Mega-prospect Andy Marte was the centerpiece of the Indians recent deal with the Red Sox. Simply put, the Coco Crisp trade does not happen if the Indians are unable to land Marte. His acquisition fills a huge void at third base in the organization for years to come.

Marte is widely regarded as one of the top 10-15 prospects in all of baseball, and is now the #1 rated prospect in the Indians system according to Baseball America's Chris Kline. In the last four seasons, he has been voted as the top defensive third baseman in the league he played in, most recently achieving such honors at Richmond, the Atlanta Braves AAA affiliate. Not only does he bring gold glove caliber defense, but he brings a middle of the lineup threat from the right-side of the plate that the Indians organization lacks in the system. According to published reports, he has “tape-measure power” and has the “tools to become a star.”

In a press conference over the weekend, Indians GM Mark Shapiro made reference to the hole in the organization at 3B stating that it “is difficult to acquire a player of Andy's caliber and skill set via trade or free agency, and third base is a position of need in our organization."

Prior to the trade, third base was a black hole in the Indians organization, with nothing on the horizon to fill the large void at the major league level. Guys like Jake Gautreau and Pat Osborn are organizational filler, and at best role players if

they ever make it to the majors. Matt Whitney has been a disaster and just can't stay healthy. Kevin Kouzmanoff is the one bright spot at 3B, but as a soon to be 25-year old ... he still has only played 7 games above single A.

The numbers Marte is putting up at such a young age is what has baseball people so excited. When scouts and major league executives compare Marte to former and current major league players, names such as David Wright, Mike Schmidt, and Adrian Beltre have been thrown around.

Recently, the Plain Dealer's Roger Brown quoted an NL scout who commented on Marte and called him the "best prospect I've scouted in 10 years, hands down" and that Marte reminded him of "a young Manny Ramirez, but with a steadier personality." Comparing Marte to Manny Ramirez may be a bit of an over-statement, but this is the type of buzz this kid is generating.

Nicknamed "Andy Market" because of his star potential, Marte has built an impressive resume in the minors. Here's a look at his numbers:

Minor League Career:

.274/.364/.485/.849 with 82 HRs and 328 RBIs in 1867 at bats

Now, one may look at those numbers and not be that impressed. But it is crucial to remember that he has built that resume primarily as an 18 to 21 year old playing in the higher levels of the minors. During those

initial years, most players show little power and are still growing into their bodies and are adjusting to wooden bats. Marte typically has been one of the youngest players in his respective league every year. For instance, in 2002 at low A Macon as an 18 year old he hit .281/.339/.492/.831 with 21 HRs and 105 RBIs in 488 at bats. Or, last year, at AAA Richmond, as a 21 year old he hit .275/.372/.506/.878 with 20 HRs and 74 RBIs in only 389 at bats.

He also has proved to be a patient hitter at the plate, and will take a walk. While he is a power hitter and will strikeout, he has cut down on the strikeouts and increased his walk rate. Last year at AAA Richmond he walked 64 times in 453 plate appearances (1 walk every 7 at bats). Also, his walks increased from 2004 (58 to 64) and his strikeouts decreased (105 to 83) even after going up a level.

Ultimately, this was a deal the Indians and GM Mark Shapiro could not pass up. Marte should lock up the 3B position for the next 6-7 years for the Indians, and be a fixture in the lineup hitting somewhere in the 3-4-5 hole. Losing Crisp is a big loss, but the Indians were able to capitalize off the desperate needs of the Red Sox to help the them in a few areas of need. Since the Indians were able to find a good replacement for Crisp in Jason Michaels, this deal was too good to pass up.

Marte is major league ready, and only Aaron Boone stands in his way. The Indians plan on sending him to Buffalo to start the season and work on his two strike approach and refine his skills offensively.

When Boone struggled last April/May the Indians had

nothing to replace him with, but now the Indians have an alternative to Boone, and can replace him at anytime. Unfortunately, Boone's guaranteed $3.75M salary in 2006 won't allow him to be let go, at least not from the outset. In the event Boone gets off to another slow start, Marte could be with the team by mid-May.