I know what you're probably thinking right now. 'Whoa, Al still writes for The Cleveland Fan?' Yes, yes I do. A two-month work stint in London, followed by spinal fusion surgery that has me pretty much immobile on the couch right now has put a bit of a dent in my production over the past few months, but fear not. I will be earnestly providing you with as much Indians and minor league coverage as I possibly can from here on out.

I'm already planning a trip to Spring Training again if my back can handle it, and will be writing up some of the Indians' prospect performances from the offseason leagues. All this while putting together my always-popular Top 50 Prospects List, which I've already been receiving questions about (hint; a shortstop is #1!). So I apologize for the recent hiatus, and hope to be back for good now. Being stuck on the couch in Northern Virginia for the holidays this year, I would greatly appreciate any deliveries of Christmas Ale that can be arranged. Also, if you notice any major spelling or grammatical errors, I'm blaming it on the Percocet.

Major League Baseball and the MLB Players Union quietly negotiated a new collective bargaining agreement over the past few months, and announced on November 22 that they have a deal that will extend labor tranquility for the next five years.
This ensures that MLB will continue to operate without a work stoppage of any kind since the 1994/1995 strike wiped out the '94 playoffs and the beginning of the '95 season. It's the longest such streak in professional sports, which is a good thing. Some of the provisions in the new CBA though, seem somewhat short-sighted and may serve to hurt small-market clubs like the Indians. In fact, the deal takes options off the table for small-market clubs and does virtually nothing to correct the massive revenue imbalance that currently exists between the big-market teams like New York and Boston and the smaller-market clubs such as the Indians and Pirates. Given an opportunity to fix a clearly broken system, the players looked out for their own salaries

and the owners took an opportunity to line their own pockets at the expense of amateur athletes.

The Good

First, let's hit the high points in the new CBA. One change that I fully endorse is moving up the signing date for Rule 4 draft picks from mid-August to mid-July. Most of the high $$ players signed at the deadline anyways, with several of them having deals in place in advance but having to hold off on announcing them because MLB didn't like them going over the "suggested" slot. The earlier signing date means that more players will sign in time to make their professional debuts the same year they are drafted, rather than having to wait until the following season. This means they will develop a little quicker, and really means that we'll get to see them play sooner, which is my major reason to like the change. The mid-August date always seemed arbitrary and pointless, so might as well have an arbitrary date earlier in the process.

The second change that I'm in favor of is increasing the use of instant replay to fair/foul and trapped/caught balls in the outfield. The goal is to get the call right, and hopefully this will save baseball the potential of further embarrassment by the on-field performance of an umpire. Ball/strike and safe/out calls are still not reviewable.

To throw a bone to the small market clubs out there, baseball has instituted a "competitive balance lottery." Basically, it's welfare.

5. Competitive Balance Lottery
A. For the first time, Clubs with the lowest revenues and in the smallest markets will have an opportunity to obtain additional draft picks through a lottery.
B. The ten Clubs with the lowest revenues, and the ten Clubs in the smallest markets, will be entered into a lottery for the six draft selections immediately following the completion of the first round of the draft. A Club's odds of winning the lottery will be based on its prior season's winning percentage.
C. The eligible Clubs that did not receive one of the six selections after the first round, and all other payee Clubs under the Revenue Sharing Plan, will be entered into a second lottery for the six picks immediately following the completion of the second round of the draft. A Club's odds of winning the lottery will be based on its prior season's winning percentage.
D. Picks awarded in the Competitive Balance Lottery may be assigned by a Club, subject to certain restrictions.

So the teams in the 10 smallest markets get entered into the lottery (good), as well as the teams with the 10 lowest revenues (bad). I understand the small market idea, but I have no clue why MLB wants to reward teams for not making money. While it is true that revenue is to a point tied to your market size, teams in small markets can still perform well and make money (see Tampa Bay for the latest example). So I like the idea, just not a huge fan of the execution.

