With Clifton Phifer Lee deciding upon a return to his “old team” (or at least one of his four old teams), it would seem that the majority of those Indians that have departed stage left from the organization (that would be via trade) have found new homes for themselves. Thus, while the young players that emerged in the early-to-mid-2000s for the Tribe move on to cash larger paychecks and to enjoy the spotlights of the bright lights and the big cities, the Indians continue to sort through where exactly they stand in this new incarnation of “Rebuild/Reload/Whatever”.

Now that the music has stopped, everyone seems to have a seat…that is, except for Tribe fans.

With that in mind, it’s time to explore the topic of whether the Indians acted prudently in the past 2 ½ years, trading off their major parts for prospects and whether the “collateral damage” done by those actions – though they may have been the best idea in the long-term – is going to haunt this team in the short-term.

For some help and some compelling “conversation”, let’s welcome Jon Steiner of WFNY back in and let “Jon & Paul Talk Baseball” once more…

JON: If there’s anything we’ve learned over the last decade as Indians’ fans, it’s that the front office believes that trading its (most valuable) assets is the most productive method of adding

talent to the organization. They seem to feel that, when the team isn't contending, the best course of action is to use the existing talent to reload the system at all levels. Let's run down a few of our infamous and not so infamous trades, shall we?

- CC Sabathia became: Matt LaPorta, Michael Brantley, Rob Bryson, and Zach Jackson
- Cliff Lee and Ben Francisco became: Jason Donald, Lou Marson, Jason Knapp, and Carlos Carrasco
- Victor Martinez became: Justin Masterson, Nick Hagadone, and Bryan Price.

And there's more: Rafael Betancourt and Ryan Garko and Franklin Gutierrez and Kelly Shoppach and Austin Kearns and Kerry Wood and on and on all became new, young faces in this organization.

It's almost enough to give a fan tunnel vision. If it's clear that we wouldn't be able to (or shouldn't) re-sign these players, then we might conclude that trading players who are about to become expensive is the best course of action for a team on a budget.

But we forget: there's another option. What if we kept these players for the full life of their contracts, and then let them walk in free agency? There's a system in place in the MLB the compensates teams who lose productive free agents with draft picks. Yes, the system for determining a "productive free agent" is a bit fishy (I'm looking at you, Elias), but consider this:

- Over the last five years, the Boston Red Sox (you remember them, right? Those small market darlings) have been so ravaged by free agents leaving for greener pastures that they've been able to corral 17 picks in the first and supplemental rounds of the draft! This season, once Adrian Beltre signs elsewhere, they'll get five picks (two for Victor leaving, two for Beltre, and one for Bill Hall)! Some of these picks became Nick Hagadone, Clay Bucholz, Bryan Price, and Daniel Bard.
- Since 2001, those scrappy New York Yankees have had 17 of these sorts of picks . Let me repeat: they've had seven extra first round picks in the last decade because they've been decimated by free agent departures.

So my question is whether the Indians would have been wise--and yes, I'm in full-hindsight-mode here--to have held onto their big pieces and allowed them to leave via free

agency? Not only would the front office not be dealing with a full-blown PR disaster created by the trades, but they could've used the compensatory draft picks to restock their system rather than targeting those glorious MLB-ready additions like Lou Marson and Jason Donald.

I'm not sure there's a right answer to this, but I feel like the question at least has to be asked. What say you?

PAUL: As to the manner in which these prospects make their way to the Indians as prospective FA are dealt or as draft picks are awarded for FA that leave, I suppose that I would say that the strategy to trade the veterans for MiLB prospects instead of stockpiling draft picks has more to do with can be learned about young players from the time that they are drafted to the time that they make the Big Leagues. Certainly, both unproven prospects and unproven draft picks are just that – unproven – and there's going to be a high percentage of them that flame out before reaching MLB and in both scenarios, you're getting unproven talent with the hopes that potential will reach a level of production commensurate with either a draft position or as a return for a particular player.

The choice that the Indians made (trading for MiLB players instead of getting the compensatory picks) essentially boils down to the track record that would exist in MiLB for the prospects they trade for instead of the prospects that they would draft. By that I mean that the players acquired via trade over the last 2 ½ years all had a "track record" in MiLB to the point that they were more of a "known quantity" (term cannot be used more loosely) than a player that was drafted and whose only "track record" consisted of competition in high school or college.

