One of the oft-stated needs by the Indians

One of the oft-stated needs by the Indians' brass, most recently in their "State of the Tribe" address, has been a desire to upgrade an infield position – specifically a 2B or 3B. Gloss over this as you've read it a couple dozen times, but the idea is that Jhonny Peralta and Asdrubal Cabrera will fill 2 of the 3 positions between 2B, SS, and 3B with their 2009 positions determined by whether the team could add a better 2B or a better 3B to the mix. The thought process being that if a better 2B was readily available, Asdrubal shifts to SS and Peralta shifts to 3B and if a better 3B was easier to add, Asdrubal and Peralta stay at their 2008 positions.

That was the stance of the Indians as the 2008 season ended, made somewhat clearer by The Atomic Wedgie's proclamation at the end of the season that, “At some point, I do feel Jhonny is going to end up at third base and Asdrubal will be at shortstop”.

This was taken, by some, as a not-so-subtle way of relaying the idea that the Indians had come to the conclusion that a 2B would be easier to find in a landscape that they had almost certainly acquainted themselves with and perhaps that the team felt that it would be stronger with Asdrubal at SS. Regardless of the rationale, for an organization that makes such measured statements and generally refuses to comment specifically on particular players, it was nothing short of a smoking gun.

Sorry if that feels like we're just reviewing what's already known, but it's meant to set up some developments in the available pool of 2B that have occurred in the last week as well as bringing up a little nugget that I found on these Interwebs that could have an impact as to who the Indians eventually decide to add to their infield.

Just to recap, here's the list of 2B (with more than 200 AB in 2008) that WERE available via FA just last week:

Craig Counsell
Ray Durham
Damion Easley
David Eckstein
Mark Ellis
Mark Grudzielanek
Jerry Hairston Jr.
Orlando Hudson
Tadahito Iguchi
Jeff Kent
Felipe Lopez
Mark Loretta
Nick Punto

As has been said many times, very few names look good on that list as legitimate upgrades over simply playing some mix of Jamey Carroll or (gasp) Josh Barfield or (double gasp) at 2B in 2009 and perhaps beyond. Most of the players have age "issues", like Counsell, Durham, Easley, Grudzielanek, and Kent or are no better than making Carroll the starting 2B for 2009. Before you say that players like Lopez or Grudzielanek could represent an upgrade, consider how their 2008 compares to that of Jamey Carroll:

Carroll – 2008

.277 BA / .355 OBP / .346 SLG / .701 OPS with 1 HR, 36 RBI in 347 AB

Lopez – 2008

.283 BA / .343 OBP / .387 SLG / .731 OPS with 6 HR, 46 RBI in 481 AB

Grudzielanek – 2008

.299 BA / .345 OBP / .399 SLG / .744 OPS with 3 HR, 24 RBI in 331 AB

Would either be an upgrade? Meh…and you'd be having to shell out years and guaranteed dollars to obtain that minimal upgrade. With that all now said, the couple of names that did stand out on the list, that didn't fall under the category of "stop-gaps" or are no more attractive than the in-house options, Carroll and Barfield, were Mark Ellis and Orlando Hudson.

Well, scratch Ellis off that list as he's agreed to a deal to return to the Athletics at a very reasonably priced contract. The contract calls for Ellis to be paid $10.5M over the next two years with the possibility of Ellis staying in Oakland for a third year if the club picks up his $6M option in 2011, or paying a $500,000 buyout if they don't. Essentially, the A's were able to re-up one of the two best 2B on the FA market with an extremely club-friendly contract, given the way that Free Agency has a tendency to spiral out of control, as they avoided the madness of too many years and too much guaranteed money getting involved in the process.

For the Indians, this could be taken in two ways in the overall effects to the 2B FA pool and the 2B FA market. The negative portion of the news is that Ellis is off the table and, while signing him wasn't exactly going to flood 216-420-HITS with season ticket requests, he would have been a nice 2 to 3 year answer at 2B that would have provided good defense and a

steady, if unspectacular, bat. On the flip side, the fact that Ellis signed a deal that tops out in guaranteed years at two and at an annual salary of $6M – and that's only if the third year option is picked up – which could serve as the reference point for the rest of the FA signings for 2B this off-season. That is to say, if Orlando Hudson (just to…ahem, throw a name out there) is looking at suitors for his services, how much more than Mark Ellis can he reasonably expect?

Well, if you go back to April, according to Jack Magruder of the East Valley Tribune in a piece dissecting whether the Diamondbacks would be able to resign Hudson, here's the number that was on Hudson's mind this Spring:

Hudson, a three-time Gold Glove winner who will become a free agent after this season, is said to be seeking a yearly salary similar to the $15 million Philadelphia's Chase Utley will receive in each of the final four years of his seven-year, $85 million dollar extension signed before 2007.

