On Friday afternoon the Indians added seven players to their 40-man roster to protect them from the Rule 5 Draft which occurs on December 10th. There were certainly some surprise additions and non-additions as well as some non-removals from the roster that may be puzzling to a lot of fans. Tony breaks down all of the decisions and provides some detailed analysis on why the Indians made the decisions they did. Don't forget to listen into the special edition of his on-line radio show he does with Paul Cousineau "Smoke Signals" this Sunday night at 9:30pm!

As a quick FYI, Paul Cousineau and I will be airing a special offseason edition of Smoke Signals this Sunday night November 22nd from 9:30-10:30pm . We will be talking about the recent roster moves, coach additions to Manny Acta's staff, and more, and may have an interview or two.

On Friday afternoon the Indians added seven players to their 40-man roster to protect them from the Rule 5 Draft which occurs on December 10th. The players added were first baseman/outfielder Jordan Brown, left-handed pitcher Kelvin De La Cruz, infielder Jason Donald, right-handed pitcher Jeanmar Gomez, third baseman Wes Hodges, shortstop Carlos Rivero, and outfielder Nick Weglarz.

There were certainly some surprise additions and non-additions as well as some non-removals from the roster that may be puzzling to a lot of fans. Let's try to sort out all of the issues on a case by case basis:

No Roster Removals: As predicted in my first part of the 40-man review last week, the Indians did not remove anyone from the roster (at least I got something right). I may have bombed my predictions on who the last three additions to the roster would be, but my feeling that no one outside of maybe Anthony Reyes would be removed proved correct.

I felt like right-handed pitcher Anthony Reyes could and probably would be removed, and while that did not happen I still think that it very well could happen at some point this offseason when the Indians need a sacrificial lamb on the roster to create a roster space for the veteran utility player and/or veteran starting pitcher they plan to sign in free agency. When they do make that signing or two, they need someone to take off the roster, and that is where a player like Reyes may come in. If they removed all perceived roster waste now and protected another one or two players, it would mean when the time comes to create space to add that free agent or two that they would be forced to lose someone they otherwise would not want to have to remove from the roster yet.

In the case of utility man Chris Gimenez, right-handed reliever Jose Veras, and catcher Wyatt Toregas, they each still have value in their own right on the roster. The Indians soon will have to make a decision on catcher Kelly Shoppach and decide whether to offer him arbitration or not. If they are unable to trade him, there is a good chance he could be non-tendered and become a free agent. If that happens, catcher Lou Marson will assume full time catching duties, and this is where Toregas' value still lies as he would be the backup catcher in Cleveland for the short term.

Veras is at least as good or better than any of the other pitching prospects left unprotected, so I have no problem with keeping him. He is in some ways still a prospect himself and very raw with some untapped potential. He has a power arm that needs some work, but he has major league experience. As much as I like a lot of the pitchers we left off the roster, I will always side with that over minor league relievers who have lesser stuff. I'm a prospect guy, and I know that may sound cold, but it's the unfortunate reality of the roster game.

Gimenez is the popular punching bag among fans at the moment, and for good reason after his horrific stint in the big leagues this past season (.144 AVG, .499 OPS, 45 G). Still, the Indians seem intent on considering him for one of the bench spots and will focus more on him as a third baseman, first baseman and outfielder as they have decided to move him away from the catching position. He would only catch in the event of an emergency and is no longer considered a backup catcher. If you noticed recently, he is also no longer listed as a catcher on the Indians 40-man roster, but as an infielder now. That all said, if the Indians need to remove someone from the 40-man roster this offseason to make space for an acquisition, Gimenez will be one of the top candidates (along with Reyes) to get waived.

Finally, Brown Is Rostered: This was about as close to a slam dunk roster decision as there was, though I have to say I am miffed by the fact some people didn't think this was so and even considered not rostering him. It was stunning to read so many accounts from people over the past few days and months about how Jordan Brown would not be rostered, or that he was not a sure thing to be added to the roster. Not to mention that it was confirmed he would be rostered as far back as September. Of all the roster protections he was the first and most obvious choice to be added, and is the most likely to be used the most this upcoming season.