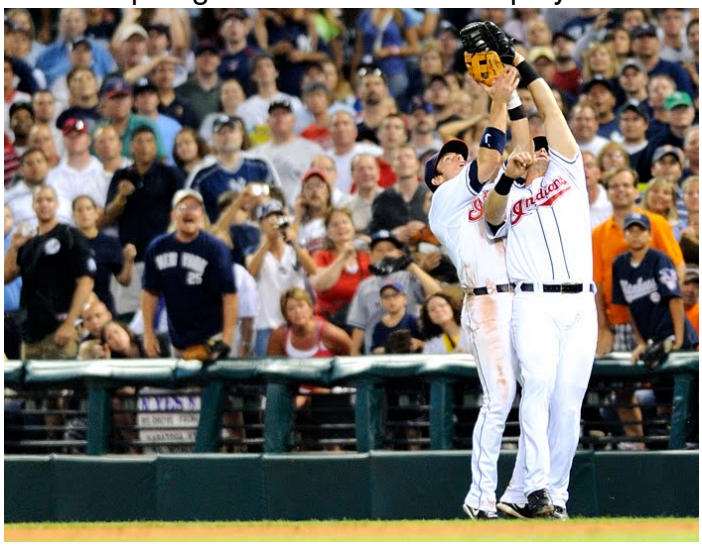
Essentially, the guys that they traded for are further along in their development than the guys that would have been taken in the 2009 draft (CC was a Type A and Blake and Byrd were Type B FA), in last year's draft (Betancourt was a Type A and DeRosa and Pavano were Type B FA), or that would be taken in the upcoming the 2011 draft (CP and Vic are Type A, Peralta and Wood are Type B FA), meaning that the Indians had a body of work for the prospects they acquired that was more than just college stats or high school stats.

Just to use the principal acquisitions from the three deals, guys like LaPorta (496 MiLB PA when he was traded by the Brewers), Masterson (233 MiLB innings and 160 1/3 more innings in MLB with Boston) and Carrasco (696 1/3 MiLB innings in the Phillies organization before his 23rd birthday) all had a track record of success in the Minors and, in most cases, had excelled at the upper levels of the Minors or in MLB at a young age. If the Indians were to simply restock the cupboards with draft picks, they wouldn't have those comparative MiLB (or even MLB) numbers upon which to base their decision.

Additionally, if you think back to when the CC deal was made, the Indians success in drafting versus acquiring young talent via trade didn't put much doubt as to where the strength of player acquisition had been for the last decade. Comparing Sowers, Huff, Crowe, and Mills to Choo, Cabrera, and the Colon haul left little doubt as to where the Indians' Front Office had been successful…and where they had not.

Certainly some of that poor drafting (and a likely hesitance to rely on the draft) is self-inflicted and more of an indictment of the Front Office than most care to acknowledge, but what I find interesting about the return for a number of the players that were dealt is their high draft position when they were drafted by their original teams. When examining the players that have been added via trade over the last two years, it's almost like the Indians were trying to make amends, or make up for, some terrible in-house drafting by picking up some high draft picks who had succeeded at some level of MiLB.

By that I mean that, just using CC, CP, and Vic, realize that Price, Hagadone, and LaPorta were all 1st Round Picks and Masterson and Knapp were 2nd Round Picks from 2006 to 2008, whereas the supplemental picks received from that trio would come in the 2009 draft and the upcoming 2011 draft. If you go further as to the players added in the past 2 ½ years, consider the draft pedigree of some of these players:



2006
Chris Perez - 1st Round (#42 overall)
Justin Masterson - 2nd Round
Jason Donald - 3rd Round

2007
Matt LaPorta - 1st Round (#7 overall)
Nick Hagadone - 1st Round (#55 overall)
Jess Todd - 2nd Round

2008
Bryan Price - 1st Round (#45 overall)
Jason Knapp - 2nd Round

All were top picks, but they were selected earlier than the Indians could have drafted had they waited for draft compensation from CC or as they would still be waiting for Lee and Vic draft compensation. This chart also doesn't take into account players like Carrasco or Santana, who were amateur FA.

As much as we get excited about Alex White and Jason Kipnis (2009 draft picks) and how they've been fast-tracked, remember the names Kentrail Davis and Maxwell Walla and their relevancy to this discussion.
Who in the world are Kentrail Davis and Maxwell Walla?

