With the recent signing of right-handed reliever Rafael Betancourt, the Indians now have every vital piece of the roster locked up for at least the next three seasons. The one exception, of course, is Cy Young Award winning pitcher C.C. Sabathia, but with or without Sabathia, the Indians have a core in place that looks to be very competitive and stands to keep the team in contention for the next several years. In his latest effort, Tony lays out just how well the Indians are set up as they move into the next decade.

With the recent signing of right-handed reliever Rafael Betancourt, the Indians now have every vital piece of the roster locked up for at least the next three years . The one exception, of course, is Cy Young Award winning pitcher C.C. Sabathia, who is only signed for one more season.

Still, with or without Sabathia, the Indians have a core in place that looks to be very competitive and stands to keep the team in contention for the next several years. The window of opportunity is now wide open and possibly even beyond because of the depth in the farm system. If you don't believe that, take a look at the breakdown of the important players on this roster signed for at least the next three years:

## The Starting Pitchers

Fausto Carmona - through 2012
Jake Westbrook - through 2010
Aaron Laffey - through at least 2013
Cliff Lee - through 2010
Jeremy Sowers - through at least 2012

The only pitchers missing from this listing who started a significant amount of game for the Indians in 2007 are Sabathia and Paul Byrd. Byrd is likely gone after this season, but is replaceable to where the Indians will slide one of their young pitchers like Laffey, Sowers, or even Adam Miller into his spot in the rotation in 2009 (maybe even sometime in 2008).

Overall, the Indians have a nice rotation for the next several years with Carmona being a quasi-ace as a #2 starter and several pitchers capable of being the #3 through #5 starters.

The key here is Sabathia. If the Indians can maintain an ace at the top of the starting staff and keep everyone else in their current roles, this rotation has the makings of one of the best in baseball for the next several years. And the Indians know this, which is why they may go out of their comfort zone and give Sabathia the six years he may want to resign with them. Reportedly, the Indians offered Sabathia the "largest contract they ever offered to a player", so it remains to be seen what happens with him between now and the start of free agency this coming November.

The Indians could live without Sabathia and still be a strong contender, but to do that Carmona would have to prove in 2008 he is ace material. The preference here though is to resign Sabathia, which would make our starting rotation the key foundation of the team, and hammer home the philosophy that the Indians said The Plan would be based on.

Laffey is going to be a workhorse in the rotation someday, possibly this season. And, Sowers seemed to turn it around the last two months of the season last year and looks to be primed for a good comeback campaign this year.

Cliff Lee is a mystery, as the Indians could trade him, but they may give him one last shot at the #5 spot this spring.

If he reclaims his spot in the rotation, all the better as before last season he was a solid #3 to #4 guy in the rotation the previous three seasons.

Also, prospects such as Miller, Chuck Lofgren , Scott Lewis , David Huff and J.D. Martin could see time in the starting rotation in the next few years.

The Indians are deep at this position, and if they were to keep Sabathia the starting pitching would continue to be the rock of the team, and also allow them to potentially shop some of their younger pitchers to fill a need elsewhere.

## The Relievers

Rafael Perez - through 2013
Rafael Betancourt - through 2010
Jensen Lewis - through 2013

## Tom Mastny - through 2012
## Masahide Kobayashi - through 2013

The Indians relief corps is arguably just as strong as the starting pitching the next several years, and the depth they have in the farm system is probably unmatched at any other position. To think the top three relievers of Betancourt, Perez and Lewis will be manning the backend of the bullpen for at least the next three years has to be a comforting feeling for Indians General Manager Mark Shapiro, and it should be for fans as well.

Of course, bullpen performance is volatile as relievers typically tend to fluctuate with their numbers from year to year. The chances of Betancourt, Perez and Lewis all putting together the great season each had last year at the same time again is pretty remote in the future.

Also, while Betancourt has an established track record and is likely to remain very effective the next three years, Lewis and Perez do not have that track record yet so there is still a chance one or both of them could always fade.

The best example of this is Fernando Cabrera, who shined in 2005, but fell apart in 2006 and 2007.

Still, Lewis and Perez were always top prospects in the system where it was believed they had the talent and projected to have the ability to do well against major league pitching, and it is very possible they will continue to show it.

Most importantly, unlike Cabrera, Lewis and Perez throw strikes.

Mastny and Kobayashi are solid middle relief pitchers the Indians can rely on for the next few years. Mastny is hardly spectacular, but as a 6$^{th}$/7$^{th}$ inning guy he does the job well. He is replaceable, yes, but until someone else comes along he is a good seventh option in the bullpen and depth at the position.

It will be interesting to see how Kobayashi's game translates to the major leagues from Japan, and he is the wildcard in the bullpen right now.

If he lives up to the hype, then this is a very good bullpen the next few years with four good backend arms.

