

Tiger farm system boss foresees promising future

By RON ONCZA

Baseball people in the know are crediting Detroit Tigers' farm system for the team's turn-around this year after a couple of miserable seasons.

What most baseball fans don't know is that Livonian Bill Lajoie is the architect of the system.

The Tigers' farm system had been relatively dormant since the mid-60s when it produced such promising youngsters as Willie Horton, Mickey Stanley and Denny McLain, who contributed to the world championship in 1968.

Now, most of the team is home-grown again, and averages 24 years of age.

The Tigers were forced to develop their own talent because Jim Campbell, the general manager, has a definite dislike for the current free agent rule, which allows athletes to play for the highest bidder.

"MOST of the clubs that purchase free agents are neglecting their farm systems," said Lajoie, director of player procurement.

"They figure they can buy talent cultivated by other organizations."

"When the next player contract comes up, I suppose we would attempt to change the reserve system, but I think that rule will be very difficult to change." The present system allows a five-year veteran of one team to sign with any team.

"The only way (free agents switching teams) will decrease," said Lajoie, "is if teams run out of money, and they will run out."

"There are just too many deferred payments down the road."

Lajoie, as director of player procurement, is responsible for assigning scouts to look over talent all over the country and also to do much of the evaluation himself.

"I sign approximately 40 per cent of the farmhands, so I spend about as much time on the road as I do in the office."

"I PLAYED minor league ball for the Cincinnati Reds for 10 years. I also managed and scouted."

"I've been here 10 years, and this is my fifth year as director of player procurement."

When associated with the Reds, he signed a local player—Bernie Carbo.

With all of the youngsters the Tigers have summoned from their farm system in the last few years, one would think that the well would be running dry. Not true,

Lajoie said.

Pitchers Bob Sykes, Sheldon Burnside, Steve Baker, Pat Underwood, Kip Young, Gary Grafton, infielder Tom Brookens and outfielder Dave Siegman may be the best bets to follow in

the footsteps of Mark Fidrych and Jason Thompson, said Lajoie.

Most are with the Tigers' Triple A farm club in Evansville.

"We also have some guys there with some major league experience

who we can call up in case of an emergency."

Besides Sykes, there is Bruce Kimbrell, Don Adams, and Jerry Manuel," said Lajoie.

"WE ARE expecting big things from pitchers Dan Petry and Mike

Chris, both 19, and outfielder Darrell Brown.

"Right now, we have lots of pitching in the minors, but after bringing up guys like Lou Whitaker, Alan Trammell, Steve Kemp, Tim Lincecum and Jason Thompson, we are get-

ting thin on everyday players."

During the off season, the Tigers acquired second baseman Steve Diland from the Boston Red Sox for minor leaguers Mike Burns and Frank Harris.

"Boston wouldn't have

made the deal without Burns or Harris, so that leaves the respect they have for our farm system," said Lajoie.

"We also picked up Jack Billingham from Cincinnati for minor leaguers George Czapuzello and John Valle."



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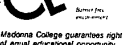
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