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The playoffs roll on with Paul Byrd and Lacey Cake potentially on a collision course to meet in the World Series (what do you mean there's a more interesting subplot if those two teams were to meet?) and we are forced to endure the Indians holding press conferences to talk about next year. Having already examined two of the needs that the Indians enter the off-season in the first part of the earliest 2009 preview that you'll ever read (infielder and reliever), it's time to turn to another question facing the Tribe as they ready themselves for Opening Day next Spring.

As a quick aside, I should point out as an addendum to the last piece that, in full disclosure, Dan Wheeler (one of the relievers I targeted as a possible addition) is NOT a FA at the end of he season, despite what Cot's Contracts tells me as he signed a 3-year, $10.5M deal with the Rays this April. Oh, and Scott Downs signed a 3-year deal with the Blue Jays earlier this year too. So that list of available relievers that could be in the Tribe's plans to augment the bullpen just got a little shorter and much less appealing.

Mea culpa and, "Yes, Mr. Weathers, he IS the newest Iron Chef and his restaurant is right there on East 4th Street...isn't Cleveland great?"

Nevertheless, let's move on to the main course:

One of forgotten disappointments in 2008 (what with Victor and Hafner getting hurt and CC getting traded and Carmona unable to replicate his 2007 success) was that Jake Westbrook, in the first year of his new 3-year, $33M deal went down with an arm injury that eventually required Tommy John surgery, followed by later news that a "minor" hip surgery was also performed on the sinkerballer. Why this is glossed over so often is beyond me as a player like Westbrook is precisely the reason that a team like the 2007 club is able to make an extended push into the postseason, as having three good-to-excellent starters at the top of the rotation generally translates to success in the regular season and into the postseason. Westbrook's return in 2007 coincided with the team taking over the AL Central (they went 53-36 after he returned on June 24th last year) as it allowed Byrd and the youngsters to become the 4th and 5th starters.

Obviously, we all know that Westbrook is "slated" to return sometime around the All-Star Break of 2009, but with Tommy John surgery, a longer recovery time is actually the norm as opposed to being the exception. So, with that knowledge, the Indians sit with the top 2 spots in their rotation spoken for (C.P. and Fausto, not without questions surrounding both), but with the rest of their rotation filled by pitchers who project more into the back of the rotation or are simply too young to be counted on contributing much more than a surprising debut.

After Lee and Carmona, the Indians sit on a stable of pitchers who all look like back-end-of-the rotation fodder with the two most promising arms (that is, the ones that could possibly end up as middle-of-the-rotation arms) coming off of years when they were shut down at the end of the season. Both Anthony Reyes and Aaron Laffey (the two aforementioned potential MOR starters) ended the season resting their arms in what could either simply be preventative measures or will serve as the first red flag in a series of them that end with an extended stint on the DL or with a flight to Birmingham to meet with Dr. James Andrews..

But we're getting ahead of ourselves as the names that figure after Lee and Carmona should be known and quantified to illustrate where the deficiency exists that should be filled externally. The pitchers that legitimately figure into the 2009 rotation mix:

Lee
Carmona
Reyes

Laffey
Sowers
Lewis
Huff
Jackson

Any of those names REALLY give you a lot of confidence pitching as the 3rd starter on a team that is designed to rely on strong starting pitching? If we know from 2007 that having three good-to-excellent starters at the top of the rotation could mean the difference between what we experienced in 2007 and what we did this year, something needs to be done.

Right, Mark? No, get a little closer to the mike...what was that again?

***"When you get to the list of areas I'd like to improve, the area I feel least comfortable with is our upper-level starting pitching. It's the area, as we plan our big league club, that will be among our two or three biggest holes. ***
"We have a lot of [internal] alternatives, but I'd feel better if we had one more experienced top of the rotation guy."

Interesting, eh?

And let's hope that the "experienced top of the rotation guy" he's thinking of "adding" isn't a guy named Jake that they're thinking they'll "add" around the middle of the season.

If, then, there is a need at the top of the Indians' rotation, is FA the best way to fill it?

To wit, here's the list of potential FA ranked by their ERA+ for 208 listed after their names - remember that an ERA+ of 100 is essentially league average :

C.C. Sabathia - 162
John Smoltz - 160 (in 28 IP)
Ryan Dempster - 152
Ben Sheets - 141
Derek Lowe - 136
Mike Mussina - 128

Jamie Moyer - 120
Bartolo Colon - 117 (in 39 IP in 2008 after 155 2/3 IP combined in 2006 and 2007)

A.J. Burnett - 106 (Burnett can opt out of contract after '08 season)
John Lackey - 116 ($9MM club option for '09 with a $0.5MM buyout)
Randy Johnson - 116
Jon Lieber - 111 (in 46 2/3 IP in 2008 out of the Cubs' bullpen)
Tim Wakefield - 111 ($4MM club option)
Freddy Garcia - 105 (in 15 IP in 2008 after 58 IP in 2007)
Braden Looper - 102
Odalis Perez - 99
Oliver Perez - 98
Paul Byrd - 97
Andy Pettitte - 95
Greg Maddux - 95
Randy Wolf - 94
Jon Garland - 89
Glendon Rusch - 87
Mike Hampton - 85 (in 78 IP)
Shawn Estes - 82
Kenny Rogers - 77
Mark Hendrickson - 76
Tom Glavine - 74 (in 63 1/3 IP)
Kip Wells - 74 (in 37 2/3 IP out of the bullpen)
Pedro Martinez - 73
Brad Penny - 71 ($8.75MM club option for '09 with a $2MM buyout)
Livan Hernandez - 71
Josh Fogg - 59
Jason Jennings - 51

Remember, again, that 100 is LEAGUE AVERAGE and look at the list again.

