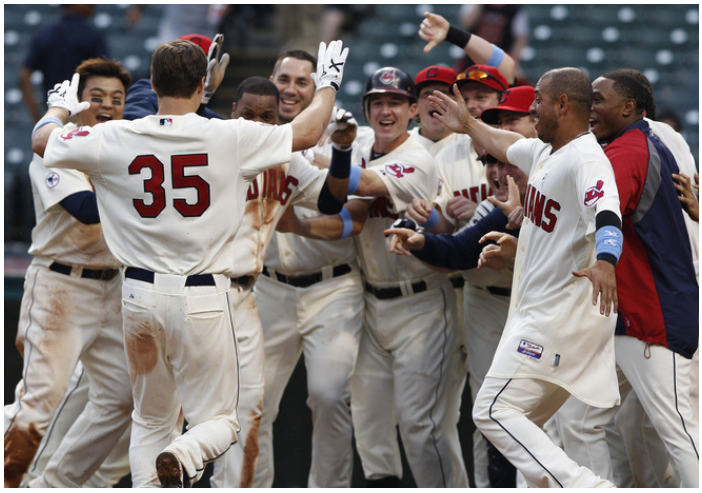


The All-Star Break is nearly upon us and (as usual) I'm not going to delve too deeply into the absurdity that is the All-Star Game or the manufactured "debates" over who got snubbed and which players are going to be playing in Arizona in a couple of days and who won't as the glorified exhibition game that MLB foists upon us (while attempting to make it more meaningful than it should be) as the outrage that all of the selections and snubs seems to generate just doesn't interest me. Perhaps there are people out there who have been DYING to see the best players from MLB play in an exhibition game in mid-July, but I'll take the ride that the Indians have been taking me on over the manufactured pageantry and hollow story lines that accompany the All-Star Game every day and twice on Sunday.

With that out of the way (and with the word "Sunday" invoked), let's get going on a Lazy Sunday as I have a day ahead of me that figures to be anything but lazy as The DiaBride and I continue to pack up our current house to ready The Reservation for a new address, one that fits 3 kids and 2 adults a little more realistically. Nevertheless, though you may be reading this as I huff and puff away in our sweltering attic, maybe you'll be having a Lazy One because here comes the only part of my day that figures to be such…

Driving the pace car for the day is Anthony Castrovince, who comes correct and in full effect, examining whether or not this Indians' team is "sponge-worthy", a variation of the "Blonde-worthy" question a couple of weeks ago. Regardless, AC examines what the Indians are likely/unlikely to do in terms of adding a piece (which is worth the click and a full read), with quotes from Antonetti providing a real glimpse into a possible plan:

"We're open in any way we can to improve the team, whatever that might be," Antonetti said. "Especially with Choo suffering the injury that he suffered, we'll probably focus most of our efforts on improving our offense and getting a little more consistency there."

--snip--

"It's so hard to put percentages on external acquisitions because there are so many variables in play," Antonetti said. "The benefit that we have with our internal options is we control those unilaterally, which guys we bring up, provided they're healthy. Externally, so many things have to come together."

Read those two quotes again from Antonetti and tell me that the Indians focus isn't maximizing the offense in Choo's absence by attempting to utilize internal options instead of searching for an external option that may or may not be there, and may not even be all that pressing of a need if Choo truly is going to be ready by the 2nd week of August, as he is telling "friends". Regardless, Castro sums it up pretty well when he wraps the piece up with the idea that,"The Indians might, indeed, make a move before the July 31 deadline. But I don't expect that move to be of much impact to either their long-term prospect pool or their short-term run-production. What you see is what you get with this injury riddled club, and what you see might very well be enough to keep hanging around in the Central standings."

Of course, that's not going to make the "THE DOLANS SAID THEY'D SPEND WHEN THE TIME IS RIGHT AND NOW IS THE RIGHT TIME" crowd, but does "spending" mean adding a Josh Willingham (who's been out with an Achilles issue for nearly a month and had a .714 OPS prior to his injury) for the $2M that he's owed or another limited player of Willingham's ilk?

There might be fits out there (Mike Cuddyer intrigues me as a versatile RH bat with some pop), but the Indians are far from alone in looking for offensive help and would be bidding against a good number of teams with the idea that they can add someone is predicated on other teams making players available, something that has not happened to date. Don't take this as an attempt to lower expectations or as a call for the Indians to sit on their hands while the teams around them perhaps augment their roster (though this month will be just as telling as to what the Tigers, White Sox, and Twins end up doing as it will the Tribe) as the Indians are far from a perfect team. Obviously, the Indians' best chance of improvement is getting healthy in some places and getting back to being effective in others as a return to form from Sizemore would have the same effect that the return of Pronk has had and an early return from Choo (assuming effectiveness) could be just as uplifting for the team.

That being said, if the Indians do decide to make a move, I received a thought-provoking e-mail from reader John Woods, regarding the Indians perhaps dealing from positions of strength – namely their middle infield depth, their starting pitching, and their bullpen – to make more substantial additions at a "weak" spot on the parent club. The idea behind Woods' premise was that there are certain players (particularly in Columbus, as noted by Adam Van Arsdale at LG T) knocking down the door that really have nowhere to go now or in the near future because of other prospects that sit higher on the organizational ladder or whose chance is unlikely to come this year…if ever.

