With the Free Agent period beginning in mere days, a development in sunny San Diego could have repercussions in decidedly less-sunny Cleveland. Trevor Hoffman and the Padres have broken off negotiations, and the Indians are amongst the front runners to land Major League Baseball's all-time saves leader. In Paulie's latest, he talks about the Indians chances of landing Hoffman, and what whichever team that signs him can realistically expect in 2009.

With the Free Agent period beginning in mere days, a development in sunny San Diego (which is attempting to "Stay Classy" despite a severe payroll deduction) could have repercussions in decidedly less-sunny Cleveland, where the feeling of living inside a dirty milk carton has descended upon us.

But before getting to new business, let's first bring back the pertinent "old business" to set this up. If you remember, the Indians were looking to add a closer to replace Sticky Wickman after the 2005 season, only to come up short on Trevor Hoffman and BJ Ryan, turning finally to Wickman (who was, apparently, sitting in Wisconsin sipping his High Life next to the phone just waiting for the Tribe to call him) to resume his closing duties for the 2006 Tribe. Despite **what the brilliant folks at The Onion would have you believe**, Hoffman and the Indians departed on "friendly" terms after negotiations, with only **the lure of staying in San Diego for his family and hopefully retiring a Padre**

preventing The Hoff's arrival on the North Coast
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"I'm just really happy that I'm not having to traipse my family across the country, although it was a tremendous opportunity with the Cleveland Indians," Hoffman said. "In particular, the class that they showed throughout the process and the respect that they showed went above and beyond and I truly appreciate it. But it came down to me making a decision for my family and not disrupting what we have going on."

Always the bridesmaid, never the bride, right?

Now, news that the **Padres and Hoffman have broken off negotiations** has hit, meaning that Hoffman won't have the option of keeping his family in San Diego, won't retire as a Padre and, most importantly to the Indians, Hoffman will hit the open market with his assumed bridge back to San Diego engulfed in flames.

With the relationship forged in 2005, Hoffman looks ripe for the picking for the Indians, who have a stated need of "back-end experience" in a reliever to augment their current bullpen, with the "premier" closers like K-Rod and Fuentes adding zeroes and guaranteed years to their asking price daily. Hoffman certainly has closing experience and would not cost the Indians the type of dollars (and, more importantly, the committed years) that the other closers on the market are commanding.

There's no question that the Indians would be well-suited to approach Hoffman about a deal, in the sense that he's exactly what they'd be looking for in terms of experience and (relative) affordability. The question, really, is whether Hoffman's age and recent performance merit the Indians committing ANY guaranteed years or dollars to him as the practice of rewarding past performance instead of paying for future performance is a quick way to be stuck with an underperforming, overpaid player.

With the idea that Hoffman's performance over the past two years is probably a pretty good indication of how he would perform in 2009, here's what he put up in 2007 and 2008:

2007 - 2.89 WXRL (36th in MLB)

2.98 ERA, 1.12 WHIP, 44 K, 15 BB with 42 saves in 49 opportunities over 57 1/3 IP

2008 - 1.82 WXRL (58th in MLB)

3.77 ERA, 1.04 WHIP, 46 K, 9 BB with 30 saves in 34 opportunities over 45 1/3 IP

Not exactly the dominant stuff that would accompany Hoffman to the mound back in the day with "Hell's Bells" blaring, but "dominant stuff" is going to cost you about 5 years and $75M (if some team is willing to meet K-Rod's demands) on this FA market, so adding a pitcher like Hoffman could fit more into the category of adding a ready-made closer. Unlike additions of the past (Wick and JoeBo) though, Hoffman's WHIP and K ratios are still the type of numbers that a team would look for in a back-end of the bullpen reliever, with the fact that Hoffman is...you know...the all-time saves leader with a level of success in the past few years thrown in there to boot.

Another factor that could come into play in whether he would fit the Indians' needs is the fact that Hoffman has succeeded in his career because of the effectiveness of his change-up and has remained effective pitching primarily in the NL (of his 988 career innings, 64 1/3 have come against AL teams in the regular season) throughout his career.

So how would his changeup translate to the AL?

That is, would going to (what is generally assumed to be) the better-hitting AL have an adverse effect on his performance or would the fact that he'd be facing AL hitters for the first time (for the most part) allow his changeup to "sneak up" on hitters as it has been doing in the NL for years now, even if it is not the weapon that it used to be or has the MPH on his fastball and changeup come closer to each other?

Sure, Hoffman's older now and surely on the other side of the mountain that is his tremendous career, but adding him to the bullpen suddenly makes Lewis and Perez lock down the 7th and 8th (with the idea that Lewis can take some save opportunities if the team chooses to limit Hoffman's workload), allowing Betancourt to slot in lower in the ladder to work the kinks of 2008 out of his system, and letting the rest of the young arms battle it out for a spot or begin the

season in Buffalo to hone their craft and be ready for the inevitable call-up when (not if) reinforcements are needed for the pen.

Additionally, the impact that a player like Hoffman could have on some of the young arms that the Indians possess who MAY factor in as closer options (Lewis and Perez with Miller, Meloan, and Stevens farther down the line) may be the immeasurable factor that could lead the Indians to going beyond their oft-stated "comfort zone" as the wisdom that Hoffman could impart, both by words and action, would go a long way to the Indians seeing their closer emerge from current in-house options soon, instead of constantly remaining on the watch for another 9th inning pitcher.

How much out of that "comfort zone" could the Indians go to add Hoffman?

Probably guaranteeing a second year or going as far as adding a club option for a third year (even if they have no interest in exercising it) or making the deal as rich as $6M annually would be more risk than they would generally assume on a 40-year-old reliever, but it may be necessary to get Hoffman to Cleveland, if only so I can wear a shirt that says " **Don't Hassle The Hoff** ".

Remember, the **Indians do have approximately $18M to spend in the 2008 budget** (assuming the 25-man budget is around $80M or so, **as it was last year**), so giving a player like Hoffman a 1 or 2-year deal at around $5M to $6M per season isn't going to eat up all of the assumed dollars that the Indians figure to have available to add pieces and parts this off-season. That is, a contract like the one outlined above wouldn't have too great of an effect on their ability to add an infielder via FA.

All told, the relationship should still be there from 2005, so the groundwork already may be laid for a sales pitch to Hoffman. The interest should certainly be there from both sides as the Indians are looking to add a reliever and Hoffman is likely looking to be the de facto "closer" on a team. All signs would point to this being a feasible marriage between the two...with the Indians finding themselves this time on the Free Agent altar and not wearing another dreadful bridesmaid's dress.