In the last 48 hours, Indians GM Mark Shapiro has acquired free agent closer Kerry Wood to solidify the backend of the Indians bullpen, and just for good measure he was involved in a massive three team, 12 player trade with the NY Mets and Seattle Mariners last night which saw outfielder Franklin Gutierrez shipped out to the Mariners with the Indians getting back right-handed reliever Joe Smith from the Mets and minor league second baseman Luis Valbuena from the Mariners. Tony weighs in on the deals, and offers some insight on the new Indians.

Talk about the recent moves tonight on Smoke Signals at 9:30pm. *Paul and I will take calls and discuss the moves as well as have right-handed minor league reliever Randy Newsom on the show for an on-air interview.*

Also, if any Indians are lost in the Rule 5 Draft today they will be interviewed on-air as well.

Indians General Manager Mark Shapiro went into the offseason with the focus and determination to upgrade the roster in three key areas: the bullpen, the starting rotation, and the infield.

In the last 48 hours, Shapiro has addressed half of those needs in acquiring free agent closer Kerry Wood to solidify the backend of the Indians bullpen, and just for good measure he was involved in a massive three team, 12 player trade with the NY Mets and Seattle Mariners last night which saw outfielder Franklin Gutierrez shipped out to the Mariners with the Indians getting back right-handed reliever Joe Smith from the Mets and minor league second baseman Luis Valbuena from the Mariners.

Wow.

As an Indians fan you almost don't know how to react to all this activity. And, for once, it is fun and exciting to be part of the offseason Hot Stove, a time when the Indians the past half decade been in hibernation for the winter.

When you add in the lack of many impact trades to acquire major league talent at the popular July trading deadline, the buzz-storm of the past 48 hours has been awesome to be a part of for Indians fans.

And, all indications are that the Indians are not done shopping.

Paul Cousineau has already written about the Kerry Wood signing and provided some additional thoughts on it today
, and I pretty much echo his thoughts on it.

The fact the Indians were able to get arguably the second best available closer on the market this offseason - be it free agency or trade - and get him to sign for just two guaranteed years is a steal if you ask me.

This guy right now is without a doubt a Top 10 closer in the league, and with another good year could be a Top 5 guy.

Yes, he has injury issues, but the risk of other available closers was not much different.

Besides, getting his ability and signing him for just two guaranteed years negates the injury risk if you ask me. On top of that, he will have some sort of option for a third year - be it a vesting or club option - which may be ironed out and disclosed later today when the signing may become official. This is more great news as the option will obviously not go into effect or be picked up unless he reaches certain performance incentives or remains healthy and productive over the course of his two year deal. As Buffum would say, "Huzzah"!

With that, the focus needs to be shifted to the other big news of the last 48 hours, which is the trade of Gutierrez last night which netted Smith and Valbuena. The Indians used a player in Gutierrez from an area of strength to fill two of the organizations biggest areas of need which is major league bullpen help and depth at the high levels of the minor league system at second base.

The loss of Gutierrez should not be understated as he was a gold glove caliber defender, and is widely considered one of the top defensive outfielders in the game. Outside of his defense, however, Gutierrez offered very little as he was just okay on the bases and was a very inconsistent hitter. After almost five years in the organization, he leaves exactly the same hitter today as he was when the Indians acquired him in April 2004 for Milton Bradley.

His lack of growth offensively is a big reason the Indians moved on and deemed him expendable.

Sure, he shows some occasional pop and ability at the plate, but he is just what he is: a great defensive outfielder with a questionable bat.

In addition to that, Gutierrez is out of options and offered very little roster flexibility since Shin-Soo Choo is now considered the everyday starter in right field and is also out of options. With David Dellucci seemingly stuck on the roster for another year, and of course Grady Sizemore going nowhere, it meant the Indians were really locked into those four outfielders.

With no flexibility in the outfield, and of course Ben Francisco needing to be in the mix, it was a foregone conclusion that if Dellucci could not be dumped that Gutierrez would be sent packing sometime this offseason because they would not open the season with five outfielders.

The Indians now have a little more wiggle room in the outfield as Francisco still has options and can be moved up and down from Cleveland to Triple-A Columbus as needed. In the end, the emergence of Choo and Francisco as solid offensive performers to go along with Gutierrez's lack of options and down year in 2008 after an encouraging 2007 season left him expendable.

And don't forget that the Indians have three outfield prospects who will start the season in Triple-A Columbus who are all expected to at some point in 2009 contribute at the major league level.

The removal of Gutierrez from the roster helps open some doors for Michael Brantley, Trevor Crowe, and Matt LaPorta to make their way to Cleveland faster now.

