This was supposed to be pretty straightforward.

The original idea was pretty simple: identify a team with a long-term solution at third base and see if they have someone "buried" in the minors (or on the bench) who could be targeted as a worthwhile acquisition. For example, Tampa Bay is pretty set at third base for a while with Evan Longoria. We are not going to trade for Evan Longoria. Tampa is not going to replace Evan Longoria with a minor-leaguer any time soon. Of course, they have to have SOMEONE in case Longoria is seriously injured, but predictably, the "someones" Tampa has are not players I want the Indians to pursue.

In walking through the teams in the A.L. East, though, I hit any number of potholes, not the least of which is that MILB.com is a horrific site to navigate. The rosters don't come up fully. It's hard to work organizationally. Maybe I'm overlooking some simple navigational tools, but I found dealing with the site to be extremely frustrating.

Nevertheless, here's what a few hours of high-level digging found:

BALTIMORE:

Baltimore's "third baseman of the future" is actually "the third baseman of right now," in that **Jos h Bell**
has been given a major-league shot in 2010. It would be a huge upset if he didn't start the year as the starter next season, so I expect he'd be off-limits. The AAA guys were ... well, mostly

Bell, with a smattering of Guys I Don't Want. The best option was listed as an "organizational All-Star" in an MILB.com article,
Brandon Waring
, who played at AA Bowie this season. Waring is described as a good defensive third baseman with power, but he hit .242/.338/.458 in some 530 PA or so. The plate discipline is encouraging, as are the 22 homers. On the other hand, he hit .242 and stuck out 179 (!) times in 129 games. For comparison, Lonnie Chisenhall hit .278/.351/.450 with 17 homers and 77 Ks in 117 games (about 500 PA) in the same league. Unless Chisenhall wields some serious Meat Cleaver Action at third, Waring would have to be something close to Brooks Robinson to make him worth considering over Chisenhall.

BOSTON:

Boston's "depth chart" lists Jed Lowrie as the starting third baseman for the Red Sox. Lowrie is also listed as the starting *second* baseman for the BoSox. I am willing to grant that Lowrie is fast and has a good first step, but it's not THAT good.

Obviously, the depth chart is built exclusively from players on the roster, not players who were on the roster or who are likely to be on the roster, so Victor Martinez and Adrian Beltre aren't considered. Martinez is important because if he signs, Kevin Youkilis will likely play a lot of 3B, and if Beltre signs, of course, he will be a premium 3B for Boston. Either way, it's probably not Jed Lowrie.

But it also suggests that they don't feel like any of their minor-league choices would give them a chance to compete in the A.L. East. At AAA, the Sox boasted **Jack Hannahan**, who couldn't hit well enough to play for OAKLAND, and Jorge Jimenez, who appears to be a fungus. At AA,
Ray Chang
hit a robust .298/.384/.436 with only 6 errors in 116 games: that's pretty powerless for a 3B, but the defense seems nice in the absence of more data.
(I can't tell you if he has good range and arm or if he's the Derek Jeter of AA third basemen. He is reported to be a good defensive 3B.)
Offhand, I'd rather have Ray Chang than Kevin Kouzmanoff because he'd likely be significantly cheaper, modulo what it took to acquire him (probably an arm: they just claimed Taylor Buchholz off waivers, so it probably doesn't even have to be an arm as talented as, say, Scott Barnes, but use him as a placeholder).

NEW YORK:

Another prime target in that Alex Rodriguez will probably be playing 3B for quite a while still. I assume he'll be a DH at some point because he's unlikely to unseat Mark Teixeira at 1B, but until at least 2013 (as far as I can tell), Rodriguez is the third baseman.

There are a number of targets: two of the lesser-known figures are converted second-basemen much in the Cord Phelps or Jason Donald mold. These are **David Adams**, the ill-fated injured player who allegedly re-routed Cliff Lee from New York to Texas, and
Corban Joseph

. I asked the guys at
It's About The Money, Stupid
to give me their impressions, and Tamar Chalker answered:

David Adams - from what I've read - is seen as more of a second base prospect, though he played a few games at third in 2009. He has a strong arm, so a move to third could be possible, but out of all these guys he looks like the least likely. I am guessing Corban Joseph was the other player you were thinking of. He is a good offensive prospect who has played some third, and according to some scouts he looks better there. He has struggled at second in going to his right, so perhaps third isn't a bad idea for him. Either way, his value is more offensive then defensive at this point.

So Adams really is essentially Phelps or even Kipnis, while Joseph ... well, I have no good comparison to Joseph, I guess. It should be noted that Joseph is considered more-highly by the guys at IATMS, but he made his AA debut in August of THIS year, so ... shoot, I'd rather just wait for Chisenhall.

