

Time to throw cash at so-so pitchers

by Chris Jenkins

Happens every year about this time. Major league baseball invokes the law of supply and duhhh-mand.

That is, there's such a shortage of good pitching it turns clubs stupid.

Once the players have played the last out of the World Series, see, big league teams immediately begin playing the fools. Not all of them, mind you, or even a majority. Just the ones who are so moneyed or so driven or desperate - to win or sell tickets - that they'll give multiyear contracts worth tens of millions to pitchers with relatively low win totals and relatively high ERAs.

A.J. Burnett. Carl Pavano. Esteban Loaiza. Denny Neagle. Russ Ortiz. Jeff Weaver, repeatedly. Javier Vazquez. Adam Eaton. Gil Meche. Miguel Batista. Eric Milton. Jason Marquis. Danys Baez. Jeff Suppan. Kris Benson.

Based on what they did before being lavished with riches - or what little they've done since - all of the aforementioned are more overpaid than Big Oil.

Barry Zito hardly lived up to the spirit of his \$127 million deal in 2007 - really, who could? - and Jason Schmidt quickly went Mike Hampton on the Dodgers.

You'd think clubs would live and learn. But then November rolls around, and here we go again.

Who'll it be this silly season, especially now that Curt Schilling's taken himself off the market, already paper-thin as it was? Just watch. Somebody's going to give Carlos Silva \$40 million or so for the next four seasons.

Silva, comma, Carlos. He's been the third-, sometimes the fourth-, sometimes the fifth-best pitcher in the Minnesota Twins rotation. A right-hander, he was 13-14 with a 4.19 ERA last season, with 29 losses over the past two seasons.

(Incidentally, some of the younger Twins starting pitchers are of greater interest to the arm-addicted San Diego Padres, who apparently made general inquiry about the availability of the likes of Matt Garza and Boof

Bonser at last week's GM meetings. Conversation turned elsewhere, however, when the Twins asked back about Chase Headley, the Padres' switch-hitting third-base prospect who was Texas League Player of the Year.)

Silva's been a Cy Young candidate compared to Kyle Lohse, another 28-year-old rightie who's likely close to getting a similar windfall. Lohse posted a 9-12 record - lowering his career mark to 63-74 - and 4.62 ERA in 2006 for the division-winning Phillies. Imagine if he hadn't pitched for a contender.

Ahhh, ain't that America. Econ 101. The weaker the market, the higher the price for lesser quality. And the dumber the check-writers get.

"It's possible the Lohses of the world will get more money than they would normally," said Padres CEO Sandy Alderson. "But the thin market also reflects the willingness of clubs to extend their players through free agency. Fewer and fewer players are making it to the marketplace than before.

"If there is a counterbalance to the trend of bigger and bigger contracts going to mediocrity, it's the success of clubs like Cleveland and Colorado that develop so much of their own talent. When teams like that get into the spotlight the way they did this year, there are other clubs that will follow the trend."

Alderson predicted an upswing in majors-for-majors trades - the best pitcher available now is incomparable Twins lefty Johan Santana, who'll be shopped all over next month's winter meetings in Nashville as defense against his own free agency - and a greater stream of pitchers coming from Japan.

Indeed, perhaps the most intense offseason pursuit of a pitcher will center on Hiroki Kuroda, a right-handed ace with the Japan League's Hiroshima Carp. As of Nov. 5, he's a free agent. Thus, major league clubs will not have to bid and barter for just the rights to Kuroda, unlike the \$51.1 million Boston had to fork over before starting negotiations with Daisuke Matsuzaka.

Thus, too, Kuroda's own price will be driven up immensely by the fact that any and all MLB teams can vie for him. Foremost among those interested in him are the Dodgers, Phillies and Mariners. Kuroda reportedly is seeking a deal in the U.S. neighborhood of \$21 million over three years.

Too steep? Well, look who else is back on the free-agent market. Eric Milton. Russ Ortiz. Kris Benson. And, of course, Jeff Weaver.

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