Brown has the most proven major league ability to date and has a bat that 29 other teams would love to have right now. He also has a huge chip on his shoulder that he used to put forth

a great 2009 season to get on the 40-man roster, and one he will continue to use next season and beyond as continued motivation for success and to become a major league starter. I think sometimes people get too caught up in protecting some intriguing prospect who is two or three years away who has huge upside but is still in High-A over a proven prospect like a Brown who while he has some warts and may not ultimately be All Star caliber has major league ability now to be an everyday player. That's what it ultimately is about when making these roster decisions. Major league ability.

Out of all the players, Brown was the most obvious and one they had little to think about. He is also the one who has the best chance to play right now in the big leagues and most ready to be a role player or even an everyday player this coming season if given the chance. With Matt LaPorta an unknown to start the year because of his recent toe and hip surgeries, Grady Sizemore coming off injury, and having no idea what to expect from Travis Hafner, I think Brown has an excellent shot to make the team and get a significant number of at bats with the big league club in 2010.

The Rostering Of The DLC: Of the seven players the Indians rostered, the two that make me scratch my head the most for being added are left-handed pitcher Kelvin De La Cruz and shortstop Carlos Rivero. I'll talk a little bit more about Rivero in a minute, but De La Cruz's addition is somewhat perplexing.

The feeling I was getting the past few weeks was that the Indians did not want to roster him and have him blow through all his option years before he is big league ready, which is very likely to happen. He will most definitely blow through his first two option years in 2010 and 2011 as the Indians hope to finish his development off by the end of the 2011 season. This would leave at most one option year left where they have flexibility to move him up and down between the big league roster and Triple-A if he struggles at the big league level in 2012. This leaves very little room for error, and if he is not ready until 2013 then there is no room for error at all.

In some ways, this roster move is reminiscent of when they rostered former Indians left-handed pitcher Mariano Gomez six years ago back in November 2003. Gomez was coming off a good year at High-A Kinston that year and was someone the Indians really liked, so they rostered him. As time played out, we know Gomez dealt with some injury issues and eventually was removed from the roster a few years later. The difference of course is De La Cruz is coming off an injury plagued season in 2009 when he is being rostered, and this just further illustrates the point that there is very little margin for error with him at all going forward.

Sure, a team could have taken De La Cruz and stashed him on their 60-day disabled list all season, but he at some point would need to be active on a major league roster even if he never pitched in 2010 and was on the 60-day disabled list all year. He would have to open the 2011 season on the big league roster again because of the requirement to spend at least 90 aggregate days active on the big league roster. It seems very unlikely a team would go through all that trouble for a pitcher with just 11 starts above Low-A, and by the same token ruin his development path by essentially not having him pitch for over two years just to "steal" a prospect from another organization.

The more likely possibility would have been De La Cruz was picked up and stashed on a 25-man roster and filled a long man role. Even still, with how vitally important every roster spot is on a 25-man roster, it is highly unlikely he could have survived all year on a big league roster as he would be almost unusable. He is supremely talented for sure, but one of his biggest weaknesses is he really needs to develop and refine his command and control. That's what the minor leagues are for, to develop and improve upon your weaknesses, whereas in the big leagues there is not time for that and it is all about results. We can also stop with the Johan Santana comparisons, another lefty taken in the Rule 5 Draft out of High-A years ago, as Santana threw over 160 innings the year he was drafted whereas De La Cruz was seriously hurt and injured almost all season. Big difference if you ask me.

De La Cruz is just so far away, and while he has lots of upside and there would be some risk involved with leaving him unrostered, I would have had no problem taking that gamble and instead preferred to go with a much sooner pitching option in right-hander Yohan Pino, left-hander Chuck Lofgren, or right-hander Josh Tomlin who I think could all be depth starting or bullpen options in 2010. Of course, the status of those other pitchers has not changed as they are still with the organization and are considered for those roles this coming season, just now their future in the organization is somewhat unknown as any of them can be taken in the Rule 5 Draft (more on all that soon).