For starters, just lop off the likes of CC (sorry dreamers), Sheets, Burnett, Dempster (all indications are he's staying on the North Side), and even a guy like a Derek Lowe as all are going to be looking for 4 to 5 year deals...and it's become apparent that the Indians aren't willing to throw that many guaranteed years at a starting pitcher, regardless of pedigree.

By the way, I've omitted names like Kris Benson, Matt Clement, Roger Clemens,

El Duque, Rodrigo Lopez, Mark Mulder, and Carl Pavano as injuries or prolonged use of PED's have prevented them from pitching in recent years. Could the Indians try to pull a "Millwood" with one of these players like Benson, Clement, or Pavano? I guess, but that would be beyond disappointing if that was the added "top-of-the-rotation" guy.

Let's assume that the options for Lackey and Penny get picked up and what are we left with?

Jon Garland?

Randy Johnson at age 44?

Jon Lieber after pitching out of the Cubs' bullpen?

Braden Looper?

Jamie Moyer at age 45?

Mike Mussina at age 39?

Odalis Perez?

Oliver Perez?

Randy Wolf?

Maybe some of those guys slot as top-to-middle-of-the-rotation pitchers (though not obviously), but the problem with signing starting pitchers on the FA market is that nearly EVERY team needs starting pitching every off-season and FA ultimately turns out to be the most ineffective way to add arms to the rotation because of the guaranteed years and committed dollars that become involved for players that generally (please note the "generally" and not a "universally") are not hitting their prime.

Thus, the pitchers that fall under that upper tier of CC and Sheets become sought-after by the teams that miss out on the top-flight FA starters. What does that mean for a guy like Garland or Looper or Oliver Perez - guys that probably would look most attractive after that upper tier finds new zip codes? Mainly that

they're going to get 3 or 4 year deals when their performance doesn't really justify it, as teams scramble to fill out their rotations and overpay for a pitcher that falls into the "middle-to-back-of-the-rotation category...and aren't we already flush with young, cheap pitchers like that?

Knowing then what a player like Oliver Perez is going to command on the FA market, is that the best way for the Indians to spend their available cash? Unless you get a guy like a Mussina on a one-year deal (and his 2008 almost guarantees that he'll get a longer deal than that), signing a FA starter often proves to be both inefficient and expensive.

If that is the case, what do the Indians do to fill that stated need at the TOP of their rotation? The trade option probably becomes the best route to take on this, with the difficulty being that not many teams are looking to move top-to-middle-of-the-rotation starters (particularly those a couple of years removed from FA) without getting a SIGNIFICANT return.

Is Kelly Shoppach a significant return ?

Would he have to be packaged with one of the young LHP to make it work...or maybe with a player like a Franklin Gutierrez to sweeten the deal?

That may be the answer to this starter question as playing the biggest chip in their off-season stack (Shoppach) should go to upgrading the Indians at a position of need with a player who would be as reasonably priced as Shoppach with similar contract status. Another way to say this would be that if other holes (infield and bullpen) can be filled via FA without the outlay of money that a FA starter demands, then the trade market becomes the logical avenue to take to add a starter. If a trade is the way to add that extra arm, using the player thought to be a "luxury" on the roster becomes the logical barter.

Let's take it one step further, though, and identify some teams that may be in the market for an upgrade at C who may have (and could be willing to part with) a young, potential top-to-middle-of-the-rotation starter that would fit the Tribe's needs:

Florida
Houston
New York Mets

Toronto

The Indians, knowing that Shoppach is their biggest bullet to fire, should aim high and target players like Ricky Nolasco (FLA), Josh Johnson (FLA), Wandy Rodriguez (HOU), Mike Pelfrey (NYM), John Maine (NYM) and Shawn Marcum (TOR). Is that group of names look lofty? Absolutely, but if the Indians are TRULY talking about a pitcher that "would start in a playoff game", the list of what would come in return can't include guys who figure to be "potential" #3 starters and figure more easily as a #4 or a #5.

Beyond the list above of interested teams, would a team like Boston (Varitek is a FA after this year) be interested? Sure, but short of the Indians somehow prying Jon Lester loose (and that simply isn't going to happen), I don't see how the rest of the Red Sox rotation would fit the criteria of young, established, and a few years away from FA. Maybe a team like Cincinnati emerges to go after Shoppach or perhaps pitcher like Paul Maholm (PIT) or Zach Greinke (KC) enters the trade discussion. It's even possible that San Diego would be interested with the potential return being a reliever like Heath Bell or Cla Meredith as part of a package (getting Jake Peavy would involve moving A TON of young TALENT)...but you get the general idea.

If the Indians are looking at a top-of-the-rotation starter to slot after Lee and Carmona and in front of the plethora of guys who either have injury concerns (Reyes, Laffey), project as little more than a #4 or #5 guy (Sowers, Lewis, Jackson) or may be a few years away from legitimately filling that role (Huff), the trade route may be the way to go with Shoppach (joined by others) as the bait dangling on the hook.

Of course, if that top-to-middle-of-the-rotation starter that Shapiro referenced is simply a path to say that Westbrook is THAT guy that they "add" when (or is it if) returns around the All-Star Break, the point is moot and the Indians are banking on some suspect arms to fill out their rotation beyond Lee and Carmona.

Still more to come on this whole shooting match, with an analysis on what effect the performance of two players coming off of injuries (Hafner and Carmona) will have on the team and where Matt LaPorta may fit into the 2009 plans.

On the topic of LaPorta and the CC deal, here's the audio of the "Smoke Signals" show that Tony and Lastoria and I did on Thursday night with

PTBN Michael Brantley and his agent Josh Kusnick
. The linked podcast has lots of interesting tidbits from Brantley regarding his game and what's in store for him in the coming years, as well as a fascinating look into the life of a sports agent.