You read that correctly, *"seeking a yearly salary similar to the $15 million Philadelphia's Chase Utley will receive"* as what his camp was thinking this Spring for what it would take for the Diamondbacks to keep him in Arizona. Compared to what Ellis received, that would mean that Hudson would

be looking for a deal that would pay him THREE TIMES as much in annual salary next year as the one Ellis just signed. I realize that Hudson is an upgrade from Ellis, but for THREE TIMES the guaranteed money per year and for a period of time almost assuredly longer than two years? Certainly Hudson is a more desirable player than Ellis…but THAT much more desirable?

Compare the lines put up by the two (plus Chase Utley…since he brought his name in the mix) over the last few years:

Ellis – 2008

.233 BA / .321 OBP / .373 SLG / .694 OPS with 12 HR, 41 RBI in 117 games

Hudson – 2008

.305 BA / .367 OBP / .450 SLG / .817 OPS with 8 HR, 41 RBI in 107 games

Utley – 2008

.292 BA / .380 OBP / .535 SLG / .915 OPS with 33 HR, 104 RBI in 159 games

Ellis – 2005 to 2007

.255 BA / .326 OBP / .404 SLG / .730 OPS with 42 HR, 169 RBI in 1,466 games

Hudson – 2005 to 2007

.294 BA / .365 OBP / .448 SLG / .813 OPS with 33 HR, 171 RBI in 1,503 games

Utley – 2005 to 2007

.310 BA / .388 OBP / .542 SLG / .930 OPS with 87 HR, 309 RBI in 1,795

Isn't Hudson a little closer to Ellis than he is to Utley in terms of production over the last few years, or at the very least just somewhere between the two? Regardless of what those numbers mean to rational people, here's where we get into the portion of the program that affirms that Hudson WILL get paid an exorbitant amount of money at an exorbitant amount of years.

Exorbitant like the "Chase Utley $15M per season" he's looking for?

Maybe not, but Ellis received his deal by giving a bit of a

hometown discount to Oakland and eschewing the FA market, leaving Hudson as the "prettiest girl at the dance" in a hall full of suitors (Mets, Cardinals, Rockies, etc.) now desperate for a 2B and the second best option (Ellis) off the table.

Remember this little nugget from Rosenthal about a month ago?

Diamondbacks second baseman Orlando Hudson, who underwent season-ending surgery on his left wrist in August, is almost certain to be a hot free agent. Hudson would fit for the Mets if they traded Luis Castillo or the Yankees if they traded Robinson Cano. The Rangers could sign Hudson and move Ian Kinsler off second. The White Sox could sign him and move Alexei Ramirez to shortstop. The Indians would be another possibility; they could move Asdrubal Cabrera to short and Jhonny Peralta to third. The Rockies and Cardinals are two other clubs likely to seek upgrades at second. The A's Mark Ellis, coming off a disappointing offensive season, figures to be the only other quality second baseman on the free-agent market. The Orioles' Brian Roberts and

Marlins' Dan Uggla are the leading trade candidates at the position.

Now, with Ellis off of the market, there's no less than seven teams (at least, as far as Rosenthal acknowledged) that are looking to upgrade their 2B (though the Rangers moving Kinsler off of 2B still makes no sense to me) and Hudson can sit back and watch the fur fly until some team gets close to the number that was in his head back in the Spring.

Would the Indians come close to that number?

Not the $15M as if the team's spending that kind of money on a Free Agent his last name should rhyme with “Pleats” or “Dough", but with nothing in their organization below Rookie Ball compelling enough to prevent them from making a multiple year commitment to a 2B, there's no reason that the Indians shouldn't be willing to offer a

contract that would dwarf the one that Ellis signed for a player like Hudson.

How much would the Indians be willing to dwarf the Ellis contract? It probably depends on what else is going to be available in FA at their other positions of need (though signing FA starting pitchers is a risky and expensive venture when it involves that top tier of pitching) and how they feel the $20M or so that they figure to have available in their 2009 budget would be best used. To me, a player like a Hudson is a nice place to put that money, in that it fills a need (an infielder that can sit at the top of the lineup) and he wouldn't be "blocking" any player in the organization at the 2B position that reasonably fits into the team's immediate plans (sorry, Josh). But there

has to be a ceiling that the Indians won't go through, whether it be $10M or $11M instead of $8M or $9M in annual salary or a refusal to add a guaranteed 4th or (I shouldn't even say it) 5th year, to make the deal happen.

Unfortunately for the Indians, the pickings that were already slim at 2B just dropped another dress size and, as a result, the teams lining up to obtain a player that you would think would have to be firmly on their radar just got a lot longer.