No Go On McBride: Probably the most controversial decision the Indians made was not rostering Matt McBride. He recently completed a great Arizona Fall League campaign (.378 AVG, .511 OBP, .649 SLG, 22 G), and may use that success to gain some additional interest as a possible Rule 5 selection. He certainly has the versatility to play catcher, first base or the outfield, but at this point he really is a man without a position as he does not figure to be a major league starter at either one of those positions. His future as a catcher is very much still in doubt, and he has a long way to go to be an adequate defender at first base or the outfield, though if he does became a major league starter it looks like left field will be the path (assuming he continues to hit).

Knowing that McBride lacks a true position anymore, the decision to not roster him may not be that much of a surprise. Your initial feeling usually tends to be most correct, and I felt up until a week ago that he would not be rostered because of what really was just a so-so showing at Double-A Akron this year (.247 AVG, .301 OBP, .427 SLG, 98 G), but I talked myself into rostering him after that good showing in the AFL and the Indians saying they did not want to lose him. If it came down to him and one of Hodges or Rivero for the last spot, then one of the determining factors of the Indians decision to side with Hodges and Rivero would be that they have a much more defined position.

McBride is certain to generate a lot of buzz for the Rule 5 Draft, but he is not the slam dunk to be taken many will make him out to be. His versatility and pop from the right side of the plate will be very attractive, but even if he is taken his bat may not yet be polished enough to handle major league pitching and he probably would be returned. His versatility is a big asset, but outside of an emergency situation he would not catch a major league inning, and he is still so raw at first base and outfield that teams may be hard pressed to even play him there.

McBride reminds me a lot of former Indians outfielder Ryan Goleski and the season he had in 2006 which vaulted him into Rule 5 consideration. Goleski was taken with the first overall pick by Oakland, but failed to hit and show enough in spring training and was eventually returned. I expect the same to happen with McBride if he is taken, and feel he will be in the Indians organization in 2010. He is very talented and a great guy, yes, but it is all about how a guy translates to the big leagues right now and not in one to two years, and right now he just appears to be a bit further away than we think.

That all said, I would have rostered him over Rivero as I think McBride has a much better chance of being selected in the Rule 5 Draft than Rivero would have.

No Issues With Hodges: I actually had Hodges rostered until the last second where after consulting some sources I was left with the impression that McBride would be rostered, so I took Hodges off my list and added McBride. Looking back on it, it very well may have come down to McBride and Hodges for that last roster spot and things were probably still up in the air in determining which one to roster.

The rostering of Hodges makes a lot of sense, and there are very few reasons to question the decision if you ask me. The Indians are very left-hand heavy with their lineup and need some punch from the right side, so this is where Hodges is most valuable. He is an average at best defender at third base and may ultimately move to first base, but the Indians protected him solely because of his potential to be a run producer with the bat. Also, even though the Indians plan to play Jhonny Peralta at third base, the position is a very big question mark in 2010 and 2011.

After the year Hodges had at Triple-A Columbus this year (.265 AVG, .704 OPS, 86 G), some may wonder how he can still be viewed as valuable, but you kind of have to give him a pass on his 2009 season. His season was in a lot of ways very similar to the disappointing year Jordan Brown had in 2008 at Triple-A Buffalo. Like with Brown, however, you have to give more credit to Hodges' 2007 season (.288 AVG, 15 HR, 7 1 RBI, .840 OPS) and 2008 season (.290 AVG, 18 HR, 97 RBI, .820 OPS) just like we should have with Brown's 2006 and 2007 seasons. Both Brown in 2008 and Hodges this past season had injury issues which severely hindered them in their first taste of Triple-A. If Hodges were completely healthy, the Indians feel his performance would have been much different this year, and their feeling is shared among others from many organizations, which is why he may have been hard to sneak through the Rule 5 Draft.

