As the Indians' season slinks closer to the finish line, with the glimmers of hope being clouded by the continuation of confusing organizational double-speak (that is, actions that go against stated intentions) and the disappointments of what is sure to remain an inconsistent product on the field into 2010, the overwhelming question of how the Indians fell so far, so fast continues to gnaw. Paulie C says it's simple. The 2002-2007 drafts.

As the Indians' season slinks closer to the finish line, with the glimmers of hope being clouded by the continuation of confusing organizational double-speak (that is, actions that go against stated intentions) and the disappointments of what is sure to remain an inconsistent product on the field into 2010, the overwhelming question of how the Indians fell so far, so fast continues to gnaw. After the run of 2007 and the promise of 2008, the Indians have undoubtedly fell on hard times in short order and while the cause of that precipitous fall can be deflected in a number of directions, one that seems to have found a toehold is that the Indians' inability to identify, draft, and develop players internally has sabotaged their ability to continue to contend.

When the trade of Bartolo Colon was announced in late June 2002, the new Indians' regime made no secret about their plans to re-stock the barren cupboard in the farm system, decrying a lack of players in the pipeline ready to contribute at some point in the future. They acted quickly, making trades that stocked the Minors with the likes of Sizemore, Lee, Phillips, Hafner, and Crisp (among other notable "misses"), ostensibly with the hope that they were putting depth and quality back into the farm in a hurry.

The credo was that in a market like Cleveland, the lifeblood of the organization would be the development of young players (home-grown and acquired from elsewhere) as the Indians knew that they would be unlikely to be significant players in the Free Agent market, with the likelihood that they would lose the majority of their "home-grown stars" once they hit FA playing the other side of the double-edged sword staring them in the face.

As a reaction to that reality, the Indians stated publicly that they would be ramping up their development system by putting more money into the farm system, with the idea that the players they acquired through the Draft and through International Free Agency would begin to fill holes internally with the young, inexpensive, under-club-control players that the Indians knew were necessary to vault back into the steady contention that they enjoyed in the 1990s.

Without breaking any new ground, the Indians have employed all of the available paths in their attempts to add talent back into the organization, enjoying great success in trading their veterans for prospects (netting the likes of Sizemore, Cabrera, Choo, Hafner, LaPorta, Lee, Valbuena, Shoppach, Brantley and even further down, the likes of Carlos Santana in this still-continuing process), moderate success in the International market (signing players like Victor, Peralta, Carmona, and Rafael Perez), and establishing a spotty record at best in FA endeavors (Millwood, Pavano, and Howry...but Jason Johnson, The Looch, Masa, etc., etc.). The draft however, remains the great frustration in the formula as the Indians, with a stated reliance on the development of players to fill holes internally, have continued to significantly augment the organizational talent more productively by trading their veterans for other teams' prospects, with the great majority of the current Indians' stable of talent coming to the club via that route.

While that path to acquiring talent is certainly a legitimate one, unless the Indians legitimately planned to fill their need for a SS by knowing that they would trade Eduardo Perez for Asdrubal Cabrera or knowing that they'd fill their OF issues when (and not if) they were forced to trade the Hefty Lefty, there's a disconnect here. The Indians, quite simply, have not been able to develop their own players via one of the crucial tools in place for them to do so. Additionally, when the Indians do see one of their draft picks emerge from the Minors to the parent club, the players have fallen more under the category of organizational filler than that of impact talent.

Without getting into the whole "Arrested Development" thing (and it is

almost time to enjoy the brilliance of those 3 seasons again once the MLB season is over) of why these players are not able to progress at the MLB level and become anything more than organizational fodder, let's take a look at how the Indians have fared in the MLB Draft since 2002, the year of unquestioned transition made official by the Colon deal that would go down less than a month after the 2002 amateur draft.

For the purposes of organizing this, the players that have appeared in an MLB game are listed by their draft class (with their draft position noted), with their MLB performance to date shown, using ERA+ and OPS+ as a measuring stick (knowing that 100 of each equates to league average) and indicating how much of their time in MLB was spent playing for the Indians.

