After a week in which Old Man Winter took one last swipe at the North Coast (and my power for a couple of days), the sun is supposed to be shining today…and not just because the Indians play a team not named the Indians in Arizona this afternoon. With the Indians playing their Goodyear-mates, the Reds, and with the mountains of snow melting outside of my window, let's get loose right away on a Lazy Sunday…

The big news of the week (and no, Trevor Crowe's shoulder issues do not qualify) came late on Friday night as the Indians agreed to terms with RH relief pitcher Chad Durbin, most recently of the Phillies, to a one-year deal worth $800K guaranteed with another $1M available to Durbin in incentives. Nearly as soon as the signing was announced, the catcalls came from the gallery, wondering aloud what the point was in signing Durbin when the Indians are reportedly bursting at the seams with power arms for the bullpen.

Well, it certainly seems as if everyone's memory of "just Chad Durbin" when he was a middling middle reliever/starter for the Indians a few years back (he appeared in 20 games for the Indians in 2003 and 2004) or as a poor back-end-of-the-rotation option in Detroit (starting 19 games of the 36 he appeared in for the Motor City Kitties in 2007) has created an overwhelmingly negative perception of Chad Durbin, essentially ignoring the player that he's evolved into over the last three years in the Phillies' bullpen. In fact, the initial confusion for some over whether the Indians were looking at Durbin to be a starter or a reliever is pretty indicative of the ignorance around Durbin and provides a decent explanation for the immediate dismissal of Durbin as an upgrade to the Indians bullpen.

However, since he's become a full-time reliever at the beginning of 2008 in Philly, Durbin has posted the following line:
3.62 ERA, 117 ERA+, and a 1.37 WHIP in 226 IP over 194 games

While those numbers may not jump off of the page, realize that 17 MLB relievers in that 3-year stretch have posted a better ERA+ while throwing more than 200 innings . That criteria may seem a little convoluted, but if the issue with relievers is generally an inability to predict health from year to year as well as production, it means that Durbin has remained healthy and productive (if intermittently) in the last three years.

Given that track record of relative success, I'm not going to guess as to why Durbin still found himself on the outside looking in with teams already in camp or why he had to "settle" for an $800K deal with up to $1M in incentives from the Indians while other middle relievers backed the Brinks' trucks up this off-season…and I'll get to that. But let's keep this with Durbin, who pitched in the 7th inning or later in 47 of the 64 games Durbin he threw in last year…think about that for a moment in the midst of this "Durbin is bullpen filler" talk while realizing that 29 of those appearances after the 7th inning came in either a one-run game or a tied game.

Additionally, in those 64 games, he accumulated a line of 3.80 ERA, 106 ERA+, 1.31 WHIP, 8.3 K/9, 3.5 BB/9, 2.33 K/BB in 68 2/3 IP which meant that he posted a higher K/9 in 2010 than any Tribe reliever who threw more than 10 innings not named Chris Perez or Tony Sipp. Going further, Justin Germano and Frank Herrmann had similarly impressive K/BB ratios, but struck out fewer batters than Durbin did. If you prefer more advanced metrics, Durbin's 4.19 xFIP in 2010 was lower than any Indians' reliever with more than 6 IP .

Certainly that's not meant to intimate that Chris F. Perez needs to be looking over his shoulder as the closer because Chad Durbin definitely has his flaws (the jump in the OPS vs. LH hitters in 2010 is worth watching) and I'm not going to be the one to guarantee that Durbin will achieve any measure of success in 2011, but if Durbin is a veteran arm (who they can run out there pretty regularly in a variety of roles and even ideally flip him in July) that allows the young power arms in the Tribe system to mature INTO legitimate set-up guys instead of having that crown bestowed upon their heads, it certainly doesn't do much harm.

Yet the fact that Durbin is 33 years old and found himself still looking for a contract with teams already in camp has led to an immediate dismissal of this addition as Durbin is painted as a "long reliever", which is more than a little misleading as he threw multiple innings in 19 of his 64 appearances last year which may look like a high number until you realize that Tony Sipp threw multiple innings in 18 of his 70 appearances for the Indians last year…would anyone categorize Tony Sipp's usage last year as a "long reliever"?

Is this a dip into the bargain bin?
Any signing this late probably is, though as much as I can't figure out (much less get on board with) any plan that goes to Opening Day with Sonny Nix or Paul Phillips on the 25-man instead of Jason Donald and Lou Marson, I'm fine with a bullpen addition, as long as the addition has a track record of success (even moderate) and health, which Durbin does. Reason being that there's a big difference between

Durbin coming in to pitch a couple of innings a week and Sonny Nix being the everyday 3B for the first few months of a season. Given that the effectiveness of bullpen arms is essentially a crapshoot from year to year, even with a track record of success – even recent success, adding an arm like Durbin makes sense considering that a good number of alternatives (particularly those that are RH) have either just taken their first sips of an MLB cup of coffee or have yet to grab their cup of Java in MLB.

Given that the Indians are still a very young (if promising) team, is there anything more soul-crushing to a young team than seeing leads given away in the 6th, 7th, or 8th innings? Lest anyone forget, Tony Sipp and Rafael Perez were both inconsistent last year and, while I have no problem with them pitching the 7th and 8th innings, both are LH and given that Joe Smith should NEVER FACE A LH hitter (LH hitters OPS vs. Smith was .979 last year and .992 in 2009), that would have left the Indians with Jensen Lewis as the RH arm that was going to be the 7th/8th inning bridge to Chris Perez. That would be the same Jensen Lewis who spent much of last season between Cleveland and Columbus and, while he certainly closed out the season well in 2010, who as a cumulative 106 ERA+ over the last three years.

