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Provided that free agent first baseman Russell Branyan passes his physical with the Indians this weekend, he will be signed to a reported one year deal for $2 million. The deal also would reportedly include up to $1 million in incentives for this coming season and a 2011 mutual option for $5 million.

It should be noted in advance that while both parties have agreed in principle to the deal, Branyan still has to pass his physical and there is no guarantee he will. He had a back issue which plagued him at the end of last season and is a big reason teams stayed clear of him this offseason even after his career year last season with Seattle where he hit .251 with 31 HR, 76 RBI and a .867 OPS. But a lot of that damage last year was done in the first half of the season where before the All Star break he hit a blistering .280 with 22 HR, 49 RBI and .955 OPS in 286 at bats, but after the All Star break he fell off a cliff to hit just .193 with 9 HR, 27 RBI and a .688 OPS in 145 at bats.

The numbers after the All Star break may have been his performance evening out, but a lot of it had to do with a back issue which cropped up and ultimately sidelined him for the rest of the season after August 28th. Whether or not he is healthy will not be known until the physical is completed, but the Indians have legit concerns about his back so he is not in the clear yet and an official member of the team. If he checks out, an official announcement could be made sometime Sunday or Monday.

So why even sign Branyan?

Let's just get this out of the way first, I am not a Branyan fan nor a fan of this signing. But personal preference aside, the deal in a lot of ways does make some sense from the Indians perspective.

Going into the offseason the Indians wanted to add some options at first base. While Matt LaPorta will be the regular full time first baseman to start the season, he is also coming off of offseason toe and hip surgeries so they want to have some options to back him up in case he has any setbacks from the injury. The Indians also do not have any other internal options to play first base as they no longer consider Jordan Brown an option at first base as an everyday player or even in a platoon role, and there is no one else in the system ready to help. This is why they went out and picked up Shelly Duncan and signed him as a minor league free agent and now Branyan. Duncan and Branyan give them an option at first base in case LaPorta is slow to return from his offseason surgeries (he has been cleared to play) or he struggles in the early part of the regular season and needs to go back to Triple-A Columbus for some more work or to catch his breath.

Also, the Indians do not expect LaPorta or designated hitter Travis Hafner to each get more than 500 plate appearances this year. They could always both prove to be 100% healthy and productive this year, which would mean they would get more plate appearances than that, but that is not a realistic forecast for them this season given Hafner's questionable health status and LaPorta still so inexperienced. So considering each position in the lineup probably gets at least 650 plate appearances per season, that's at least 150 plate appearances alone at both first base and designated hitter the Indians wanted to fill with another player.

In the outfield, the Indians will send out Michael Brantley, Grady Sizemore, and Shin-Soo Choo as the regulars when the season starts. The true spring battle will be between Trevor Crowe and Austin Kearns for the fourth outfielder role, but where Branyan fits in here would be as a guy who can help cover both left and right field if needed. Sizemore is still coming back from injury, and while he is expected to be 100% and good to go this season, in the case he is sidelined and Brantley has to move to center field Branyan would become a much better stop gap option as an everyday left or right fielder than Crowe or Kearns. Brown would also be an option in left field if any injury were to befall one of Brantley, Sizemore or Choo.

In addition to playing first base, designated hitter, left field and right field, Branyan also provides coverage at a fifth position, that being third base. There is a good chance that Jhonny Peralta could be traded at some point this season as he is in the final year of the guaranteed portion of his contract, though has a club option for 2011. As a result, the position could be in flux all season long. If Peralta is traded, then the Indians would likely put third base prospect Wes Hodges there for the short team as uber-third base prospect Lonnie Chisenhall won't be ready until sometime next season. With Hodges so young and inexperienced, the Indians would need a veteran third baseman to fall back on in case he falters, which is where Branyan would come in.

Some may be asking, what about Andy Marte? Well, Marte appears to no longer be an option at third base as if Branyan is on the team then Marte can't make the 25-man roster unless some other injuries open up a roster spot, and that means he would have to be designated for assignment by the conclusion of spring training. While he would probably go unclaimed, unlike last year he would probably choose to leave the Indians and sign a minor league deal with another organization. It is also very possible that if Branyan is officially added to the roster that Marte is the player that is removed from the 40-man roster to make room for Branyan.

Of course, Branyan's days as a third baseman and outfielder appear all but over with the back issue, but he could be used there if needed in a pinch. It looks like he will primarily play first base and designated hitter in a platoon with LaPorta and Hafner which would allow him to get about 350-500 plate appearances this year in such a role depending on his health and production.

