It may have gone unnoticed on the North Coast, but Milwaukee sugger Prince Fielder is not too happy about the Brew Crew renewing his contract for 2008 at a paltry $670,000 after a monster 2007 season. In his public complaints, Fielder has alluded to the situations in Colorado and Cleveland, where the Rockies and Indians wrote new, lucrative deals for their young stars at this same stage of the process. In his latest, Paulie looks at how what the Tribe did with Grady differs with what the Brew Crew did with Prince.

It may have gone unnoticed on the North Coast, but it seems that Prince **Fielder is unhappy about the Brewers' renewing his contract for $670,000** after hitting 50 HR and posting a 1.013 OPS as a 23-year old in his second full MLB season.

While it is certainly the Brewers' right to renew Fielder's contract at that salary (it actually is a step up in terms of where 3rd year players' salaries generally reside) it actually provides a great example of how different organizations approach contracts and salaries with their young players, particularly those thought to be on their way to becoming perennial All Stars.

What may seem at first glance like another instance of a player grousing about how he is underpaid is actually more relevant to the Indians than you may initially think. The Brewers have taken the approach with their young players, namely Fielder and Ryan Braun, that they may pay a little more than the going rate for players not even eligible for arbitration and still subject to the minimum MLB salary scale, but they're not going to go into the realm of guaranteeing any future dollars by locking up future years on a multi-year contract, a practice utilized by the Indians going back to the early-90's and adopted by numerous teams in

subsequent years. The Brewers, eschewing this strategy, generally pay their players according to certain "benchmarks" before a player becomes arbitration-eligible, at which point the club and the player initiate the ugly process of "exchanging numbers" and potentially presenting arguments against each other in arbitration, a procedure that has been know to sour relationships.

Fielder, who has approximately the same MLB service time as players like Josh Barfield and Kelly Shoppach on the Tribe, will be eligible for arbitration after the 2008 season as well as after the 2009 and 2010 season until he has the potential to become a Free Agent after the 2011 season. Basically, there's still quite a bit of time that Fielder figures to be in Milwaukee, but 2008 represents the last non-arbitration affected salary for the club. Seeing what the likes of Miguel Cabrera received in his 1st year of arbitration ($7.4M in 2007, as well as the $11.3M he'll be paid in 2008, his second season of arbitration), it is certainly feasible to have the feeling that Fielder should just keep his head down, keep his mouth shut, keep hitting, and wait for the big payday that is waiting for him next year.

But Fielder sees what has happened elsewhere around the league in regards to signing young players to multi-year deals to essentially buy out those years of arbitration (and sometimes the first year of free agency) for the certainty of a guaranteed contract, and he is not a happy Prince. Throw in the "human element" of Fielder watching the Brewers give significant money this off-season to Eric Gagne (a $10M salary in 2008), Mike Cameron (a $7M salary in 2008), and David Riske (a $4M salary in 2008) and, regardless of how much Fielder understands (or doesn't understand) the way that MLB salaries are structured based on service time, the unquestioned MVP of the team is going to feel slighted. In this case, he just happened to go public with his dissatisfaction.

Now, what exactly is meant by the "what has happened elsewhere around the league" that I referenced above, causing Fielder to utter that "guys with the same amount of time I have who have done a lot less than me and are getting paid a lot more"?

Certainly, this is an obvious reference to the deals meted out to Grady Sizemore and, more recently, to Rockies' SS Troy Tulowitzki. We are all very aware of the Sizemore deal, signed in 2006 for $23.45M over 6 years that buy out Grady's arbitration years as well as one year of Free Agency; but it is more likely that the Tulowitzki deal is the one that Fielder is alluding to as Colorado inked their young

SS to a 6-year, $31M deal after all of 705 career MLB at-bats. Tulowitzki posted a .838 OPS with 24 HR and 99 RBI in his rookie year and the Rockies rewarded him with a guaranteed, multi-year contract - something they were under no obligation to do, except for the message that it sends to the team that the organization intends to take care of their own...even when they don't need to. Tulowitzki is slated to earn $750,000 both this year and next (compared to Fielder's $670,000) and will get pay increases to $3.5M in 2010, $5.5M in 2011, $8.5M in 2012, and $10M in 2013 with a club option for $15M in 2014 with a $2M buyout.

That huge amount of guaranteed money due to Tulowitzki, in addition to the $80K more in 2008, is where Fielder is not feeling the love from Milwaukee. The Brewers are, as I said, under no obligation to give Fielder anything more than a one-year deal essentially at their terms and have indicated that they have "benchmarks" in place to determine the salaries of players not yet eligible for arbitration, which dictated Fielder's salary. "We view our system as more than a fair system," Brewers' GM Bob Melvin told the Associated Press. "You can't worry about it. It is what it is. You do it."

Who cares, right? What does Fielder have to complain about?

For a moment, take notice of the years posted by Sizemore and Tulowitzki immediately prior to their long-term deals:

**Sizemore 2005 (Age 22)**
.289 BA / .348 OBP / .484 SLG / .832 OPS, 22 HR, 81 RBI, 111 R, 123 OPS+

**Tulowitzki 2006 (Age 22)**
.291 BA / .359 OBP / .479 SLG / .838 OPS, 24 HR, 99 RBI, 104 R, 108 OPS+

Pretty impressive numbers for players at such a young age and certainly worth looking into locking up for the foreseeable future, right?