The final point I'll cover here is a brief one, but one that Indians fans should care about. Any player who is arrested for a DUI will undergo mandatory evaluation by the league. I'm not clear on what this mandatory evaluation will consist of, or if it will cause the player to miss any games on the field, but this is a good thing. We all remember the Miggy Cabrera incident from spring training last year, and of course the S.S. Choo DUI from midseason that he admittedly had trouble moving past. These incidents are bad publicity for the league, the team, the player involved, and more importantly they are just plain unsafe. Hopefully this serves to stem what appeared to be an increasing tide of alcohol related incidents involving MLB employees, and we never see a Leonard Little type incident where an MLB player actually kills somebody behind the wheel while drunk. It should serve to increase awareness, decrease incidents, and allow those involved to receive appropriate counseling and move past it. Aaaaaaand I'm off my soapbox.

The Bad

Now, we come to the not so nice side of the new CBA. Bud Selig stated publicly that his #1 priority in the negotiations was to “fix the Rule 4 draft.” What exactly he was trying to “fix” is unclear, as I don’t think anyone was really thinking that the draft was broken other than Selig himself. So what we ended up with was this; a “luxury tax” on teams spending more than the commissioner’s instituted limits on how much each team can spend on the draft. Here’s how it looks like on paper:

3. Signing Bonus Pools

A. Each Club will be assigned an aggregate Signing Bonus Pool prior to each draft. For the purpose of calculating the Signing Bonus Pools, each pick in the first 10 rounds of the draft has been assigned a value. (These values will grow each year with the rate of growth of industry revenue.) A Club's Signing Bonus Pool equals the sum of the values of that Club's selections in the first 10 rounds of the draft. Players selected after the 10th round do not count against a Club's Signing Bonus Pool if they receive bonuses up to $100,000. Any amounts paid in excess of $100,000 will count against the Pool.

B. Clubs that exceed their Signing Bonus Pools will be subject to penalties as follows:

Excess of Pool Penalty (Tax on Overage/Draft Picks)

- *0-5 percent; 75 percent tax on overage*
- *5-10 percent; 75 percent tax on overage and loss of 1st round pick*
- *10-15 percent; 100 percent tax on overage and loss of 1st and 2nd round picks*
- *15-plus percent; 100 percent tax on overage and loss of 1st round picks in next two drafts*

So the teams picking earlier in the draft will have more $$ to spend overall than the teams picking later, but there are some pretty severe penalties for going over your limits by as little as 6%. Also, if you miss out on signing a pick, you can't bank the $$ for overslot signings later in the draft, you just lose the opportunity to spend the money. So if the Indians dare to go overslot on signing their 1st round pick and then go on to sign high-upside guys later in the draft for overslot, they will pay up to double for their trouble, not to mention lose their 1st round draft pick in the following season. Again, let me stress that the commissioner's office has decided that the draft, the easiest and cheapest way for teams to add elite talent, should be rigged so that teams cannot add the most amount of talent, to the point where teams lose their 1st-round pick if they dare go over Lord Selig's recommended spending level.
Per Baseball America's Jim Calis, a whopping **twenty teams** (including the Indians) would have been 16% or more over the recommended bonus pool this year, which would put them in the highest possible tax bracket and cost them a pair of draft picks. I've always advocated overslot spending in the draft as the best possible way for a small market team like the Indians to compete, and now that advantage is being taken away by King Bud in his attempt to "fix" the draft. You could even argue that the change benefits teams from the larger TV markets, as they can afford to spend overslot, pay the tax, give up the pick(s) and then just do the same thing next year. Because if you think this will cause agents like Scott Boras to take a step back and start asking for lower bonus money, you've got another thing coming. So this could actually force the higher level talent to the big-budget teams, because only they will be able to afford to select them and pay the accompanying luxury taxes. So how exactly does this "fix" the draft? A draft that wasn't broken in the first place? Beats me. For what it's worth, the tax revenue and lost draft picks will go to teams that don't go over the cap. I'm going to break an in-house TCF rule here and link to a Pittsburgh paper, because Pirates writer Dejan Kovacevic really hits the nail on the head in his piece looking at the same issue.
I hated Selig's unnecessary slot recommendations, I hated how his office forced teams and players to keep the lid on deals that they had agreed to for weeks at a time, and now I hate the latest changes he's made with respect to the Rule 4 Draft. To say that I'm not a Bud Selig fan right now would be a bit of an understatement.

As if that weren't enough, MLB has decided to "fix" the international free agent signing process in much the same way. Here's the new rule, in its entirety:

5 f. International Talent Acquisition

[redacted]

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