If Lewis turns into Jensen v.2009, the Indians options for another RH set-up guy that had spent time on the parent club became…well, Frank Herrmann (44 2/3 career MLB IP), Vinnie Pestano (5 career MLB IP), and maybe a guy like Jess Todd (28 1/3 career MLB IP). As much as I might like the long-term outlook for those three (as well as guys like Stowell, Judy, Putnam and others…who have never appeared in MLB), given the uncertainty of any bullpen, do you start to see where Durbin comes in as a RH option with a track record of health and relative success?

None of this is to suggest that Chad Durbin is some sort of magical stabilizing force that will translate to the Indians bullpen DEFINITELY not driving into the ditch that captured them in 2006 or 2008 (most notably), but if you'll remember how I was inexplicably scared by the bullpen last week, realize that I wasn't alone in taking all of this talk that "the bullpen's fine…finally" was premature, as no less than Castrovince asserted something similar

while sitting in Bastian's chair earlier in the week:
Beware anybody who offers assurances, positive or negative, about a Major League bullpen. Nobody really knows what they're talking about. That's why it helps to have depth, and this is one area where - on paper, at least - the Indians possess such a luxury. Acta was asked if he thinks there's such a thing as "momentum" carrying over from one season to the next for a bullpen. After all, Tribe relievers posted a 2.95 ERA after the All-Star break last year - the second-lowest such mark in the AL and the fourth-lowest in MLB.

Of course the numbers after the All-Star Break are a positive sign, but AC's right and the aside about "on paper" is telling because as much as we'd all like to think that Herrmann, Judy, Pestano, Stowell, and the other cast of characters is ready to step right into the Cleveland bullpen on Opening Day and thrive, the presence of Rafael Perez and Jensen Lewis (who were SO good down the stretch in 2007 and have gone through their share of career hiccups since) are instructive in terms of relying too much on any reliever from year to year, much less young ones, regardless of MiLB statistics or pedigree.

Truthfully, I'm probably more optimistic about the Indians' pipeline of power arms than most and realize that 2011 is the year that many of them will arrive topside. However, from a realistic standpoint, success for relievers is volatile and assuming that any (or all) of these guys is going to arrive in Cleveland and dominate is delusional. While the sheer volume of arms that seems to be coming is comforting, isn't one of the goals of the 2011 season (maybe not a publicly stated one) to get off to a fast start and perhaps even generate some interest locally to a sports scene in need of one ?

Remember that idea again of how soul-crushing some bullpen implosions can be to a team, particularly to a young one, particularly early in the season?

It a main reason that one of the "suggestions" for Indians' additions posited here back in October was for a veteran RH reliever with the reasoning for such being presented back then as such:
Though the Indians are touting the performance of the bullpen in the second half, let's realize that the RHP that figure into the 2011 bullpen past Chris F. Perez are Joe Smith, Jensen Lewis, Justin Germano and a bunch of promising AAA pitchers, like Vinnie Pestano and Zach Putnam.

Do you really feel comfortable that one of those guys can assume that 7th or 8th inning RH role for 2011?

Maybe this is from the experience of watching the bullpen deep-six the 2006 and 2008 seasons (among other reasons), but I don't and I think that a priority this off-season would be to add a RH reliever to the late-inning mix to assist Rafael Perez and Tony Sipp in serving as the bridge from the 6th to the 9th innings, when necessary.

I'll still stand by that, regardless of the glowing reports that have come out of Goodyear and this intimation that the bullpen will be the "strength" of the team when Jensen Lewis and Joe Smith were tabbed as the teams' RH set-up guys heading into Goodyear. In that piece from last October, my suggestion was to bring in a guy like Jesse Crain with those hopes being dashed

when Crain signed an inexplicable THREE-YEAR DEAL with the White Sox for $13M.

Don't think that Crain was the exception to the off-season rule however as Matt Guerrier signed a 3-year deal worth $12M with the Dodgers, Scott Downs signed a 3-year deal worth $15M with the Angels, Rafael Soriano signed a 3-year deal worth $35M with the Yankees, and Joaquin Benoit signed a 3-year deal worth $16.5M with the Tigers, the final contract providing the lead-in to a great piece in last week's print edition of SI by Tom Verducci about how middle relievers were suddenly the prettiest belles of the ball this off-season:
Joaquin Benoit didn't have a job last year until Feb. 15, and when he found one, it was through a minor league contract with the Rays. He was pitching filler—just another arm that was aging (he turned 33 last year), damaged (he missed 2009 because of rotator-cuff surgery), mediocre (4.79 career ERA) and not good enough to start or close games.

Instead of committing multiple years to set-up guys (who may or may not outperform Durbin) like those aforementioned teams did, the Indians took a chance that Durbin is able to sustain some level of success in 2011 while providing some rubber-armed veteran presence to a bullpen that figures to be pretty fluid throughout the year.

To that end, there's going to be a lot of player movement in the bullpen (as there always) is and there will be a TON of opportunities for these young arms to get opportunities. For some perspective on this, the Indians used 13 relievers last year (not including Marte) and the year before that, they used 23 relievers. Chad Durbin will be one of those relievers in 2011, likely along with all of the young arms that people are (rightfully) optimistic about with the idea that those young arms can start the season in AAA, attempting to separate themselves and forcing their way onto the MLB roster, much in the way that Frank Herrmann did last year. Really, does anyone think that Chad Durbin is going to ostensibly block a gaggle of arms for the Indians all season long if he's not performing for the Tribe?

For some context on this idea, realize that the Indians signed Jamey Wright to a minor-league deal last off-season that turned into a $900K deal when he made the 25-man roster out of Goodyear. At the end of May, he was sitting on a 5.68 ERA and do you know how many innings Jamey Wright pitched last year for the Indians?

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