On Monday the Indians completed the Kelly Shoppach trade with the Tampa Bay Rays which was originally made on December 1st. As part of the original agreement to trade Shoppach to the Rays, the Rays (not the Indians) had until 11:59 p.m. on December 20th to make a choice from a list of two players and they ended up deciding to send right-hander Mitch Talbot to the Indians. In Tony's latest, he tells Indians fans about Talbot, the Indians mindset on him, and how he may fit into the 2010 plans of the big league club.

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As part of the original setup of the trade, the Indians also sent an unspecified amount of cash to complete the deal since the Rays chose to send Talbot to them. Minor league right-handed pitcher Joseph Cruz was the other player on the two player list agreed upon by the Indians and Rays, and according to Indians.com beat reporter Anthony Castrovince the parameters of the deal called for the Indians to trade a minor league player to the Rays if they chose Cruz. The Rays likely chose to deal Talbot to clear up some roster issues and also receive some cash in the deal to offset the cost of Shoppach.

The pick up of Talbot may be viewed as a puzzling acquisition given that he is out of minor league options and his upside is limited. But according to the Indians, while they understand he brings little flexibility from a roster standpoint, they view him as another potential starting pitching option at the outset of this coming season. In addition, considering he is out of options the Indians will also consider him for a bullpen role.

"We were waiting for the Rays to decide between two alternatives, both of which we liked," said Indians GM Mark Shapiro on SportsTime Ohio's show All Bets Are Off on Monday afternoon. "Privately we were hoping it would be Talbot because he was a guy who could come into spring training and compete for a spot in the rotation and if not would certainly be an option for our pen."

Talbot, 26, pitched in the Arizona Fall League (AFL) this offseason, and it is there that the Indians interest in him picked up. Finally healthy and over the right elbow strain which plagued him for most of the 2009 season, he made six starts and went 3-0 with a 4.37 ERA with a .303 batting average against in a hitter dominated league (22.2 IP, 27 H, 6 BB, 15 K).

"We scouted him heavily in the Arizona Fall League as he kind of completed rehabilitation at the end of the year from some elbow troubles," said Shapiro. "Our best scouts saw him repeatedly and his stuff was pretty good, he has a plus changeup, a good fastball which gets up to 94 MPH, and a good feel for a slider. He is a competitor and a guy who prior to some elbow injuries this year was a factor for them in the rotation and their major league staff. It is a situation where I feel like we need to add all the starting alternatives that we can."

Talbot is a big league ready arm who brings with him a successful seven year minor league career where as a 2nd round pick in the 2002 Draft out of high school he has carved out a career minor league record of 62-54 with a 3.79 ERA in 165 starts (905 IP, 911 H, 265 BB, 748 K). He made his big league debut for the Rays in 2008, making just three appearances (9.2 IP, 16 H, 12 R, 11 BB, 5 K). In 2009 he spent the entire year in the minors and was limited to just 15 total starts because of a right elbow sprain, and in those 15 starts was 4-4 with a 3.69 ERA (68.1 IP, 73 H, 18 BB, 67 K).

Talbot's acquisition combined with alternatives already in the organization such as Jake Westbrook, Fausto Carmona, Justin Masterson, David Huff, Aaron Laffey, Jeremy Sowers, Hector Rondon, and Carlos Carrasco appears to have satisfied the Indians need to go out and get another starting pitching option to bring to camp this spring. Westbrook's recent performance in winter ball and his health also help. Other opportunities may present themselves as the offseason progresses, but it seems aside from a non-roster minor league deal with a veteran starter or a legitimate pitcher falling into their lap that their thirst for a starter this offseason may have been quenched.

In the end the Indians are satisfied that they were able to pick up another pitching option for a player they ultimately were about to non-tender. They could have non-tendered Shoppach and not agreed to a deal where they would have had to pay the cash needed to complete such a deal, therefore saving money that may have been better spent on a bonus for a draft pick or two in the 2010 Draft. But they like Talbot, so the cash payout seems to have been of little concern.

A Deal With A Twist: The intriguing part of this deal was some of the complexities involved with it and some of the behind the scenes stuff that went on. The Indians easily could have just traded Shoppach for Talbot back when the trade originally took place on December 1st, but some unique arrangements put the completion of the trade off until December 20th as far as what the Indians would receive in return.