That all said, the Indians got some good value for Gutierrez by filling a need in the major league bullpen with Smith and filling a big organizational need at second base. Some may look at the loss of Gutierrez as a big loss to the Indians outfield defense, which is true, but the acquisition of Smith helps shore up a bullpen which is all of a sudden looking very good again.

Smith now will take over the role that would otherwise have likely gone to Eddie Mujica or one of the young bullpen arms stashed away in the minors.

This is without a doubt a serious upgrade over Mujica, and while the young bullpen arms in the system may potentially be better, the Indians need a solution they can rely on at the outset of the season who has a proven major league track record.

Mujica is all but certain to be waiver wire fodder now when the Indians make another move and need to clear space on the 40-man roster.

The additions of Wood and Smith to the bullpen is very significant, which was the Indians biggest weakness last season and reason for their downfall. With Smith and Wood now in the bullpen, the seven-man bullpen is essentially locked up with Wood, Smith, Rafael Betancourt, Jensen Lewis, Rafael Perez, Masa Kobayashi, and Zach Jackson (long man).

Jackson's inclusion may raise a few eyebrows, but having some value, left-handed, versatile

and most importantly out of options means barring injury he is all but certain to be in the bullpen as a long man to start the season.

Unless there is a trade.

Yes, something else may be in the works here. The Indians have amassed quite a lot of depth now in the bullpen and starting rotation, particularly with right-handed relievers and left-handed starters. In addition to the pitchers in the proposed opening day bullpen above, the Indians also will have highly regarded right-handers Adam Miller, Jeff Stevens, and John Meloan as well as left-handers Tony Sipp and Rich Rundles all on speed dial at Triple-A Columbus next year.

In addition to them, undervalued right-hander Randy Newsom will also be an option in Columbus.

That has the makings of one heck of a bullpen and some excellent depth.

Also, assuming Anthony Reyes is locked into the #4 spot in the rotation, by now we all know of the left-handed starters who will likely be battling for the one open rotation spot this spring: Jackson, Aaron Laffey, Scott Lewis, Jeremy Sowers, and David Huff.

The Indians could potentially use one of the left-hander starters, one of the relievers like Kobayashi, Betancourt, or any of the Columbus guys, and package them with another prospect or two and use them to land the middle of the rotation starter or the second baseman/third baseman they covet. If you take out the two prospects and include catcher Kelly Shoppach in the deal instead, you have the makings of a potential blockbuster on the horizon which may allow the Indians to substantially fill that starting pitching or infielder need.

Valbuena's acquisition is not expected to deter the Indians focus this offseason in acquiring a solution at second or third base, and he is expected to open the 2009 season as the everyday second baseman in Triple-A Columbus.

A trade like this may or may not happen as in year's past I would have said there was no chance the Indians would step out of their comfort zone and be so bold. But, this offseason they appear to have peeked their heads out of their protective bubble they live in and realized, "hey, this isn't so bad" and been proactive by taking a few gambles.

They are making a concerted effort to improve a team that was a big disappointment last year, which in the end is all the fans can ask for.

No more band aid moves to cover up all their issues, finally some actual acquisitions that have impact potential.

And they don't appear to be done Christmas shopping yet.

Who The #@$& Are These Guys?

After hearing the names of the two players the Indians acquired in this deal, the construction worker's famous quote from the movie "Major League" may have popped into your head. Most people should know who Smith is since he has pitched in the Mets bullpen the past two years, but practically no one knows who Valbuena is, including yours truly about 24 hours ago. It is amazing how much you can learn about a player in 24 hours though!

Anyway, here is a quick rundown of who Smith and Valbuena are and what the Indians are getting:

Smith, 24, spent the entire 2008 season in the Mets bullpen and went 6-3 with a 3.55 ERA in 82 games (63.1IP, 51H, 25ER, 31BB, 52K, 4HR). Overall, major league hitters only hit .220 off him, and he was especially dominant against right-handers (.192 AVG) although in limited action against lefties (50 AB) they did touch him up (.320 AVG).

He finished tied for third in the National League with 82 appearances and his inherited runners scored percentage of 17% (11 of 63) was the second best mark in the NL and sixth best in the majors.

In 136 career major league appearances over the last two seasons, Smith is 9-5 with a 3.51 ERA (107.2IP, 99H, 42ER, 52BB, 97K, 7HR, .243AVG).

He is also sort of making a homecoming as he is from Cincinnati, OH and attended Wright State University.

Smith is a right-handed sidearmer who just flat out dominates right-handed hitters. Unlike most sidearmers his fastball is pretty lively and averages out at 89-91 MPH and tops out at 94 MPH.

His best pitch is a Jeff Nelson-like slider which is devastating to right-handers.

