Last winter there was a lot of chatter but no action from the Indians brass, as the team did little more than sign Masa Kobayashi and Jamey Carroll. This season, the Winter Meetings started off with a bang, with a myriad of reputable sources now reporting that the Indians and former Cubs closer Kerry Wood are close on a two year deal with a club option for a third. This morning ... Paulie gets us all caught up on Wood, and what his signing would mean for the Indians bullpen.

As the Hot Stove starts to put off heat, there is a report from Matt Underwood's blog that the Indians are perhaps close to solidifying the back end of their bullpen by inking Kerry Wood:

The Cleveland Indians are moving closer to signing free agent closer Kerry Wood to a multi-year contract. Sources that I spoke to last night indicate the deal would be 2-years with a club option for a 3rd...While the framework for a deal appears to be in place an official announcement may not happen until late in the week or Monday at the earliest because of physicals and paperwork.

Now what does "closer" mean and what interest would Wood (ba-dum-dum) have in a 2-year deal, considering that it looks like K-Rod is signing for 3 years (a little less than the 5 years he was hoping for), but AC has a similar story on the official site so this one could certainly have some legs to it.

If you were hoping for that strikeout-heavy closer with dominant stuff after being treated to the soft-tossing "guts" of Brodzoski (The Close) or Sticky Wickman, certainly Kerry Wood is the answer to your prayers. When healthy (and that is certainly a caveat, but more on that in a bit), pitchers don't get much more

dominant than Wood.

Consider his 2008 :

34 saves, 3.26 ERA, 1.09 WHIP, 84 K, 18 BB over 66 1/3 IP over 65 games

How dominant was his stuff among pitchers in MLB with at least 60 IP last year?

K/9 rate - 11.40 - 7th in MLB
K/BB rate - 4.67 - 9th in MLB
WHIP - 1.09 - 19th in MLB
OPS against - .632 - 37th in MLB

Everyone knows the story of Wood, from wunderkind 20 K game status to constant injury while earning $12M in 2006 while throwing 19 2/3 IP for the North Siders to his renaissance in the bullpen, finding new life as a dominant closer for the Cubbies. While most casual fans know him mainly from his success as a starter, take a look at how he has adjusted to his role as a reliever:

Career Stats as a Starter

3.69 ERA, 1.26 WHIP, 10.33 K/9, 2.36 K/BB, .681 OPS against

Career Stats as a Reliever

3.16 ERA, 1.09 WHIP, 10.96 K/9, 3.47 K/BB, .608 OPS against

If anything, Wood has IMPROVED since his move to the bullpen (though certainly some of his stats as a starter were colored by injury) and his presence on the Cubs solidified their bullpen on their way to an NL Central title. So why would Chicago not re-sign Wood, who has often stated that he felt at home in Chicago (where his wife is from) and that he wanted to remain a Cub?

The likely answer is that the Cubs thought that Carlos Marmol, who set Wood up last year in the Cubs' bullpen, was ready to ascend to the role of closer. It's hard to argue with their logic as Marmol posted K/9 rate for 2008 of 11.75, while his WHIP of 0.93 also bested Wood, not to mention that Marmol's OPS against of .508 ranked 3rd in MLB after a couple of guys named Rivera and Soria. Throw in the facts that Marmol is playing for the league minimum and that he looks to be on

the cusp of dominance as a closer and you see why the Cubs felt comfortable handing the 9th inning to him. Why they didn't keep Wood on, in a lesser capacity, and opt for obtaining Kevin Gregg from the Marlins to fill a bullpen role instead is a mystery. If the Indians are, in fact, in line to sign Wood, we would have to hope that the Cubs reluctance in committing years and dollars to Wood wasn't the result of concerns over lingering health issues.

Ah, the health issues...the ones that seemed to add initials to Kerry Wood's name, much like a doctor gets an MD or a dentist adds a DDS. For too many years in Chicago, Kerry Wood's name and the initials MRI were closely connected as every article that referred to Wood had some mention of his elbow, an MRI, or some other lingering medical issue. However, knowing the Indians and their reluctance to commit multiple years to players with injury concerns (keep your Hafner comment to yourself), one would have to think that the Indians are going to run Wood through a litany of tests before any kind of final commitment to him. And even if there is lingering concerns, the length of the deal being reportedly discussed (2 years with an option for a 3rd) protects the Indians against making a huge commitment in terms of years going forward.

Going further, if (and, remember, we're still talking "if" here as there's been nothing official) the Indians do add Wood to the bullpen mix, the Tribe bullpen just got a great deal better and quite a bit deeper:

Wood
Lewis
Perez
Betancourt
Kobayashi/Mujica/Jackson/Rundles
Miller/Meloan/Stevens/Sipp

Those are some dominant arms at the back end with the possibility of allowing Betancourt to find himself again in the 6th or 7th inning instead of as a primary set-up man for Stomp Lewis. Additionally, it allows the young arms in that last group to work their way into the mix gradually or simply establish themselves in Columbus and wait for the first call-up to replace an ineffective or injured pitcher as the chaff is separated from the wheat in that second last line.

Obviously, we're still talking about a deal "allegedly" happening with Wood, but adding him to the bullpen mix solidifies the back-end of the bullpen with

a pitcher capable of dominating opponents. To net that type of player on the FA market without committing anything more than 2 guaranteed years on the open market looks to be a tremendous addition to the current Indians' roster. Beyond that, it allows that ladder of progression that the Indians rely upon amongst their relievers to strengthen to the point of the bullpen being a pillar of the 2009 team and not the rickety version that handles relief duties in 2008.