Why, the two players selected by the Brewers with their compensatory picks for losing CC in the 2009 draft. Kentrail Davis (#39 overall) is a 22-year-old OF who just posted a cumulative .866 OPS in low-A and high-A ball in 2010 and Maxwell Walla (2nd Round compensatory pick) is a 19-year-old OF who spent the 2010 season in the Arizona Rookie League, posting a .699 OPS. As disappointing as Matt MaTola has been and as choppy as Mike Brantley's transition to MLB has been, there's the alternative and what the Brewers have to show for finishing the 2008 season with the Hefty Lefty.
What the Red Sox and Rangers end up with for Vic and Cliff remains to be seen, but those compensatory picks aren't coming until this June and with the crevasse in the Indians' organization (self-created, I might add), there was a need to infuse the farm system with upper level talent that the team wouldn't have to wait 4 to 5 years to develop. It's a luxury that teams like the Red Sox and the Yankees can afford, which is why the draft compensation makes sense for them as their parent clubs are constantly loaded. In the case of the late-2000 Indians, the sense of urgency is greater.

JON: I think you've probably convinced me that, at least from an organizational perspective, the trades netted us a more immediate (and likely more productive) haul than the compensatory draft picks would have. And I say this after having watched the fairly pathetic 2010 performances of Matt LaPorta and Lou Marson. As I said, nicely done.

I should also admit that my question was, at best, disingenuous. You're right to point out that draft picks are the only thing that's less of a sure thing than MiLB prospects. I was more interested in pointing out the idiocy of a system that feels the need to compensate teams like Boston and New York for "losing" free agents.

But there was a second part to my question that we haven't yet addressed, dealing with a subject I've spent a good deal of time writing about recently. Namely, what did those trades--especially the trades of Sabathia, Martinez, and Lee--do to the team from a PR perspective? And why should this even matter?

As analysts primarily of wins and losses, some would argue that we shouldn't concern

ourselves too much with these sorts of issues, and I think that warning makes some sense. If you get too carried away with what Joe Schmoe thinks, you might miss what the team is actually trying to accomplish. On the other hand when you see a team that boasts the lowest attendance in MLB, I think it's fair to at least wonder about the effects some of these decisions had on the fanbase at large--something certain politicians call "collateral damage."

After all, a team's competitiveness is tied directly to its revenue stream, which is tied in large part to a club's ability to market its product to a fanbase. I would argue that the three trades mentioned above damaged the team, perhaps irrevocably, from a PR standpoint. Rightly or wrongly, those trades sent a message to the majority of fans that the Indians not only weren't willing to invest in the team, but that they couldn't even pay their bills. (Let me be clear that I don't believe this. But let me also be clear: what I believe is irrelevant.) This crisis of confidence--initiated by the Sabathia trade--sent ticket sales and revenue streams down the toilet, which, in turn, has hamstrung the club's ability to spend moving forward.

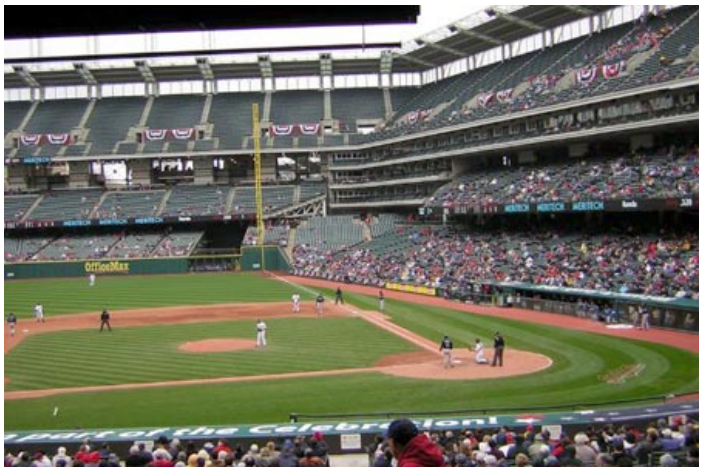
I'm probably a bit eager to connect some of the dots here that don't necessarily correlate and I might be over-emphasizing the deleterious after-shocks of the trades of the 2008 and 2009. But I wonder: would any of this antipathy toward the Indians be dulled or diminished had we allowed the players to leave of their own volition? Or would the pitchfork crowd just complain, in a grass-is-always-greener way, that we should have traded them when we still could? I honestly don't know. But I hope the club has a plan to get these people buying tickets again, and I'm not sure that dollar dogs is the answer.

Maybe it's just this simple: not many fans like a loser--and the consequences of the Hafner contract ensured that we'd be losers for awhile. Nevertheless, I still think that those trades cost the club in ways that Carlos Carrasco and Justin Masterson can never repay--at least not in the hearts and minds of some fans I've met. I wish it weren't so, but I'm afraid it probably is.