Though many point to the recent success of Dave Huff and the (since-promoted) Luis Valbuena as guys that could be used for trades to upgrade the parent club, the question is whether the Indians could ACTUALLY sell a couple of their once-tarnished prospects as "ready to turn it around" in MLB to another team that may have a desirable piece. Frankly, I'm a little leery that other teams are scouting the likes of Huff or Valbuena (just to use them as examples) and

thinking that those guys just need a shot in MLB to stick. So, the attractiveness of those types of players may not be any kind of shiny lure at the end of a fishing line that's going to draw much interest in the waters of MLB. This idea that the Indians can turn their former prospects into impact players reeks too much Costanza going into Big Stein's office ("I think I've figured out a way to get Bonds and Griffey…and it wouldn't cost us that much") for the next few weeks for me to handle, but that doesn't mean that the Indians shouldn't explore the opportunity to be bold and maybe step out of the comfort zone that they've already crossed with the promotions of White and Chisenhall.

To that end, I wonder if the most desirable path that the organization could take would be a different approach that still falls into their wheelhouse as the Indians have developed a reputation for identifying undervalued prospects in other organizations with their list of larcenies being well-documented. For the past few years, the Indians have seemed to part with their own flawed players at the MLB level (usually before they were about to get expensive), netting more useful organizational pieces in the process.

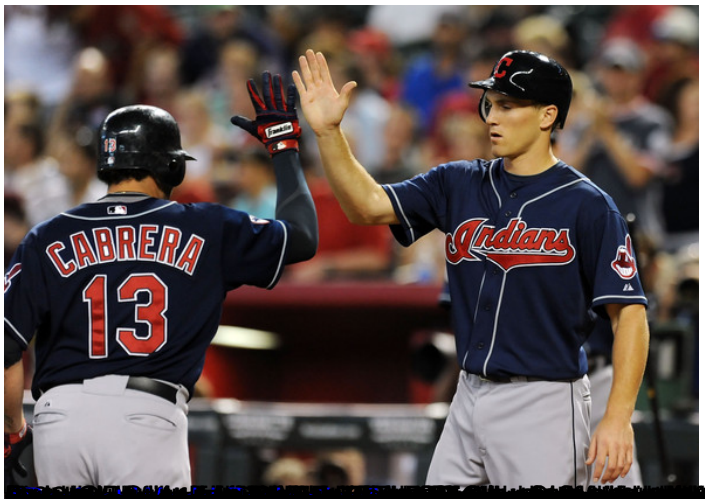
Of course, we know of Ben Broussard turning into Asdrubal and ½ of a season of Austin Kearns turning into Zach McAllister, but the Indians spun Ben Francisco (a 4th OF who is "earning" $1.18M in Philly) to net more prospects from Philly and flipped Kelly Shoppach (in the 2nd year of a $5.5M deal in Tampa, where he has a .593 OPS) to the Rays for a pitcher that – though he may not be in the rotation for much longer – provided the Indians with about a season-and-a-half of starts while the arms beneath him ripened. Ryan Garko had all of 165 MLB plate appearances after the Indians dealt him for a now 23-year-old pitcher in Scott Barnes who has struck out 85 hitters in the 82 1/3 innings he's thrown for Columbus this year. But even the guys bemoaned a "great" losses have turned out to be traded with good reason as for as much hand-wringing that happened during Franklin Gutierrez's Gold Glove season, he now has a cumulative .686 OPS in 3 years as a Mariner, with Seattle on the hook to pay him $5.5M next season and $7M in 2012.

Though there may be valid complaints about the Indians as an organization, they do seem to have a pretty good idea of their own players' strengths and weaknesses and, more importantly, their ceilings, their attractiveness to other organizations willing to cast a blind eye to their warts, and the cost-effectiveness of keeping certain players. They may have been relatively blind-sided by one Josh Tomlin, about whom a scout gushed this to B-Pro's John Perrotto ,

"He's a surgeon, kind of like a poor man's Greg Maddux" and while Tomlin was under the glare of the bright lights all week, with
AC profiling him as well at MLB.com
and comparing anyone to any kind of "man's Greg Maddux" has to be put in the column of hyperbole, most of the times the Indians are not one of these organizations that has too many of these "pleasant surprises" in terms of prospects panning out at the MLB level, particularly recently.

Regardless of anything related to Tomlin, the hope would be is that the Indians can be as honest about their current cache of upper-level prospects as they have been in the last couple of years with their former prospects. With guys like Garko, Francisco, Broussard, Gutierrez, and Shoppach, they realized their limitations and their limited future with the team (particularly in relation to salary) and acted aggressively in selling high (or at least at the right time) on nearly all of those guys. To that end, the question becomes what current prospects in AAA are perhaps overvalued by others that are in the Tribe's organization or who may be an ancillary part down the road and whose value may be greater in what the organization could net for them instead of what that particular player figures to contribute for the Tribe in the coming years. As good as the Indians have been in identifying their own players at the MLB level whose usefulness had leveled off and whose greatest value was tied into what the organization could get for them, it now becomes a question of whether the Indians can be brutally honest with themselves about their own prospects (which they love to have stockpiled) and perhaps part with a player who may project as a useful MLB player, but whose value to the Indians could be less because of other players within the organization.

If you read that last sentence carefully, you know where I'm going with this as I've been in Cord Phelps' corner more than most (even driving the bandwagon from time to time) and think that the problem with the Indians' handling of Phelps was calling him up to mainly sit on the bench or to allegedly play a part in a platoon that never materialized, when he had never done so in his baseball career. You can point to his defensive "yips" or say that "he'll be back…he just needs more seasoning", but the Indians had a hole at 2B (and still have it) and Phelps represented an upgrade. With that being the case, perhaps the fact that they were so reticent to play him regularly and so quick to send him down (as I fail to see Hannahan's value on the roster presently) may be telling as to how Phelps is viewed in terms of the team's future.



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