The real targets are two guys a lot closer: **Eduardo Nunez** actually got some time in the majors this season, and although he's more of a shortstop option if St. Derek moves off the 6 (and if Ramiro Pena is not seen as ahead of him), he apparently is a fine defensive 3B who can hit like a good shortstop. Nunez wouldn't be a bad hedge bet against the re-pumpkinization of Asdrubal Cabrera, in fact. Still, I get the impression that the Yankees would rather simply hold on to Nunez unless they were to get a major player for him.

Which brings us to **Brandon Laird**. Laird has been playing 1B and OF in the AFL, but then, Cord Phelps is playing 3B. It may certainly be that the Yankees do not see Laird (whose defense has reportedly been bad in the lower levels) as a viable third baseman. It could also be that they are looking for flexibility, either for themselves ('cause A-Rod ain't goin' anywhere) or for other teams (Look! Our guy can play multiple positions! Surely he's worth more now!). But Laird is a 22-year-old (turned 23 in Sept.) who made it to AAA (where, it should be noted, he was terribibble) and hit .291/.355/.523 with 23 homers in 107 games at AA Trenton. In addition, he was named an "AFL Rising Star," which means ... okay, I'll be straight with you, I have no flaming idea what that means. Laird did make 20 errors in those 107 games in Trenton. He may not actually be able to play third base well. I don't know one way or t'other. I should note that in an amusing coincidence, Laird was drafted by the Indians in 2005 but didn't sign. He subsequently got drafted by the Yankees in 2007 and has been in their system ever since.

Laird is much in the same boat as an asset as Nunez: Laird has legitimate power and had a breakout year in 2010. If the Yankees don't get their Cliff Lees and such with their checkbook this winter, then Laird is one of their best assets for acquiring whatever it is they need. In other words, the most likely disposition of Laird would be as part of a package for Super Awesome Johnson, whether that be tomorrow's Cliff Lee or Adrian Gonzalez or Hanley Ramirez. Not that

they're trading for one of those guys, just saying that's the KIND of guy they'd want Laird to be a chip for. So for the Indians to trade for Laird, they'd likely have to cough up either one excellent major-leaguer or a couple of very fine prospects. We're talking Shin-Soo Choo or Nick Hagadone + Nick Weglarz here. Either deal is too much for Laird, but I doubt the Yankees are in much of a hurry to deal him, and you'd have to overcome their innate desire to use Laird in the future as part of a Star-getting package. I would absolutely rather see Laird (or Nunez) at 3B in 2011 than Jayson Nix, but I would probably not be willing to give up what it would take to get either one. Chris Antonelli could surprise me here, and I'd certainly CALL ... but I don't consider this all that LIKELY.

TAMPA BAY:

Their AAA third basemen were **Dan Johnson**, who is a first baseman, and **Hank Blalock**, who is dead. Their AA 3B are less ready than Chisenhall. There is no "there" there. (You could POSSIBLY make a play for
Sean Rodriguez
or
Reid Brignac
, but they might be needing those players to either play or trade for a first baseman after losing Carl Crawford and Carlos Pena to free agency. I don't see a fit here.)

TORONTO:

Shawn Bowman was a 25-year-old in AA hitting .263/.330/.484 with 22 homers. **Brad Emaus** hit .298/.395/.495 in AAA Las Vegas, but ... it's the PCL and Las Vegas. He also made 20 errors in 87 games.
Jarrett Hoffpauir
is not really a third baseman (he is Eckstein-sized). The depth chart without Jose Bautista is
Mike McCoy
(.195/.267/.244 in TOR) and
John McDonald
(fu/ng/us). Actually, I guess a year of John McDonald's glove at third could have it's uses, but the man is 36 and is probably no longer the glove man we remember him being. (He is probably every bit the Utter Absence of Bat we remember him being.) I think Toronto's priority would be to re-sign Bautista, with Emaus waiting in the wings. Would Emaus be worth a shot if they sign Bautista? I dunno ... I'm really wary of PCL numbers in higher altitudes, and the glove does not strike me as a real order-of-magnitude upgrade over Nix (maybe even
Phelps
).

Summing up, then:

Probably better potential offense: ***Brandon Laird***
Likely better defense with at least comparable offense: ***Eduardo Nunez, Ray Chang***
Probably pretty similar to what we've already got: ***Brandon Waring, Brad Emaus***

I'd call the Yankees, get discouraged, then call the Red Sox. I find it hard to believe you couldn't get Chang for a couple of organizational arms.