Rationalizing Rivero: Of all the roster decisions, this is the only one I really have a problem with. The decision is certainly sound from a pure prospect perspective, as he is a better prospect than any player left off the roster. That said, I am not sure he had much of a chance to be taken in the Rule 5 Draft, and like De La Cruz will now spend at least the next two seasons blowing through two of his three option years finishing off his development before he is (hopefully) usable as a major league player.

Like with the De La Cruz comparison to Mariano Gomez being rostered in 2003, the decision to roster Rivero reminds me a lot of when the Indians rostered Ivan Ochoa in 2003. Ochoa, like Rivero, was a very young shortstop who seemed to have a ton of untapped potential, though he

was sill in High-A whereas Rivero just completed a full Double-A season.

Rivero's overall numbers the past three seasons are not very impressive, but for the second straight year he showed marked improvement over the second half of the season. This past season he hit .280 with a .797 OPS in the second half of the season at Double-A Akron all while he was still one of the youngest players in the league. His second half improvement combined with a very solid AFL performance (.318 AVG, .859 OPS, 22 G) made him too valuable to the Indians to leave exposed to the Rule 5 Draft. He has a good reputation as a defender, and showed he can handle third base out in the AFL, so could possibly have fit onto a roster as a backup infielder.

The hope right now is that at some point Rivero will put it all together offensively, and that could happen next year where he could very well repeat at Akron to open the season in order to allow his age to catch up with the league for once. By allowing his age to catch up with the league it could be what he needs to become a more consistent offensive performer.

The Rostering of Donald, Gomez, and Weglarz: There has been really no backlash over these three roster additions, and I very much agree with the addition of all three of these players to the roster. While Donald and Weglarz missed a lot of time due to injury last year, both are very talented and have a lot of potential as big leaguers and could contribute at some point in 2010. Gomez was a slam dunk on the pitching side after a very good season in Akron and his continued development into a potential mid-rotation starter in the big leagues.

The Bottom Line: When it comes down to it, the Indians sided more with protecting high upside still projectable talent with the likes of De La Cruz and Rivero in lieu of guys like McBride, Pino, Lofgren, and Tomlin who all clearly are more big league ready but have all more of less reached their ceiling or are very close to it. De La Cruz and Rivero have some impact potential still and could be everyday players, whereas the other guys left off mostly project as major league 5th starters at best or role players off the bench.

For those wondering, the Indians certainly explore the Rule 5 waters before making these decisions as the at times will consult trusted scouts and executives throughout baseball for their opinions on who may or may not get picked if left unprotected. When it comes down to it with the roster, it is about minimizing the potential losses in the Rule 5 Draft, and they look to have covered it as best as they can as outside of McBride there is not one prospect left unprotected who should be ranked any higher than #25-30 in any prospect publication this offseason. I have some minor issues some of the selections and may have done things differently, but if the focus was to roster their best talent then they absolutely achieved that goal.

Let me make one thing clear though, just because a player is not rostered does not mean the organization does not like them or no longer values them. It's strictly a numbers game and a roll of the dice they are making on ensuring that they don't lose anyone in the Rule 5 Draft. There are certainly a lot of players upset who were not rostered, and emotions are definitely on overload as a result. These players are human beings after all and are career driven. Making a big league roster is a huge step in achieving that dream since childhood to be a big league ballplayer, so they are bound to be very upset by it. It is a cruel process in a lot of ways, and at

the same time shows just how hard it really is to make the big leagues.

Some of these players may get a new fresh start elsewhere as the offseason plays on, be it as a selection in the Rule 5 Draft or in a trade. Most of them, if not all, will return next season. There is no question they will be as focused as ever to do whatever it takes to make the big league roster, or even showcase themselves to other teams as a potential trade option or free agent option down the road.

With the 40-man roster decisions now complete, we now move our attention to the Rule 5 Draft which commences in less than three weeks on December 10th. I'll be back the week of the draft with a full breakdown of the players the Indians have the best chance of losing.