

Thursday, December 16, 2004

Tim Hudson

Boy, you get me all hyped up for Marcus Giles, you know I'm going to be disappointed when the first name mentioned in the story about Tim Hudson's trade to the Braves is Charles Freakin' Thomas.

That's unfair, though, because Thomas is essentially a throw-in. And for a throw-in, he seems to be not bad. He had a .121 MLVr this year. Two famous players with similar (ever so slightly inferior, actually) numbers this year are Lew Ford and Shannon Stewart. It ought to be noted, though, that Thomas was strictly platooned by the Braves this year: over 85% of his plate appearances came against right-handed pitchers, leaving just about 40 appearances against lefties. It's impossible to tell whether he could hit lefties now or ever, but I'm guessing the A's don't wait around to find out, not with Eric Byrnes and Bobby Kielty also on the team (at least for now).

Thomas is sort of Scott Hatteberg-ish, I think, putting up decent numbers that are very OBP-oriented (i.e. no power) at a position where you should be able to find power easily. If he gets regular playing time, I think it's a bad sign.

Juan Cruz is the player I was initially and superficially most excited about, mainly based on remember the trade that sent him from the Cubs to the Braves this past spring which was roundly considered a win for Atlanta. Cruz has been highly regarded for awhile and apparently has great stuff. That stuff has resulted in pretty good performance, if not Pedro Martinez-type numbers. He put up a 2.75 ERA for the Braves this year in 50 games out of the bullpen, struck out more than a batter per inning, got a few more ground balls than fly balls, and didn't give up an inordinate number of homers. You could argue that's he's a bit wild, having walked 30 batters this year and had not-great control records in the minors, but Barry Zito's control isn't all there all the time, either, and he still manages alright (this year notwithstanding).

By the Davenport Translation numbers, Cruz was worth over three wins for the Braves this year, which I think is pretty good for a middle reliever. On the other hand, in terms of expected wins added, which take into account his performance with other people's baserunners and so on, he was down half a win. I'd guess that, while the latter is a better measure of his actual value to the team, the former is a measure of how he'll pitch in the future, in terms of the components of pitching, where his actual value will vary with his role. For example, if the A's push him back into starting (because you have to figure there are now two spots open in the rotation, which will be fought for by a number of good candidates), I'd be pretty optimistic about his expected performance.

Finally, there's Dan Meyer. He was drafted in 2002 and has already made his big league debut, pitching in two games late last year. Meyer never had an ERA over 3.00 at any minor league stop, and unearned runs aren't really hiding anything: there's no big discrepancy between the R and ER columns in his record that jumps out at you. He's struck out over a batter per inning, walks one about every five innings or so, and doesn't give up the long ball in great quantity. In the 2004 Baseball America Prospect Handbook, he was rated the Braves's 4th best prospect. That's in an Atlanta system that BA ranked as the fourth best in baseball, by the way, and Meyer was the top left-handed starter in Atlanta's minors.

BA also comments that he has a good fastball and a slider that should be a good major league pitch. John Sickels gave him a B+ and notes that only a mediocre strikeout rate at Myrtle Beach in 2003 kept him from bumping him to an A-. Given that he's had another year and very similar performance to his prior years, but at a higher level, I wouldn't be surprised if Meyer was in the A range in this year's Sickels book.

I feel sour in the mouth, because this is, after all, Tim Hudson. What A's fan will forget how Hudson came up as a 23 year-old in mid-1999 and immediately set the world on fire, going 11-2 with an ERA almost half again as good as the rest of the league? And then followed that up with a 20-win season that was actually, in most respects, his worst season: he walked a ton of guys, gave up homers, and posted his only ERA over four. Of course, when your worst season by ERA+ is a 114 (as it was in 2000), you're probably a pretty good pitcher.

But obviously the A's didn't feel they'd be able to re-sign Hudson so they figured they'd save the money he'd cost and get some actual ready-now or almost-so players in return, rather than draft picks.

In terms of the Oakland's competitiveness this very year, you have to worry a little, but remember that the Angels probably overperformed last year. Anaheim has signed Paul Byrd, but dumped Ramon Ortiz as well. They've also picked up Steve Finley, but don't you have to figure he'll just collapse and die in center field at some point or another?

Blog Export: Beaneball, <http://beaneball.org/>

Maybe I'm over-reacting to the Adrian Beltre and Richie Sexson deals, but you have to wonder if Seattle might leap-frog a team or two this season.

What I think everything boils down to in whether this trade works out or not is Curt Young's ability or lack thereof to get Barry Zito and Mark Mulder straightened out (or healthy, or whatever) and to continue the development of guys like Joe Blanton and Rich Harden. I like the A's collection of arms for the backend of the rotation better than anyone else's (Blanton, Cruz, Meyer, Duchscherer, and so on), but I'm really worried about the front two.

Here's a collection of links, annotated as usual, from the A's blogs I know of that have written about this trade already:

Brian at A's Y'all is excited about Dan Meyer and generally optimistic about the trade.

Mad Dog at Barry Zito Forever is also excited about Meyer, but doesn't like Cruz as much as I do.

Jon at Bridge Ball clearly is unhappy, referring to the players as "three warm bodies," which pretty much summed up my initial reaction when I found out that nobody named Giles (or Marcus for that matter) was coming to Oakland. I got over it, though, and if Meyer and Cruz perform like I think they can, I think Jon will come around.

Oakland A's Days rails against the economic system that allegedly led to the trade and site, uniquely, the less-quantifiable characteristics that Hudson brought to the team. The tribute is touching, and I especially love item 4 on the list, but I wonder whether the A's would trade him even if they were a bigger-revenue team. Hudson will, after all, be 30 in the first year of his free agent contract, and you certainly have to question, especially after seeing what's happened to Pedro Martinez in his 30's, how well that slight frame of his will hold up to the rigors of pitching once he's 10 years or so into his big league career, especially since, either with the A's or Braves, he's likely to be pitching for a contender, in games that matter down the stretch, when he won't be able to sit to nurse minor owies, as he might were he pitching for a team that was out of it.

In the end, I think the trade was forced, but not necessarily because of an economic system. Rather, almost in the sense of being "forced to call for value" even when you know you're well behind in a poker hand, the A's, in order to maximize their assets had to get top value for Hudson: they believed that getting players for him now, rather than a year of his performance plus draft picks later, was the way to maximize their return.

You'd like to think they'd do that even if they had the cash to burn, but you wonder, especially when you see Wonder Boy and the Super Friends signing Edgar Renteria for \$40 million bucks, whether that would be true. It's almost a blessing to be perpetually short on cash, then, though I'm sure Billy Beane doesn't believe that.

Posted by jason in Baseball, Oakland A's at 20:20