With that introduction, let's pull back the curtain on the MLB players drafted by the Indians from 2002 to 2007, stopping there if only because the 2008 draft class is just only now finishing their first full professional season:

Cleveland

2002

Jeremy Guthrie - Round 1 (#22)
Career 109 ERA+ in 570 MLB IP - 37 of those IP for Cleveland

Brian Slocum - Round 2 (#63)
Career 58 ERA+ in 19 2/3 MLB IP - all of those IP for Cleveland

Ben Francisco - Round 5 (#154)
Career 99 OPS+ in 869 MLB AB - 817 of those AB for Cleveland

2003

Michael Aubrey - Round 1 (#11)
Career 67 OPS+ in 66 MLB AB - 45 of those AB for Cleveland

Ryan Garko - Round 3 (#78)
Career 106 OPS+ in 1,497 MLB AB - 1,404 of those AB for Cleveland

Kevin Kouzmanoff - Round 6 (#168)

Career 101 OPS+ in 1,677 MLB AB - 56 of those AB for Cleveland

Aaron Laffey - Round 16 (#468)
Career 110 ERA+ in 242 2/3 MLB IP - all of those IP for Cleveland

2004

Jeremy Sowers - Round 1 (#6)
Career 90 ERA+ in 384 MLB IP - all of those IP for Cleveland

Scott Lewis - Round 3 (#77)
Career 128 ERA+ in 28 1/3 MLB IP - all of those IP for Cleveland

Chris Gimenez - Round 19 (#557)
Career 36 OPS+ in 104 MLB AB - all of those AB for Cleveland

Wyatt Toregas - Round 24 (#707)
Career 32 OPS+ in 37 MLB AB - all of those AB for Cleveland

Tony Sipp - Round 45 (#1333)
Career 143 ERA+ in 31 MLB IP - all of those IP for Cleveland

2005

Trevor Crowe - Round 1 (#14)
Career 49 OPS+ in 108 MLB AB - all of those AB for Cleveland

Jensen Lewis - Round 3 (#102)
Career 117 ERA+ in 146 1/3 MLB IP - all of those IP for Cleveland

2006

David Huff - Round 1 (#39)
Career 73 ERA+ in 108 1/3 MLB IP - all of those IP for Cleveland

2007

No Players

OK, we all know how this goes - harrumph, harrumph...I didn't get a harrumph out of that guy...oh, because he's too busy wailing and gnashing his teeth - that's acceptable.

While it may be unfair to gauge the success of a young player like a David Huff or a Tony Sipp just yet because the sample size is so small, the fact remains that Ryan Garko and Aaron Laffey are the two best players in terms of performance that have logged any significant time in MLB and those guys are...well, a place-holder 1B who is not an everyday player on an NL West team these days and a young pitcher who hopefully slots into the middle of the rotation for the next few years.

The sense that the Indians have failed to draft and develop impact players holds up as the names that fill this list certainly fall under the "organizational filler" column in the ledger with players that look like 4th OF, back-up catchers, 5th starters or swing men.

If you're looking for a tangible measuring stick for the 6 years of the draft examined, the number of players with an OPS+ or an ERA+ over 100 with more than 200 AB or 50 IP (meaning that we're not just talking about success in a cup of coffee with the Tribe) with 50% of those AB or IP coming with the Indians is...wait for it...3.

Ryan Garko, Aaron Laffey, and Jensen Lewis are who the Indians can hang their hat on right now as "successes" in those 6 years of drafting.

Cue the harrumphs...

Now, do injuries play a role here?

Certainly, as Michael Aubrey's career was derailed by injuries and only makes this list by virtue of a few meaningless AB for the Orioles this season, just as Atom Miller does not find himself on this list because of visiting the doctor's office at a rate usually reserved for a hypochondriac.

But injuries play a role everywhere and for every team, which brings us to the idea that the only way to truly analyze the recent success (or lack thereof) for the Indians in the amateur draft is to look at their performance in comparison to a number of different teams in the same timeframe, using the same criteria.