Right now he is only a situational reliever because lefties hit him pretty hard, and the key to becoming a more effective against left-handers and a potential setup man is the development of a changeup.

Valbuena, a native of Venezuela who just turned 23 years old on November 30th, split the 2008 season between Double-A, Triple A, and in the big leagues with Seattle. He began the season at Double-A West Tennessee before being promoted to Triple-A Tacoma on June 28, hitting a combined .303 (137-for-452) with 84 runs scored, 21 doubles, 2 triples, 11 homers, 60 RBI, stole 18 bases, and had an .813 OPS in 128 games between the two stops.

He made his big league debut with the Mariners in September, hitting .245 (12-for-49) with 5 2B, 1RBI and 6 runs scored in 18 games.

He is currently hitting .280 (28-for-100) with 7 2B, 2 3B, 4HR & 18 RBI (.510SLG, .843OPS) for Lara in the Venezuelan Winter League.

Valbuena's biggest upside is his bat, which is the main reason the Indians acquired him. He

has a good approach at the plate, and has demonstrated good bat-to-ball ability and has a penchant for taking walks.

He also continues to get stronger, which is a reason he has seen his power numbers improve this past season.
He is only considered an average runner, but he has the ability to be an above average defender.

he compares a lot to a Ray Durham type player if he reaches his potential.

Jason Churchhill of the popular Mariners prospect blog Prospect Insider had this to say about Valbuena:

At 5-9 and 190 pounds, second baseman Luis Valbuena reads as an uber-stocky kid with slow feet, but while he's just an average runner, he's solid at second base. Enough for me to call him above-average in the big leagues, due to above-average range and accurate throws. His work around the second-base bag is at least average, albeit not smooth like another former Mariners prospect Asdrubal Cabrera.

He doesn't have the physical tools that Cabrera has, but he does possess similarly polished plate skills for a 22-year-old.

He will work counts, draw his share of walks and limit strikeouts.

Final Rule 5 Thoughts

After my preview article posted yesterday , there were some comments and questions pertaining to my stance on why I now feel the Indians likely will not lose anyone in the Draft when a few weeks earlier I felt we could possibly lose a player or two.

Well, a lot of this is perspective. When you spend 95% of your time following just the Indians minor leaguers, you tend to have a personal attachment to all the players and inflate their value some because you know them and see them play often. Familiarity. Initially, without much consideration of what the other 29 teams would have eligible to be drafted, I felt that some guys like Jordan Brown, Chuck Lofgren, and others could be drafted.

That said, after talking to a few people in other organizations who are actually doing the scouting for their org for this draft, the general consensus was the Indians eligibles list was very weak and it is likely that no one is selected. In fact, the eligibles list for all the teams overall is not anywhere close to offering up potential major league talent like in years past. This is why my stance changed somewhat.

My value for the Indians players that are eligible has not changed at all. Personally I believe that should any of them get a chance elsewhere, they will succeed. But objectively, when considering the value outsiders have for these players compared to other players available from other teams, this is where my opinion changed from thinking it was possible a few guys could

be taken to believing it being very unlikely anyone is taken at all. Of course, I only talked to people from three teams, so there are still 26 other organizations who may feel differently about our players and select one or two.

As far as my comment from one person who said the Indians would be the "last team they would look at for players", this in no way is indicative of a lack of talent the Indians Rule 5 eligible players have. This really is about how well they play at the major league level and if they are a suitable fit for a team. Contrary to what many may believe, teams strongly consider if the player can play and handle playing in the major leagues when taken in the Rule 5 Draft. They do not draft a player with the idea to stash a guy on the roster as he has to be a potentially useable piece when he is drafted. The one exception to this rule is if there is a high impact level hitter or pitcher who is exposed that a team may want to stash away. The Indians have no such player available. They have some good players available, but no one who is projected to someday be a FOR starter, backend bully guy, or middle of the order bat.

As for the Indians possibly taking a player in the draft, I don't foresee the Indians taking anyone. It would be a big surprise as to me they have a plethora of relief options and 4th outfielders on the roster. Prior to last night's trade for infielder Luis Valbuena there was an outside shot they could target an infielder to use in some sort of platoon at second base with Jamey Carroll or Josh Barfield, but that is no longer a possibility. They will likely just be monitoring who is taken from their team and leave it at that.

The thing to remember here is only about 15-25 players are likely to be taken in the major league portion of the Rule 5 Draft. With over a 1000 players eligible to be taken, those are some long odds. Again, I could be completely wrong and we lose two guys. That is the uncertainty of the Rule 5 Draft, and the gamble/guess I am making based on info I have at this time.

Photo courtesy of Mets Today