Things are a lot different these days in baseball when it comes to the International market for players. No longer is Latin America a hot bed of reasonably priced talent, instead it has turned into an over-inflated market boiling over with shadiness.

With that in mind, several teams are starting to shift their approach with how they handle Latin America and the International market in general. Teams are starting to tap into new markets in other areas of the world, and some teams have implemented a quality over quantity approach with the way money is spent and the players they ultimately sign. The Cleveland Indians are one of those teams that have shifted their focus on the International front. Not change per se, but more an adaptation to a market that has spun out of control and a more concerted concentration on allocating resources efficiently.

One of the more notable things the Indians do differently is how they approach the International Signing Period. Not necessarily because they have changed anything, but just in how they look at the importance of it. For those unaware, the International Signing Period runs from July 2nd to August 31st and is the official kickoff to the Latin American signing season. Players who have turned 16-years old or will be 17 years old September 1st of the next year are eligible to be signed. In recent years this period has really become a time of over-inflated contract demands for very high risk, young players, a market created by agents and buscones (a type of advisor/coach/agent).

I recently had a chance to sit down and talk at length about the International Signing Period and lots of other things on the International front with Indians Assistant General Manager and Scouting Director John Mirabelli. In order to provide the full context of our discussion, I have provided the full raw quotes below in a standard question and answer format.

What has the organization changed in regard to how you operate on the International front?

John Mirabelli (JM): Change is not really the operative word. I think it is just more how we as a mid-market team have to operate with limited resources in a market where there are astronomical, hyper-aggressive rates of signing bonuses. We have to find value. Just like with a lot of the things we do, we have to find talent and place the right value on that talent. Are you going to see the Cleveland Indians signing some 16-year old right-handed Dominican pitcher and give him $4 million? That's not going to happen. That's not how we feel would be the most effective use of our resources. We sign some 17-year olds and some 18-year olds. I think that is the key. Signing players with talent that you think have some upside. I think if we have changed in any aspect, it is you have to look at Latin America as being risky. There are going to be some misses there, so you have to shoot for some upside. You are talking about 16-17-18 year old kids that don't play organized baseball. Yeah, they have some ability, and some athleticism, but it is a risk and we know that going in. There is going to be some attrition, and that is fine. But I think you have to shoot for some upside, and have high value in these players. So if we have made any adjustment I would say it is that. Not chasing down the over-inflated kid who you are trying to evaluate at 15 and a half years old, and instead spend our time wisely really just trying to out scout people in all the countries that they are playing baseball in down there.

So rather than focus on one or two high profile Latin players, the idea the idea is to spread the money around and maybe find a few high upside players who slip through the cracks?

JM: Yes, they could slip through the cracks. Hanley Ramirez was [a five figure bonus guy] and there are more of those guys than the big dollar guys. These [high profile] guys are not perfect yet. It doesn't mean that they won't, but there are not many of them now. There is value out there, but this has become a very inflated market with super-aggressive teams. It is a market that we do not think is productive and it hasn’t proven to be yet. You have to go out and out scout some people. There is some strength in numbers as you are going to have some

casualties. You are not just going to get on one guy down there as that is just too risky a proposition.

Whether a player is a high profile signing or not, players coming into the system are very raw and their true worth won't be unveiled until they start playing in the organization. So player development plays a big part in the process, albeit after the fact?

JM: I think you have to develop guys, as that is the other part of the equation. We need to get the kids to the states as soon as we can. We had one of the youngest teams in the Arizona League this year, and certainly one of the youngest we have ever had. The idea is the sooner we can get these kids over here and get around quality coaching and competition, better nutrition, and better strength and conditioning, all of those things are going to expedite the development of the Latin player. That goes hand in hand with what we are doing scouting-wise and a little bit of a shift with how we approached it in the past. There are still some raw, crude kids who are not ready who need to spend a year in the Dominican Summer League to see where they are, but we are hoping to push some guys [next year] like we did this year where they came over here and held their own and really developed. It is not about performance, it is about developing and I think we had a pretty good year with that.

The Indians in recent years seem to be less involved in all the hoopla surrounding the International Signing Period. In reviewing the media guide for this season, you signed players all throughout last year. What relevance does the International Signing Period have to the Cleveland Indians?

JM: July 2nd is just kind of a random date. That is the first day that [agents] can line up and start hyping the guys and the younger the player and the better he is the more money he should get. It is just a random date that doesn't mean anything to us. It is not a draft thing where on July 3rd we are going to release all of our signings. All of these guys are signed throughout the year. All those guys like Felix Sterling, Juan Romero, Robel Garcia, Leonardo Castillo and Charlie Valerio signed [earlier] this year. We conduct tryouts two days a week now, and if they are willing to sign we might sign them tomorrow.