Thus, let's take a look at the results of the other teams in the AL Central from 2002 to 2007, using OPS+ and ERA+ as the same measure of performance for their draftees that have reached MLB.

And...away we go:

Detroit

2002

Scott Moore - Round 1 (#8)
Career 69 OPS+ in 98 MLB AB - 0 of those AB for Detroit

Brent Clevlen - Round 2 (#49)
Career 81 OPS+ in 73 MLB AB - all of those AB for Detroit

Curtis Granderson - Round 3 (#80)
Career 116 OPS+ in 2,473 MLB AB - all of those AB for Detroit

Luke Carlin - Round 10 (#290)
Career 27 OPS+ in 111 MLB AB - 0 of those AB for Detroit

Joel Zumaya - Round 11 (#320)
Career 144 ERA+ in 171 1/3 MLB IP - all of those IP for Detroit

Jesse Carlson - Round 15 (#440)
Career 127 ERA+ in 119 MLB IP - 0 of those IP for Detroit

2003

Tony Giarratano - Round 3 (#70)
Career 22 OPS+ in 42 MLB AB - all of those AB for Detroit

Virgil Vasquez - Round 7 (#190)
Career 61 ERA+ in 54 2/3 MLB IP - 16 2/3 of those IP for Detroit

Brian Rogers - Round 11 (#310)
Career 48 ERA+ in 10 2/3 MLB IP - 0 of those IP for Detroit

Jordan Tata - Round 14 (#460)
Career 66 ERA+ in 28 2/3 MLB IP - all of those IP for Detroit

Dusty Ryan - Round 48 (#1405)
Career 92 OPS+ in 69 MLB AB - all of those AB for Detroit

2004

Justin Verlander - Round 1 (#2)
Career 116 ERA+ in 797 MLB IP - all of those IP for Detroit

2005

Cameron Maybin - Round 1 (#10)
Career 89 OPS+ in 182 MLB AB - 49 of those AB for Detroit

Jeff Larish - Round 5 (#150)
Career 90 OPS+ in 178 MLB AB - all of those AB for Detroit

Clete Thomas - Round 6 (#180)
Career 93 OPS+ in 358 MLB AB - all of those AB for Detroit

Matt Joyce - Round 12 (#360)
Career 113 OPS+ in 274 MLB AB - 242 of those AB for Detroit

Michael Hollimon - Round 16 (#480)
Career 116 OPS+ in 23 MLB AB - all of those AB for Detroit

Burke Badenhop - Round 19 (#570)
Career 86 ERA+ in 107 MLB IP - 0 of those IP for Detroit

2006

Andrew Miller - Round 1 (#6)
Career 78 ERA+ in 258 1/3 MLB IP - 74 1/3 of those IP for Detroit

2007

Rick Porcello - Round 1 (#27)
Career 107 ERA+ in 141 2/3 MLB IP - all of those IP for Detroit

Chicago

2002

Royce Ring - Round 1 (#18)
Career 85 ERA+ in 65 2/3 MLB IP - 0 of those IP for Chicago

Jeremy Reed - Round 2 (#59)
Career 81 OPS+ in 1,201 MLB AB - 0 of those AB for Chicago

Josh Rupe - Round 3 (#90)
Career 90 ERA+ in 132 2/3 MLB IP - 0 of those IP for Chicago

Sean Tracey - Round 8 (#240)
Career 141 ERA+ in 8 MLB IP - all of those IP for Chicago

Brandon McCarthy - Round 17 (#510)
Career 99 ERA+ in 352 MLB IP - 151 2/3 of those IP for Chicago

Boone Logan - Round 20 (#600)
Career 80 ERA+ in 126 MLB IP - 110 2/3 of those IP for Chicago

Jay Marshall - Round 25 (#750)
Career 80 ERA+ in 126 MLB IP - 110 2/3 of those IP for Chicago

Fernando Hernandez - Round 49 (#1448)
Career 22 ERA+ in 3 MLB IP - 0 of those IP for Chicago

2003

Brian Anderson - Round 1 (#15)
Career 66 OPS+ in 790 MLB AB - 782 of those AB for Chicago