Branyan also provides some much needed experience for a team that from a starting lineup perspective will be very young this season. The Indians will essentially have four rookies in the everyday lineup with Brantley, LaPorta, Luis Valbuena, and Lou Marson, not to mention two other players in Asdrubal Cabrera and Shin-Soo Choo who are still very young themselves with less than three years of experience. With that in mind, it looks like the Indians have gone with the idea to have a veteran bench by signing Mike Redmond as the backup catcher, Mark Grudzielanek as the utility player, Austin Kearns as the fourth outfielder, and now Branyan as the corner outfield and infield bat off the bench. Obviously Grudzielanek and newly acquired Brian Bixler will battle it out for the utility role, and Kearns and Crowe for the fourth outfielder role this spring, but the veteran bench setup is the ideal scenario for them, to which I cannot argue with.

But while I cannot argue with the experience and versatility that Branyan provides, I have to wonder if it is a necessary signing. Time will tell, and aside from Chris Gimenez the Indians

really don't have an internal option that can play four different corner positions in the field like Branyan can, but I may have been more inclined to piece together the role with the internal options already at their disposal. Whether that be someone like Jordan Brown, Andy Marte, Chris Gimenez, Wes Hodges, Shelly Duncan, or whoever, I think the internal options were just as good (or bad depending on how you look at it).

It is great to have versatility and depth, but I don't see any reason why Brown would not be as productive with the bat in such a role. Obviously, the Indians prefer that Brown gets everyday at bats, and that just won't happen with Brantley, Sizemore and Choo in the outfield, so he is all but certain to open the season in the Triple-A Columbus outfield. But, it is a pretty damning statement of what they feel about him as a first baseman because they really had a need there this offseason and could have just inserted him there instead of signing someone like Branyan who isn't all that good of a defender himself there. If Brown were still considered a first baseman then it would have been an ideal way to break him into the big leagues by implanting him onto the team in the same platoon role at first base and designated hitter. Brown will now have to bide his time in Columbus and wait for an opening in the starting outfield if Brantley, Sizemore or Choo are injured or Brantley scuffles. Or, if by chance the Indians have an amazing change of heart and try him out at first base again.

It is also a pretty clear indication that Chris Gimenez's role with the team has slipped considerably, and that his status on the 40-man roster is in serious doubt. He could be the one given the axe if Branyan is signed, and even if he survives that he will be one of the first options to consider removing all season if the Indians need to make a roster spot for a player they want to add.

Bottom line, the Branyan signing is just a marginal signing and nothing to be excited about, but nothing to be overly disgruntled about either. It is par for the course as the Indians front office has scraped the bottom of the barrel for these kinds of low cost marginal reward guys under Shapiro's reign.

It is a signing that has little to do with impacting the win-loss record, but instead providing a useable alternative in the event a young player struggles. The Indians could have used an alternative at second base back in 2003 when Brandon Phillips struggled, and not having one they stuck with him a lot longer than they probably should have that year. By having a player like Branyan on board as well as all the other veterans on the bench, it looks like their way of helping ease their young players into full time play at the big league level and to have a backup plan in the event that player struggles.

I can't argue with that, but I still have to wonder if Branyan is worth it.

Knapp Update

In case you missed the weekly on-line radio show "Smoke Signals" that Paul Cousineau and I do every Thursday from 9:30-10:30 PM ET, this past Thursday we had Indians right-handed pitching prospect Jason Knapp on as our guest . Knapp came on in the second half of the show for about 20-25 minutes and we talked a lot about his rehab from offseason shoulder surgery, the trade, and other things.

One of the more interesting things of note to come out of the discussion is that Knapp expects to not return to game action until around midseason. He checked out fine in a recent visit to his doctor three weeks ago for a routine checkup, and is doing really well in his rehab and on track to return at 100%. But the Indians and doctors are going to be extremely cautious and patient with him considering he is just 19 years old, oozing with talent, and such a vital piece of the Cliff Lee trade from last summer.

Knapp will participate in spring training though will be on a monitored throwing program and will not pitch in any games. When camp breaks and full season leagues start, he will stick around in Goodyear in extended spring training to continue his throwing program and build himself back up to where he can pitch in real games by maybe sometime in June. With him mentioning on the show that he won't be pitching anywhere until the "middle of the summer" if there are no setbacks, it really looks like he won't pitch anywhere until short-season leagues kick up and after the Single-A All-Star breaks in late June. He may pitch a few games at rookie level Arizona before going to High-A Kinston or Low-A Lake County, but in any case it looks like he will be out for anywhere from a third to half the season to ensure the shoulder is sound and 100%.

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