

Ghosts of Prospects Past: Chris Magruder

Written by {ga=aclayman}

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No, he is not the title character of the latest, exceedingly unnecessary Saturday Night Live movie. In fact, if we're talking in SNL terms, he'd be more akin to a Charles Rocket or Finesse Mitchell than a Will Forte. But give credit where credit is due. Chris Magruder once played professional baseball for the Cleveland Indians, and for a fleeting moment eight years ago, we all knew the name: MAGRUDER!

The MacGruber-Magruder Connection

For the most part, Saturday Night Live movies have a reputation for being unwatchable box office disasters, mainly because something that is marginally funny in a five-minute sketch rarely translates to the feature-length format (the jury is still out on whether the Forte vehicle "MacGruber" will buck that trend). To stretch a metaphor to its max, the baseball equivalent of this SNL movie effect is clearly the "rebuilding season." In small doses, a terrible baseball team can provide a pretty fair amount of entertainment—young guys battling for playing time; old guys asleep in the clubhouse during the games; maybe even the occasional upset victory. But sitting through an entire rebuilding season-- 162 three-hour games-- will inevitably leave you frustrated and nauseated; a definitive "thumbs down" experience.

This is why we need heroes like today's Ghost of Prospects Past: Christopher James Magruder. While never a household name—possibly even within his own home—Magruder proved to be a shining example of a brand of ballplayer known (for the purposes of this column, anyway) as the "worker bee"—so named because they give 110% effort for the good of the hive, despite being doomed to a one-year lifespan. For Chris, his year was 2002. Well, to be fair, he actually played in parts of five seasons over the course of his Major League career. But if anyone has fond memories of his three stolen bases for the 2005 Brewers, you'll have to write your own column.

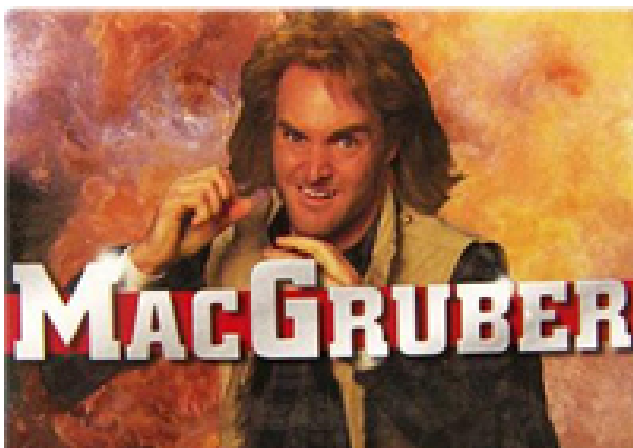
Setting the Stage

For Indians fans, 2002 might seem like a long while ago. Or then again, it might feel like yesterday, because the Tribe was basically in the exact same miserable boat then as they find themselves in now. Manny Ramirez had long since taken the money and run, and despite a playoff appearance in 2001, the wheels had come off in '02, eventually leading to the then hugely unpopular trade of Bartolo Colon to Montreal (for no-names Cliff Lee, Brandon Phillips, and Grady Sizemore) and the far more accepted dismissal of hapless manager Charlie Manuel (2008 World Series Champion) at midseason. With Joel Skinner at the helm for the stretch run, the Tribe limped to a 74-88 finish— not awful, just boring. Of course, there were some bright spots, like watching Jim Thome crush 52 homers (made somewhat less bright by the fact that they'd be his last in an Indians uniform) or seeing the debut of our much-heralded catching prospect Victor Martinez. For the most part, though, the 2002 season was a painful grind— a slow descent from contender status to the dreaded “rebuilding” phase. And when you're a rebuilding team with a rebuilding manager and a rebuilding fanbase, you need to bring in some worker bees to keep the ship afloat.

Admittedly, Chris Magruder once had higher aspirations for himself. In 1998, the former Washington Huskie (and member of 1997 U.S. National Team) was drafted in the second round by the San Francisco Giants. The 5'11", 200-pound outfielder came in pretty well polished and fundamentally sound, but the adjective that stuck with him most was “scrappy”—which is another way of describing a guy who succeeds despite not actually being very good. Across two seasons at Double-A Shreveport in 1999 and 2000, Magruder averaged 5 HR, 50 RBI, 17 SB, and a .270 average. Solid numbers, but hardly enough to get any sirens spinning at the Baseball America offices. In 2001, he was shipped to the Rangers as part of a package for Andres Galarraga, and wound up hitting .362 in 33 games with AAA Oklahoma, followed by a 5-for-29 effort in a cup of coffee with Texas.