PAUL: This is the most frightening part of the trades of the last 2 ½ years to me as I have that same fear that the PR damage already done is not all that easily undone, if it can be undone at all. It has been referred to as the "Spiral of Death" in some places as you can follow the progression where the the fans don't show up because the team isn't winning, the team doesn't spend money to improve the team because of decreased revenues, and the fans don't show up because the team isn't...well, you get the idea.

Where the Indians currently sit in that "Spiral" is up for debate as the team HAS in fact spent in

years past to extend their veterans (Hafner and Westbrook, most notably) only to be burned by those deals and added a significant piece via FA (Wood), even when they looked to be on the decline from their apex, only to be...say it with me, burned by that deal. With the Indians now slashing prices in an effort to attract people to the ballpark by gimmicks and giveaways, one has to wonder how they're going to end this "Death Spiral" as they never really completely pulled themselves out of it, even with the talented group of players that donned the Chief from 2005 to 2009 or so.



Winning is the panacea (or so they so), but this team is probably going to need an extended period of winning (likely 3 consecutive seasons or so) if they're legitimately going to draw people back. The reason I say this is simply from recent history as if you want to go over the records and attendance over the last few years and how the fans never really did come out when they were winning (mainly because they were never able to piece together consecutive seasons of success), you can have at it, but I'm done taking kicks at that dead horse (record vs. attendance) that's been laying there since 2008.

The fact is that people (well...some of them) were willing to accept the rebuild back in 2002 as it was presented very clearly and articulated very well as to what the Front Office was going to do to leap back into contention within three years. While they accomplished that, the fans didn't exactly storm the box office, taking a Missouri approach ("Show me that you're going to be good for a while) and the team promptly fell on its collective face in 2006 and, more importantly, 2008.

What's happened since then is well-documented, but in the here and now, their PR is an unmitigated disaster and their place in the public's perception couldn't get lower as they constantly and unabashedly point to an uneven playing field in MLB (which is valid) to justify where they are, but never acknowledge their own shortcomings in the endeavor (poor drafting, most notably) or point out that the risks that they did take financially blew up in their faces (Hafner, Westbrook, Carmona...before last year) or even take the effort to put Front Office

changes into place that at least give the illusion of change. Instead, they given interviews with talking points focusing on this garbage line that “we’re not going to spend money, because the time isn’t right”, which is ripe to be skewered (and rightfully so) by the local media and the “pitchfork crowd” (as you so adroitly coin them) and leaves the Indians looking defeated and desperate before a season even starts.

Don’t think that this perception of the Indians hasn’t become pervasive and nearly accepted as fact as about a month ago, our (I share a package with my parents) season ticket renewal packet came in the mail and my father said that he just didn’t see the point in going to games if they weren’t going to field a competitive team. After I reminded him that we started our season tix package together BEFORE the 2004 season (coming off of a 94-loss season in 2003) because HE was excited about Jody Gerut and Jason Davis and what the future held. Even after this reminder, he begrudgingly relented to re-upping and said that he while he was excited about Santana and some other young players, that he didn’t know if he could put his heart into believing that the current team will succeed, mainly because he knows what’s eventually coming if they do succeed.

That may have been the crushing fall-out from the CC, Lee, and Vic deals coming in such rapid succession as, when the Colon deal was made, most of the other pending FA had made their way out of Cleveland and Colon was the last remaining big chip to move. People understood the notion of knocking it down to build it back up when it was moving that one chip. After those three guys were moved, among others, and the sense that this team was going back to square one, the Indians’ fan wasn’t interested in putting themselves through the education process associated with Carlos Carrasco or Mike Brantley nor did they want to see these young players struggling...as young players are wont to do because of the heartbreak that they saw as looming, regardless of how far off that heartbreak could be.

The suddenness of the tear-down after the meticulousness and growing pains of the build-up left many fans not wanting to go through that another rebuild if it’s going to eventually be torn down at some point in the future.

Now, the team is where we are today, attempting to build back up and the Front Office afraid to speak out that they have accomplished this before from 2002 to 2005 or to point out that they DID build a talented team (evidenced by the contracts handed out to a number of those players) from scratch...they just built a talented team that didn’t consistently win.

Realizing that this is all hindsight, it becomes the great question of what SHOULD the Indians have done to avoid this or if it was unavoidable and the Indians took the most prudent, if painful, path when presented with all of the alternatives, even if that path alienated a large portion of the fanbase.

What if they have played out the string with the players (just to use one incarnation) from the 2008 team and CC had left via FA...who's the victim in the situation?

What if they would have kept Lee and Victor and attempted to keep Pavano for 2010...where would the Indians sit today, in terms of lineup and rotation with all of those players?

Right now, it's all "what if's"...but really, "what if"?