What is the purpose of International Signing Period? Why so much focus on these two months when teams can sign players the other ten months of the year as well?

JM: Yes, once they turn 16 you can sign guys any time of the year. Years ago it was determined that when you sign guys who are 16 that they signed July 2nd. The mentality has remained because of the evolution of these buscones and the agents that the younger these players are the more money they are worth. Why do you think they are lying about their age? And I don't necessarily think that is true because at 17 years old it doesn't make a whole lot of difference to me. We are signing guys over here domestically at 18-19 years old out of high school. Plus you are trying to evaluate these guys when they are 15 and a half years old. I am not that good to look at a guy at 15 and a half years old throwing 84 MPH and say I am going to give him $2 million and hopefully within five years he is going to be throwing harder. The risk-reward just doesn't line up in a lot of these cases. Don't get me wrong as we have signed a few 16-year olds ourselves, but we are not going to be in that kind of market.

Would a world-wide draft help?

JM: I think there will have to be some kind of control put on the spending limits, and certainly even before you get to the money just identifying players with their age and identity. That's the number one thing. I don't know if a world-wide draft would work per se, but some way where these guys have to be officially registered and declare themselves eligible to be signed. We have to clear that up. [As for a world-wide draft], you have varying issues in different countries where you can have 16 year olds eligible in one country and 17 year olds in another, and what would you do about Japan or Korea as they would be out and they wouldn’t want to be part of the agreement. So, it could be very complicated and convoluted internationally to implement a draft. I think we have our hands full just getting the amateur draft situated.

Do the signings really cool down at this time of the year, or do things remain steady?

JM: It has tapered off by now because most teams have reached the end of their budget. The budget period for most teams probably ends October 31st, so you are either out of money or are running toward the end of it. There will still be some signings and we will be active, but things taper down at this point. Not that the players don't want to sign, I just think it is just a matter that teams don't have the resources right now to sign guys. There are still some high profile guys out there who have not signed, but that is the game these guys can play as they are under no deadline or timeframe to sign. They can wait…and wait…and wait, and then try again next year. That July 2nd date is kind of an artificial date that just kind of works into the hands of the agent as they can pump their guys up and [build] everything around July 2nd.

As you said, the organization was really aggressive this year with pushing a lot of the young Latin players stateside this year to participate in extended spring training and the Arizona Summer League. The numbers were obviously not very impressive, but how did these players do from a developmental aspect?

JM: It was their first exposure [to organized baseball]. I think Sterling was a guy who really opened some eyes. To be 17 years old and go out there and establish himself pretty firmly in the rotation, he was probably the most impressive in terms with how he performed and the things that he did. A lot of the other guys held their own. Romero has ridiculous power, and he has upside. We are happy that they got their feet wet and got better. That is the bottom line as they got better from the time they got there to the end of the program, and they are all sticking around for Instructional League. I am happy with the progress some of these kids made. I mean a guy like Ramon Cespedes who got all the way to Lake County, I think we took some good steps. I thought Alex Monsalve was going to perform better both offensively and defensively than he did. We still think he has significant upside, but he has some work to do. Jorge Martinez did a great job defensively, so now we have to get him on track offensively. Overall, I think if you look at this group along with Erik Gonzalez, Luigi Rodriguez, and Charlie Valerio, and some of these guys that are coming over [next year], you can see the upside. Does that mean it is all going to happen? Obviously not. But I think that we are seeing that we have some upside players, and that is what we need from Latin America. We don't need just marginal, extra players; we need to shoot for upside. We know there is risk and we are going to miss a lot as guys are going to under-perform and not reach the upside that we think. We know going into it that we are not going to bat 1.000 down there. But we have to challenge our scouts to sign the kind of players that have some upside and ceiling.

You mentioned some of the DSL guys like Luigi Rodriguez, Erik Gonzalez, Leonardo Castillo and Charlie Valerio. To all of us these are just names on a piece of paper at this point until they start playing stateside and people can see them for themselves. What are some things you like about these players?

JM: Rodriguez was probably our best player down there [this year]. He was signed originally as a second baseman, but he had some troubles defensively. About ten games into the season we moved him to center field and he really flourished. He started swinging the bat, he is a natural instinctive outfielder, is an 80 runner, and he was really impressive. He really took to center field naturally, and I am very excited about him, and he has a chance to be in the Arizona League next year. Gonzalez is an offensive player. He hit .346 and is an All Star. He has some power and he has some life in his bat. We just need to find a position for him. Not that he is a non-athlete corner kind of one dimensional player; it’s just that he has grown a lot. We want him to be a second baseman, but he might end up at third or he might even end up in right field. He is a good athlete, just with his size he has outgrown a few positions on the field so we

need to find out where he is going to play. But he has some significant offensive upside. Valerio is a very good offensive catcher-first baseman. We need to make him a catcher. He has some bat and we know worst case he can play first base or left field, but he is coming over here to see if we can make him a catcher. Castillo is a young third baseman. We signed him and Juan Romero at the same time, and we had to bring one to Arizona and keep one in the DSL. You could have made a case for either guy. He is probably a better hitter and a little better defender than Romero right now, but he doesn't have Romero's power.