Apparently less than impressed, the Rangers eventually shipped Magruder on to the Indians in the first week of the 2002 season, receiving the similar but younger minor league outfielder Rashad Eldridge in return (Eldridge never made it to the Bigs. Score another one for Shaprio!). Magruder didn't know it yet, but destiny was putting his ducks in a row.

Magruder's Big Moment



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Funnily enough, the Indians started out of the gate 11-1 in 2002, looking like world beaters. By May 22, however, they were 20-25 and the party was over. Ellis Burks and Travis Fryman were starting to look their age. Ricky Gutierrez and Matt Lawton were looking like duds. And Russell Branyan was—hey look, Russell Branyan! Wow, the more things change...

Anyway, the call was made to Buffalo, and 25 year-old Chris Magruder took the next bus to Detroit to suit up for his long awaited (within the Magruder family) Tribe debut. Uncle Charlie penciled him right into the starting line-up, too, hitting ninth and playing centerfield. On the hill for the Tigers: the lanky right-hander, Jeff Weaver. Of course you know what happened next. ...Oh wait, you don't remember? You don't recall a random Wednesday night game in the middle of May in the middle of a shitty season eight years ago? Well, Chris Magruder certainly remembers.

As tends to happen with a rebuilding Tribe team, hits were hard to come by on this day. In fact, they were downright impossible to come by. Weaver had the Indians bats tied in knots all night. Even Russ Branyan struck out three times!!! On the other end, Chuck Finley matched Weaver the best he could, but by the eighth inning, it was 2-0 Tigers, and Jeff Weaver had himself a no-hitter going. With the crowd now hanging on his every pitch, Weaver whiffed Branyan to start the eighth, then got Einar Diaz to pop out to third. He was four outs away from history, and some kid named Magruder was standing in his way. MAGRUDER!

It happened in a flash—BAM! First pitch! Chris Magruder lines Weaver's delivery off the wall in right field for a standup double, rescuing the Tribe from what would have been a particularly low lowpoint in a sea of lowpoints. Weaver slammed his glove down in disgust. "Foiled by Magruder!" he shouted, maybe. Flustered, Weaver then hit Omar Vizquel with a pitch. Suddenly, the Tribe had the go-ahead run at the plate! ...Then Ricky Gutierrez struck out and Weaver got a 1-2-3 ninth inning for the shutout victory. But that's not really important. After all, this is Chris Magruder's story!

And sadly, we've just about come to the end of that story. There were other highlights, to be sure. In fact, between the dates of May 30 and June 4, 2002, Chris Magruder legitimately had some people (who shall remain nameless) wondering if he might just be a part of the Indians long term future. Over that 5-game stretch, Magruder went 7 for 16 from the plate with 2 HR and 6 RBIs, raising his season average to .294. From there, he stayed in the starting line-up for a shockingly large portion of the season, bouncing around all three outfield spots. His production, however, proved spotty. A 6-hit, 3-homer weekend series against Kansas City in July fanned the flames of the Magruder legend, but the effort had only raised his average to .235, and when the season went in the books, Mighty Chris had dipped to a paltry .217, with 6 HRs and 29 RBIs. It would prove to be his best season.

The End of Magruder?

In 2003, Cleveland re-signed Chris to a free agent deal, but injuries derailed his progress. He eventually wound up back in Buffalo, hitting .328 in 41 games for the Bisons. But with guys like Jody Gerut and Alex Escobar now emerging (or pretending to) in Cleveland, Magruder knew his window was nearly closed. Before shaking Slider's paw and saying goodbye, however, he had

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one last moment of magic up his sleeve.

On September 11, 2003, Magruder finally made his first appearance of the season with the Indians, having gotten the call-up when rosters expanded. Once again eliciting responses of “who is this guy?,” Chris made his presence felt in classic Magruder fashion, going 4 for 5 with 2 RBIs in a 6-5 Cleveland win over Kansas City. All told, he hit .346 in his final stint in Cleveland, covering just 9 games.

In 2004, Magruder would transfer his services to the National League, hitting .236 in limited duty with Milwaukee. He appeared in 100 more games as a reserve player in 2005, hitting .203 with 2 HRs, 13 RBIs, and yes, 3 steals. After that, Chris Magruder’s career stats end abruptly. At 28 years of age, our heroic worker bee had served his purpose, and he stepped aside to let the Trevor Crowes of the world carry on his cause. From there, it was on to new challenges and new adventures in parts unknown. Who knows, he might even be defusing bombs with rubber bands and bubble gum, or better yet, auditioning to be part of SNL’s rebuilding phase. **MAGRUDER!**