And, even after Kobayashi's deal expires in three years, the Indians would still control him at least another three years as he would be just hitting his arbitration years.

The Indians will lose Aaron Fultz and Joe Borowski after this season, although there is always the possibility they could bring one of both of them back. The most likely one to be retained may be Borowski if he has a good year in 2008.

Although, the Indians appear to have two potential in-house closer candidates in Betancourt and Lewis, so the $6-7 million per season it would likely take to resign Borowski may be better

spent elsewhere next season and beyond.

Like toward Sabathia or to fill a need.

The farm system is loaded with good relief potential from the left and right side. Left-handers Scott Lewis and Reid Santos could debut sometime this upcoming season in the Indians bullpen, and others like Tony Sipp, Ryan Edell, Shawn Nottingham, and Matt Meyer could be here sometime in the next three years.

Right-hander Eddie Mujica will likely get a call sometime this season, and Jeff Stevens or Randy Newsom could make a strong push for a midseason callup this year.

Down the road, others like Sung-Wei Tseng, Michael Finocchi, and Luis Perdomo could be in the bullpen in the next three years.

Even Adam Miller and Aaron Laffey could find a home in the bullpen this year or down the road.

## The Position Players

Grady Sizemore - through 2012
Asdrubal Cabrera - through 2013
Travis Hafner - through 2013
Victor Martinez - through 2010
Jhonny Peralta - through 2011
Ryan Garko - through 2012

Franklin Gutierrez - through 2012
Josh Barfield - through 2011
Ben Francisco - through 2013
Shin-Soo Choo - through 2013
Andy Marte- through 2012
Kelly Shoppach - through 2011

The Indians have seven of the nine positions in the lineup under control for at least the next three years, with third base and left field the only positions in question at this point. Most of the players under the Indians control have an established track record, with Cabrera and Gutierrez being the only ones who are core pieces to the lineup but with a limited track record.

It should be noted, the control of these players can change, though, as with the expiration of option years the Indians may lose a player (like Marte) if they have to put him through waivers because they cannot option him to the minors.

The two "holes" in the lineup the next three years are at third base and left field, and if you have spent any time on the message boards or listening to talk radio, you are already well aware of the Indians shortcomings at these two positions.

The Indians have a lot of internal solutions to fill left field with players like Ben Francisco and Shin-Soo Choo, and by midseason with others like
Jordan Brown
and
Trevor Crowe
.

The Indians have a haul of good outfield talent backed up at the Triple-A and Double-A level, but the problem is last year no one really stood out and had a great year to give them momentum coming into this season.

The hope from this corner is that one of the Tribe farmhands at Buffalo or Akron breakthrough and take the left field reigns in Cleveland sometime this year.

Third base is the stickiest situation for the Indians. They appear to have the long-term solution to the position in-house with the likes of former mega prospect Andy Marte.

However, since coming to the Indians in 2006, Marte has been a colossal bust.

Still, the Indians should not give up on Marte, and reportedly they will not as they will keep him on the team this year and see what he can do,
something they did not do with Brandon Phillips two years ago
(which they should have done).

This year is clearly Marte's last chance in the organization, and they will exhaust every

opportunity to keep him on the team this year, but if he is still struggling by the middle or end of the season, they will cut him loose.

Beyond Marte, the Indians also have two very good third base prospects in
Beau Mills
and
Wes Hodges
in the system, but these two likely will not make their Indians debut until late 2009 at the earliest.

The established lineup is important, as the Indians currently lack very many impact hitters in the minors. Prospects like Jordan Brown (1B/OF), Wyatt Toregas (C) and even Trevor Crowe (OF) could all make their major league debuts sometime in 2008.

Down the road, others like Mills (3B/1B), Hodges (3B),
Jared Goedert (2B
),
Josh Rodriguez (SS/2B)
and even
Nick Weglarz (OF/1B)
could see time in Cleveland sometime in the next three years.

## In Summary

When it comes down to it, the positions not under the Indians control and established the next three years are really only third base, left field, and their #1 starter. The Indians have good depth at all of the established positions, and have several in-house alternatives to fill the voids at third base and left field.
This is why the resigning of Sabathia could be the key to this organization maintaining a high level of success for the next three years and beyond.

While it is not a death sentence if the Indians lose Sabathia, he is important for keeping the stability of the most important area of the team, the starting rotation. Also, it would go a long way at providing enough credibility to the fans to get them off owner Larry Dolan's back.

Still, when you have your top seven position players, your #2 through #6 starters, and your top three to four late inning relievers locked up for at least the next three years, good times should still be on the menu for the Indians the next several years.

Injuries and poor performance always have a way of changing such a rosy outlook, and the ridiculously competitive American League is going to change things from year to year. But, from where things stand right now, the Indians window of opportunity is wide open.