Ryan Sweeney - Round 2 (#52)
Career 94 OPS+ in 888 MLB AB - 80 of those AB for Chicago

2004

Josh Fields - Round 1 (#18)
Career 84 OPS+ in 650 MLB AB - all of those AB for Chicago

Gio Gonzalez - Round 1 (#38)
Career 65 ERA+ in 113 2/3 MLB IP - 0 of those IP for Chicago

Donny Lucy - Round 2 (#59)
Career 5 OPS+ in 15 MLB AB - all of those AB for Chicago

Adam Russell - Round 6 (#178)
Career 98 ERA+ in 32 MLB IP - 26 of those IP for Chicago

2005

Lance Broadway - Round 1 (#15)
Career 101 ERA+ in 45 1/3 MLB IP - 40 1/3 of those IP for Chicago

Chris Getz - Round 4 (#125)
Career 126 OPS+ in 346 MLB AB - all of those AB for Chicago

Aaron Cunningham - Round 6 (#185)
Career 65 OPS+ in 133 MLB AB - 0 of those AB for Chicago

Clayton Richard - Round 8 (#245)
Career 86 ERA+ in 176 2/3 MLB IP - 136 2/3 of those IP for Chicago

2006

No Players

2007

Aaron Poreda - Round 1 (#25)
Career 191 ERA+ in 11 MLB IP - all of those IP for Chicago

Minnesota

2002

Denard Span - Round 1 (#20)
Career 122 OPS+ in 831 MLB AB - all of those AB for Minnesota

Jesse Crain - Round 2 (#60)
Career 122 ERA+ in 302 MLB IP - all of those IP for Minnesota

Pat Neshek - Round 6 (#182)
Career 149 ERA+ in 120 2/3 MLB IP - all of those IP for Minnesota

Evan Meek - Round 11 (#332)
Career 97 ERA+ in 60 MLB IP - 0 of those IP for Minnesota

2003

Scott Baker - Round 2 (#58)
Career 99 ERA+ in 619 MLB IP - all of those IP for Minnesota

Levale Speigner - Round 14 (#418)
Career 46 ERA+ in 48 MLB IP - 0 of those IP for Minnesota

2004

Glen Perkins - Round 1 (#22)
Career 87 ERA+ in 281 2/3 MLB IP - all of those IP for Minnesota

Anthony Swarzak - Round 2 (#61)
Career 66 ERA+ in 59 MLB IP - all of those IP for Minnesota

Matt Tolbert - Round 16 (#481)
Career 63 OPS+ in 242 MLB AB - all of those AB for Minnesota

2005

Matt Garza - Round 1 (#25)
Career 113 ERA+ in 495 1/3 MLB IP - 133 of those IP for Minnesota

Kevin Slowey - Round 2 (#73)
Career 94 ERA+ in 317 2/3 MLB IP - all of those IP for Minnesota

2006

No Players

2007

No Players

Kansas City

2002

Zack Grienke - Round 1 (#6)
Career 118 ERA+ in 857 MLB IP - all of those IP for Kansas City

Donnie Murphy - Round 5 (#138)
Career 63 OPS+ in 325 MLB AB - 104 of those AB for Kansas City

Jonah Bayliss - Round 7 (#198)
Career 65 ERA+ in 64 MLB IP - 11 2/3 of those IP for Kansas City

Matt Tupman - Round 9 (#258)
Career 442 OPS+ in 1 MLB AB - that 1 sweet ever-loving AB for Kansas City

Kila Kaaihue - Round 15 (#438)
Career 116 OPS+ in 21 MLB AB - all of those AB for Kansas City

2003

Mitch Maier - Round 1 (#30)
Career 79 OPS+ in 351 MLB AB - all of those AB for Kansas City

Shane Costa - Round 2 (#42)
Career 70 OPS+ in 421 MLB AB - all of those AB for Kansas City

Ryan Braun - Round 6 (#162)
Career 71 ERA+ in 50 MLB IP - all of those IP for Kansas City

Mike Aviles - Round 7 (#192)
Career 100 OPS+ in 539 MLB AB - all of those AB for Kansas City

