of Alex Escobar, warranted or not, serve as a harsh reminder of highly touted prospects from the Big Apple.

## PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES

*Pat Burrell*

This name seems to come up every year as a RH bat that could "solve" the Indians problems, despite the fact that he holds a full no-trade clause and is making $14M a year. There's no question that Pat the Bat can hit (.902 OPS, 30 HR, 97 RBI in 2007) - the question becomes how much the Phillies are looking for in return, namely in the Starting Pitching department.

Like the Cubs, the Phils aren't ready to trade a player like Burrell for some prospects who may or may not help their club in 2008 or even 2009. They're looking for a middle of the rotation starter that can add some depth to their thin starting pitching corps now. Unless they truly feel that Cliff Lee could put up decent numbers in the Jet Stream-aided Citizens' Bank Park, there really is not a good match for the two teams. Players like Aaron Laffey, while his groundball tendencies seem tailor-made for CBP, aren't the type of established "known quantities" that the Phillies generally deal in. Perhaps the Tribe can convince the Phillies to take a package of Ben Francisco (to replace Aaron Rowand) and Laffey to acquire Burrell (if that price isn't too high) - but Pat the Bat would still need to approve it and the Indians would be adding some SERIOUS payroll dollars that I'd rather C.C. included in another contract.

## PITTSBURGH PIRATES

*Jason Bay*

The rumor du jour as Neal Huntington, formerly of the Indians' Front Office, is the new GM where the Three Rivers meet and Jason Bay is biggest bargaining chip for overhaul of team in the Bartolo Colon sense for a team with so many needs that they TRADED for Matt Morris and his dreadful contract last year.

Bay, despite an off year in 2007, is exactly what the Indians would be looking for in an OF acquisition as he is under contract through 2009 with some reasonable numbers attached to him ($5.75M in 2008, $7.25M in 2009) as he's averaged 29 HR and 98 RBI over the last 3 years while posting a .883 OPS over that timeframe.

Obviously Jason Bay would look good in front of the Pepsi (or is it Toyota...Ford?) Home Run Porch in LF, but what would cause Huntington to trade him as his first real move as GM in regards to players? The only reason that I can think of is if Huntington arrives in Pittsburgh to find the cupboard so bare that he realizes that the only way for him to truly build a "winner" is to tear it completely apart and start from scratch, using his own scouts and criteria to pick the players that will make up "his" Pirates. It's a move that would be, again, like the Colon trade when the Indians decided that they had to blow it up and move their most valuable piece to get the highest return for him.

If this does indeed come to pass, Huntington would be intimately familiar with the Indians' prospects and players and would know (just as Shapiro and Antonetti would) where there was disagreement on a player within the Tribe Front Office. For example, if Huntington carried the flag for a Ben Francisco or a Cliff Lee in a number of organizational meetings (perhaps going against others), all parties involved would be obviously aware of it and could move the chess pieces around the board accordingly.

The possibility, thus, remains that Huntington has his "favorites" from the Tribe organization that he feels are undervalued in Cleveland and could make a play to acquire some of the talent that he is most intimately familiar with. If Jason Bay is the carrot dangled in front of the Indians, he could get the players he wants as little else on the Pirates (outside of a few relievers) are going to quicken the pulses on Ontario Street.

## SEATTLE MARINERS

*Raul Ibanez*

Out of Seattle, news that the **Indians have an interest in Ibanez to play LF** for "right-hander" (which destroys quite a bit of credibility - remember, he's a LHP) Aaron Laffey is being reported by the local paper. This looks like a nice little upgrade until you consider Ibanez's splits over the last few years:

2007 vs. LHP - .650 OPS, 2 HR
2007 vs. RHP - .899 OPS, 19 HR

2006 vs. LHP - .663 OPS, 4 HR
2006 vs. RHP - .955 OPS, 29 HR

Acquiring Ibanez simply upgrades the LH portion of the platoon over Dellucci (who would have to be moved) for about $2M more than Double D. There's no question that Ibanez would provide a certain upgrade over Dellucci as he bashes RHP, but isn't the idea to get away from platoons? And is a simple upgrade in a platoon slot worth a 21-year-old LH groundball pitcher who thrived in his first exposure to MLB?

**TAMPA BAY RAYS**

*Elijah Dukes*

Overloaded with OF (just put the possibility of getting Carl Crawford out of your head because it would cost the Indians a legitimate front line starter with an MLB track record...and frankly, I'd rather hang onto anybody that even resembles that description) and ALWAYS in need young pitching, the Rays (they're dropping the "Devil") will field all calls pertaining to the immensely talented and immensely trouble Elijah Dukes.

On the basis of talent alone, the Indians could kick the tires on Dukes (who sent a picture of a handgun to his ex-wife's cell phone last year), but knowing their history on dealing with troubled players, this one seems awfully unlikely.

**TORONTO BLUE JAYS**

*Alex Rios*
*Reed Johnson*

The window is quickly closing on J.P. Ricciardi's plan, although every move that

they have made in the past few years seems to point to 2008 being the year. Despite a high payroll, they are still in need of pitching depth and the fact that OF prospect Adam Lind seems ready to assume one of these corner OF jobs could make Rios or Johnson available. Rios would be a big "get" for the Tribe, but he's unlikely to be moved, considering his production last year with Vernon Wells regressing, unless Ricciardi is bowled over by an offer of pitching unlikely to come out of Cleveland.

## Looking Ahead

Heading into 2008, the Indians have options in LF - to either stand pat with Dellichaels, to promote from within and give Ben Francisco an opportunity to seize LF as Frank the Tank did in RF (with Dellucci as the LH 4th OF), to attempt to find a solution in a wafer-thin FA market, or to consummate a deal to acquire a legitimate everyday LF from their surplus of pitching depth.

The goal of filling LF should essentially come down to the idea that the Indians are better off playing ONE player in LF, allowing the roster flexibility that keeps a spot for Andy Marte and enabling the veterans on the team like Dellucci and Michaels to slot into roles that better suit them (4th OF or packing their bags) and the team.

While the FA market barely musters a yawn, the Indians should explore the trade market using Dellichaels (as a known quantity) and Francisco (as a prospect) as the baselines for players that they would seek out. If a player simply represents a platoon upgrade or doesn't project to be much better than Francisco, the Indians should politely move down their list.

Unfortunately for them, legitimate corner OF with the ability to play everyday don't exactly grow on trees (Albert Belle isn't walking through that door...Manny Ramirez isn't walking through that door) and the Indians should weigh the potential of the players already in the organization (namely Francisco and Brown down the line) before making a move that does little to upgrade a position that needs to be upgraded from the 2007 performance of its current occupants.