Now, look at Fielder's numbers in his first two MLB seasons:

**2006 (Age 22)**
.271 BA / .347 OBP / .483 SLG / .830 OPS, 28 HR, 81 RBI, 82 R, 110 OPS+

**2007 (Age 23)**
.288 BA / .395 OBP / .618 SLG / 1.013 OPS, 50 HR, 119 RBI, 109 R, 156 OPS+

If the numbers posted by Fielder as a 22-year-old were not enough (as they were for Sizemore and Tulowitzki) to bring the Brewers to the contract table, surely his 2007 would, right?

Not in Milwaukee, with their "fair system" and "benchmarks" for salaries.

Now, you may be asking yourself, "How does this have anything to do with the Indians?"

Ultimately, this comes down to differing organizational philosophies on how to handle young players' contracts and how the perception of those young players towards the organization is formed through their early negotiations.

At this point, it's no leap of faith to say that Fielder has purchased a calendar and is marking each passing day with an "X" until his time with Milwaukee has ended, if the reports of his displeasure are to be believed. The impact of that then, on the clubhouse to potential stars like Ryan Braun and further down to complementary pieces like J.J. Hardy and Chris Capuano is the message (fair or not) that the organization is unwilling to "take care of their own", to guarantee some long-term security for one of their best players, instead willing to go along with their "system" until they are forced by the guidelines of salary and service time to bite the bullet and pay their players. The likely products of the "system" end up being that the team saves money for today, but the seeds of discontent are sowed in the process, perhaps alienating a young talent like Fielder who may be more than content to sign a deal in line with that of Tulowitzki and (probably) be "underpaid" as that contract runs its course. Of course, sacrificing those arbitration numbers give the player some security that, if something were to happen, the guaranteed money isn't going anywhere.

But, enough about Brew City and their organizational philosophies as there's no guarantee that Fielder wouldn't essentially ask for the Girl in the Moon (Miller High Life reference) at the negotiating table, making the whole discussion moot - the point of examining what is happening with Fielder and the Brewers is to realize that the Indians (long ago) decided that this was not the way to do business with their young talent. To follow the Indians' line of thinking, the goodwill created through a few choice long-term contracts to lock in guaranteed salaries and avoid arbitration while providing certain players long-term security goes a lot further than

saving a few dollars in the short-term.

Not intending to don a corduroy jacket with the elbow patches and go all "History Professor" on you, but it is a philosophy pioneered by John Hart in the early 90's, locking up young players with relatively club-friendly deals, avoiding the ugly process of arbitration, and (hopefully) buying out a year of Free Agency in exchange for the security of a long-term deal of guaranteed money. Hart's first foray into the philosophy was done en masse, with some hits (notably Sandy Alomar, Jr., Carlos Baerga, and Charles Nagy) and some notable misses (Jack Armstrong, Scott Scudder, Glenallen Hill, Dennis Cook, Dave Otto, Rod Nichols, and Alex Cole). The strategy, as we all know, served as the impetus for the unprecedented run of success through the late 90s as the talent gelled and matured together.

The strategy continued throughout Mark Shapiro's tenure as GM when, after the 2005 season, the Indians approached Grady Sizemore and Jhonny Peralta about inking long-term deals, despite Sizemore having only 778 career at-bats to that point and Peralta having 771 career at-bats (Fielder, by the way, has 1,201 career at-bats). Both players agreed to deals, with Sizemore's aforementioned 6-year, $23.45M deal keeping in a Tribe uniform through 2012 (assuming the club picks up a $8.5M option for that year) and Peralta signing a 5-year, $13M deal that will keep him in Cleveland through 2011 (again, assuming a $7M option is picked up by the team that year).

Don't think the fact that Colorado GM Dan O'Dowd (who inked Tulowitzki to the record-setting deal for a player with less than two years of MLB service time) plied his trade at the knee of John Hart before Shapiro did is a mere coincidence. Both O'Dowd and Shapiro saw the effect that the strategy of locking up young players had on the Indians of the 90s, both in terms of having set salaries for budgetary reasons as well as team continuity, and prudently have continued the line of thinking (even surpassing Hart's design in terms of locking up players with less service time than those signed by Hart in the early 90s) to the point that both had their teams in the "Final Four" in 2007, returning essentially the same team in 2008.

While the wisdom of the philosophy employed by the Indians and Rockies (and others) can be argued regarding the construction of a perennial winner, I can't recall a Tribe player publicly complaining about feeling underpaid or feeling somehow wronged by the organization. Rather, most indications are that the

philosophy of rewarding guaranteed contracts to young players, avoiding arbitration, and generally "taking care of their own" before dictated to do so because of service time and by the process of arbitration has the effect of galvanizing the talent on a roster as it shows that the organization is willing to assume the risk associated with giving a (still relatively) unproven player guaranteed years and money when they can easily, and within their rights, simply employ the "system" in place in Milwaukee to pay a player only when the rules dictate, perhaps creating animosity and jealousy in the process.

In the increasingly competitive league, with the schism between large-market, mid-market, and small-market teams seemingly growing every season, the differing philosophies employed by the Brewers and the Indians (in two similarly sized markets) offer a stark contrast in a strategy for developing a consistent contender. Personally, I prefer that the Indians employ the pro-active philosophy of addressing issues before they turn ugly instead of the reactive philosophy of teams like the Brewers that result in team tumult, unhappy players, and little chance of any goodwill between club and player in future negotiations.

Prince Fielder, and a few folks in the Milwaukee clubhouse, would probably agree.