Speaking of the Dominican Summer League, the Indians used to have a team in the Venezuelan Summer League but pulled out of there a few years ago. What is our presence in Venezuela these days?

JM: No, we don't [have an academy in Venezuela anymore]. The league has kind of dissolved as I think there are only like four or five teams left playing there. It just became an issue in that it is not the safest place in the world for our players, coordinators and staff. It also became very costly as the country imposed a lot of taxes to do business there. It just made sense really to just bring all our players to one place [in the Dominican Republic] and develop them there. You can coordinate your instruction better, you can evaluate your players better, and you can make sure everybody is on the same page with what we are teaching and how we are teaching it. It just made a lot more sense, and most of the teams have done that. We just have a scouting operation [in Venezuela] now, nothing more than that.

We have recently been more active in recent years in Japan and Taiwan with the likes of C.C. Lee, Chun Chen, Taka Nakamura, and now Chia-Ching Lin who we signed in June, and even went into Europe last year and signed catcher Martin Cervenka from the Czech Republic. With Latin America starting to price teams out of the market, are there any alternative markets that may be emerging?

JM: I am not as sold on Europe. I know we signed Cervenka from the Czech Republic and he is an interesting kid, but I am not sure the popularity of the sport there is enough to attract the best athletes into baseball, so I am not sure I am sold on that. I think maybe a place where we have a decent presence and we actually have a good thing is Taiwan. I don't think it is an emerging market, but I think it is probably the next country on the horizon that can maybe start producing at a regular rate. Australia obviously has diminished as that didn't live up to everybody's hopes 20-30 years ago to where we are now, but Taiwan may present a different story. [Another] area where we are seeing a little more activity is in Columbia. I know some good players have come out of there in the past, but that is one area where we are spending more time than we ever have.

Last year you made some changes in your organizational structure on the International front by appointing Ramon Pena as the new Director of Latin Operations and made several other changes to the scouting and development staff. Now almost a year into the changes, how have things gone?

JM: We got a late start as we did not get things in place until late in November, but I think from where we were ten months ago to where we are now, we are very pleased with the direction we are heading. There are still some more changes we are going to be doing that I am not going to go into right now because they are not done, but I think in the next couple of months we will be ready to announce some more changes in structure to the Pacific Rim and other parts of Latin America. It is just an effort to adjust to the market and adjust to individual situations and how we can be better. With the resources that we have and what we have to work with and how we are going to approach it, it is a game of adjustments for us. We have to position ourselves to take advantage of everything that we can and scout the way that we feel that we can find the best players for the Indians.

You have spent most of the year in a transitional phase from your old academy in the Dominican Republic to the new one that is set to open next month. How does a better facility help with recruiting players or developing the ones you already have?

JM: In the spring we moved to a newer transitional place until the brand new one is ready October 15th. The new complex is a stand alone facility just for one team. It is completely private and we can control who is coming in and out. I think it helps in that it is a better environment to develop players. You have more resources, better food, better strength and conditioning, and better living conditions. I think that all helps in the development of a player, but it doesn't help in attracting players at all. This is a bottom line business where they are going for the last dollar. Now, all things being equal and you are offering someone $75K and another team is offering $75K, and you live in a decrepit unsanitary complex like we used to be, yeah that can shoot the decision. But bottom line it comes down to dollars.

The organization implemented some new private testing procedures this spring to help crack down on the false identities and those using any performance enhancing drugs. How has this new testing procedure gone?

JM: I think it has helped us. We implemented some testing initiatives on our own back in April. Major League Baseball also is putting in some stricter rules and regulations as far as registering players and identifying players. All of these things help, but there are still rampant issues down there.

In the end, it appears the focus has really been stateside with the amateur draft. You have been quoted several times recently saying that you believe the amateur draft is the best market where we can compete for players. Even still, in the amateur draft you are going to have to spend money to compete and that is something we did this year. Is the amateur draft our best chance to acquire talent?

JM: I think that is how the market has shifted. There are teams that have figured out how to be very successful using the resources of the draft. I didn't create this market, and you can talk about how to slot or overpay or be aggressive. This is what it is right now and you as an organization can either choose to participate or you don't, but somebody else is going to do it. You are either in or you are out. I think for us, we chose that we have to be in. The Cleveland Indians did not establish this market and where things have gone, and we have to decide whether we are a player or not, and obviously we need to be.

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