2004

Billy Butler - Round 1 (#14)
Career 108 OPS+ in 1,286 MLB AB - all of those AB for Kansas City

JP Howell - Round 1 (#31)
Career 99 ERA+ in 319 MLB IP - 72 2/3 of those IP for Kansas City

Billy Buckner - Round 2 (#55)
Career 75 ERA+ in 101 2/3 MLB IP - 34 of those IP for Kansas City

2005

Alex Gordon - Round 1 (#2)
Career 95 OPS+ in 1,132 MLB AB - all of those AB for Kansas City

2006

Luke Hochevar - Round 1 (#1)
Career 77 ERA+ in 256 2/3 MLB IP - all of those IP for Kansas City

2007
No Players

_____

Everyone's head spinning yet, overloaded from all of that data and how exactly it should be parsed?

OK, let's start to break it down a couple of ways.

Total Players Drafted from 2002 to 2007 to make it to MLB:

Detroit - 20
Chicago - 19
Cleveland - 15
Kansas City - 14
Minnesota - 11

If you're talking about players that logged more than just a few cursory appearances in MLB, here are the Total Players Drafted from 2002 to 2007, who logged more than 200 AB or 50 IP, regardless of MLB team:

Kansas City - 12
Detroit - 10
Chicago - 10
Minnesota - 10
Cleveland - 8

Since merely receiving AB or IP at the big-league level does not convey an actually hit rate in terms of identifying impact talent, how about using that same OPS+ and ERA+ number to see how many players were drafted by each team that fall into that category of an OPS+ or an ERA+ over 100 with more than 200 AB or 50 IP, again regardless of team:

Detroit - 6 (Granderson, Zumaya, Carlson, Verlander, Joyce, Porcello)
Cleveland - 5 (Guthrie, Garko, Kouzmanoff, Laffey, Lewis)
Minnesota - 4 (Span, Crain, Neshek, Garza)
Kansas City - 3 (Greinke, Aviles, Butler)
Chicago - 1 (Getz)

Comparatively, have the Indians drafted THAT badly in that 6-year stretch when you look at the bodies of work that their AL Central counterparts have put forth?

The draft is obviously a crapshoot, but the Indians' performance in the draft is not far off from what the rest of the AL Central has put forth. Certainly there is no Verlander or Greinke in the Indians' list, but those two were drafted #2 and #6 overall in their respective drafts, identical in their draft position to Alex Gordon (#2) and Andrew Miller (#6...not to mention another #6, Jeremy Sowers), giving credence to the notion that the truly elite players are few and far between in a draft and when a team is given the opportunity to select one of those players, success is critical.

A glaring trend that stands out when looking at the draft products of the AL Central though is not how each team's roster is full of draft picks, but rather how other teams have used those drafted players to net current players on the roster. Just for a few quick examples of success:
Cameron Maybin, Andrew Miller, and Burke Badenhop for Miguel Cabrera
Matt Joyce for Edwin Jackson
Brandon McCarthy for John Danks

Of course, those deals can go in the opposite direction as well:
Matt Garza for Delmon Young
JP Howell for Joey Gathright and somebody named Fernando Cortes
Kevin Kouzmanoff for Josh Barfield

All told, the Indians' draft performance in the 6-year stretch from 2002 to 2007 certainly contributed to the place that the organization finds itself in today

(beginning another rebuild, reload...whatever), which certainly comes as a disappointment for an organization designed to rely on the contributions of young talent. However, when compared to the rest of the AL Central's performance over the same timeframe, the Indians don't find themselves too far behind their divisional opponents in terms of drafting and developing talent.

Whether that track record can improve for the Indians (or is even on its way to improvement) remains to be seen as a team like the Indians, having the knowledge as early as 2002 that they're going to have to rely on tools like the draft to contend, need to outpace their divisional rivals because the other avenues (like FA) in place for teams like Detroit and Chicago, without regard for payroll, are dead ends for the Tribe.

From 2002 to 2007, that just didn't happen...putting us squarely where we sit today, looking up in the standing, left with only hope for the future.