Talbot and Cruz were the two players the Rays had to decide between, but the reason this trade took so long to complete and why it went down to the last second is because the Rays were the ones deciding on the player to be named and not the Indians. Industry sources have said that arbitration was tied into the deal, and the only way this seems to be the case would be whether the Rays would offer Shoppach arbitration, hence the need for the player to be named later stipulation.

The Rays did offer Shoppach arbitration by the December 12th deadline, but according to sources after the Rays completed a trade with Atlanta on December 10th for Rafael Soriano they contacted the Indians to see if they would be interested in possibly restructuring the deal. Apparently the Rays were looking to unload some salary and had some roster issues they were working through, and as a result more players were in play than the original two on the list that the Rays would consider sending to the Indians.

The Rays had been talking to other teams about other potential deals, which is the reason why the player to be named took so long to identify and be completed since they were checking into all other options before completing the deal. The deal did eventually end up being completed as originally setup, but it was intriguing to follow nonetheless and an interesting twist to find out the Rays were the ones picking and not the Indians.

Shoppach's Plummeting Value: It is amazing when you think about how fast Shoppach's trade value diminished into almost nothing in the matter of one

season. He had what some would call a breakout campaign in 2008 as the regular catcher while Victor Martinez was out most of the season injured as he hit .261 with 21 HR, 55 RBI, and an .865 OPS in 112 games. Apparently, though, Shoppach's value never really spiked after that very good year in 2008 as the interest in him last offseason in a trade was lukewarm as teams were not willing to give up very much for him.

After Shoppach's 2009 season where he hit just .214 with 12 HR, 40 RBI, and a .734 OPS in 89 games, the trade market on him about flat lined. With the Indians already committed to Carlos Santana, Lou Marson, and Wyatt Toregas getting all the time at catcher in 2010, they wanted to move on without Shoppach so a trade or just non-tendering was their only course of action. They put out feelers to teams for Shoppach, and there was interest from multiple teams. In the end they decided that the Tampa Bay offer was the best, which considering the so-so return makes you wonder what everyone else was offering.

Not a Talbot Fan: I'll be honest, I am not a fan of what the Indians received in this trade at all. I am sure a high percentage of Indians fans feel the same way too. Talbot is just so bland and has so little upside, not to mention he makes an already crowded pitching situation even more crowded with guys who need to make the 25-man roster out of spring or risk being lost. The Indians already have left-hander Jeremy Sowers out of options and need to see if Rule 5 pick right-hander Hector Ambriz can stick, so now they have a third pitcher added to the mix for what looks like one open roster spot in the bullpen. When you have too many choices to choose from, it increases your chance you make a mistake and keep the wrong guy and let the right one go.

That all I said, the Indians and Rays essentially completed a deal to trade gunk for gunk. A guy we had no use for in Shoppach that we were going to non-tender that they could maybe use, in return for a guy they had no use for in Talbot and probably were going to designate for assignment at some point that we maybe can find a use for. While I am not happy with what we got in return, I do realize with Shoppach's small trade value we weren't getting much of anything of relevance in return anyway. So, I guess it's better to get something rather than nothing for Shoppach had they non-tendered him as expected.

I still would have preferred to pick up a minor leaguer deeper in the Rays system who would offer the Indians much more long term control and some upside. Cruz was that other option, but he was a mid-level prospect at best and has a long way

to go before he even establishes himself as much of a big league ready pitcher as Talbot. The key here is the Rays had the control in regard to selecting who the player to be named later would be, and in the end it appears the Indians got the guy they wanted.

Indians Sign Rivera: In addition to the pickup of Talbot from the Rays, the Indians also signed right-hander Saul Rivera to a minor league contract yesterday. Rivera, 32, was 13-15 with a 4.05 ERA in 245 major league relief appearances with the Washington Nationals the last four seasons (275.2 IP, 285 H, 123 BB, 191 K). The signing of Rivera adds some more depth to the bullpen and yet another candidate to compete for what looks like as many as two to three open spots in the bullpen next year. It also reunites him with Manny Acta who was his manager in Washington the last three years.

Knapp Update: Right-hander Jason Knapp is currently progressing well in his rehabilitation program from offseason surgery to remove loose bodies from his right shoulder. He will visit with team doctors in late January for a scheduled check up on his progress post-surgery, and at that time there should be a better understanding of when Knapp will be ready to pitch in 2010. At this time he is doing well and still expected to be ready for spring training, but this won't be known for certain until his visit with doctors in about five weeks.