

Draft Recap: 2020 Iowa Crows

Those of us of a certain age lived through the Rubik's Cube fad circa 1980. If your circle of friends was like mine, there was a mix of those who could solve it blind-folded and those for whom it was a Sphinx-like riddle. I was in the latter group, a rather unpleasant memory that was rekindled a year or two ago when the robotics club kids at the school where I substitute teach were obsessively trying to best one another's times throughout the school day... Rubik's Cube had become the fidget spinners of the Mensa set. Everything old is new again.

Viewed from the wake of my third draft since rejoining the league, RUMBA is another cube that I am unable to master. The record speaks for itself: a membership spanning roughly ten years total, and not a single playoff berth in all that time. We are not the St. Louis Browns, finishing last year after year, but in some ways are even more pitiable... picking twelfth the first time and then tenth in each of the last two drafts reveals a team trapped in a web of mediocrity, stuck in the limbo of middling draft position.

This is not my first time around the block. I have been in draft leagues off and on for my entire adult life. So although I am intimately familiar with the notion of 'tanking' to move up in the draft order, something in my Catholic upbringing makes it hard for me to lose games with the wild abandon required to get one of the lottery picks. I have in fact tried to straddle the fence a bit in these first few new seasons, often trading high picks for veteran players to shore up the team. My major trade this off-season was more of the same: essentially my #10 pick (which was Gavin Lux in the event) for Brian Anderson. But at the same time I continued the tear-down of my roster that began last year, trading away good players like Carlos Santana and Hyung-jin Ryu in the perverse belief that to get better we first have to get worse. Clankety-clank, here comes the tank.

#30, DYLAN CEASE (RHP). My three main weaknesses going into the draft were at 1B, 2B, and pitching. I would normally prioritize hitters as a safer investment when starting a rebuild, but took this young ChiSox starter because I am a fan of both his team and his prospects. Furthermore, by middle of Round 2 it also seemed like the quality of hitters available had already taken a serious tumble. No telling if Cease was really the "best available" at this point, but he does have all-star upside so I'm happy with the selection.

***Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda?** Oscar Mercado or Danny Santana would have been nice OF pickups, but as mentioned I thought my first pick of the draft should have star potential. Harder to pass on was Nico Hoerner, potentially a good long-term answer at 2B. But what worried me the most was the dearth of real talent to patch my hole at 1B... maybe a mistake to dump Carlos Santana?*

#47, NICKY LOPEZ (2B). My other league, the CBA, was already into its middle rounds by this time, so I had already been struck by the overall disdain for Lopez (he was #105 over there). As such, I could likely have waited a round on this one (who knows?), but as a Royals fan with keystone troubles in this league I decided to take my guy here. It is worth mentioning that I was hooked by a report that he had bulked-up over the winter in hopes of hitting with a bit more power — I am always an easy fish to catch with this sort of scoop.

#50, GARRETT COOPER (1B). The second of my cluster of 2nd-round picks reflects my general "hitters first" bias to rebuilds. At age 29 and ranked 40th or so on my 'value' spreadsheet for hitters, Cooper, as with Lopez, was a bit of a need-based reach and in the context of stars like Pete Alonso and Jose Altuve neither amounts to much. But I must say in all candor that at the end of our draft's first day I was thinking the draft was going to be a success.

Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda? My main concerns after this were getting some bulk pitching innings and some more centerfield depth. We had quite a few outfielders on the roster already, but they are mostly LF types and I was hoping to get future help in either a CF or RF. Shortly after my pick, Adam Haseley and Mike Tauchman were taken, so suddenly the relatively good options there were gone. The same thing happened to the starting pitcher crop, causing me to question my choice to take hitters over Spencer Turnbull.

#70, DANIEL NORRIS (LHP). Not liking the look of my options in Round 4, I sent out a trade feeler and am listing my acquisition that followed — Daniel Norris — as if he was drafted. In retrospect, I should have just drafted a pitcher here, rather than also trade down from #90 to #117 (and my #3 next year for a #4), but let me just say that increasingly I feel it is better to get the guys you really want rather than making a hold-your-nose pick. Finally, it was still pretty fresh in my mind that at #90 last year year I talked myself into the innings-security of Derek Holland, and it felt good to pick up 140 innings *and* an arm I feel has some long-term value.

Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda? Kyle Lewis, Hunter Harvey, and Jake Fraley are just three of the guys on my needs-based short lists that were in some ways part of the opportunity cost of the Norris trade. You win some, you lose some. History will be the judge.

#110, MICHEL BAEZ (RHP). This pick was at least in part a spill-over from my other league. That morning over breakfast I had asked Jenny which of two names she liked better, and she picked Baez. But when the time actually came, I ended up taking the other guy and was feeling guilty about it. So he is now with the Iowa Cubs instead of the Iowa Owls. This is not one of my favorite moments in our draft, because I don't get enough innings from Baez and he isn't exactly all that and a bag of chips either. Then again, never underestimate a woman's intuition!

Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda? I was tempted to take either Oliver Drake or Chris Martin here. They are oldish, but have great skills. Frankly, I think I got caught up in the gold rush to nab the glittery September call-ups that I observed around me. It would have been wiser, perhaps, for the Cubs to add one of the remaining birds in the hand.

#117, BUCK FARMER (RHP). Weirdly, I looked beyond both Drake & Martin once again to take a different veteran arm in Buck Farmer. I suppose he seemed more valuable to me as a guy who is a bit younger and a tad closer to being his real team's next closer (and my stopper, Sean Doolittle, is getting a bit long in the tooth). One thing that struck me at this point was the depth of the relief pool even here near the end of Round 6.

Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda? "Lane Thomas" is not exactly a household name, but I remembered reading it this off-season right after he was picked by South Dakota. There were some other guys like this, buried so far down on my spreadsheet that I barely looked at them, but here was a guy who I might have preferred to Farmer had I noticed him — I still needed an outfielder, after all. To paraphrase Robert Frost, sometimes the lane not taken is the one that leaves us wondering.

#126, RIO RUIZ (3B). Ruiz has been killing the ball this Spring and is just 26. He also starts at the hot corner, a position where my main guy is Evan Longoria, now in his age 34 season. Yes, the rational side of my brain understands why he was still available in Round 7... just try not to judge my signing him to a guaranteed contract.

Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda? Also on my needs list was a third catcher. I am pretty strong there with Contreras & Caratini, but still wanted to fill out the position before the pool was drained to the dregs. As it turned out, I missed out on Stephen Vogt, Jake Rogers, and Zach Collins (who has some 1B upside). I also missed the chance to reacquire one of my cuts, Chris Davis, who has stunk the last

three years but who is ripping the ball down in Arizona — but frankly, I think I have too much pride to re-draft a guy that I cut. A card played is a card played (or something like that). But why all this self-doubt over alternatives to Ruiz? Surely a team in my position is better with him than with Vogt or Davis, but I'm angst-ridden nonetheless.

#143, CHRIS MARTIN (RHP). I suffered another mini-panic when I jumped ahead with a trade for this pick. The panic was over those catchers that were dropping like flies, and I just had one more that I wanted. But shortly after making the deal, it struck me that it seemed foolish to trade that #6 for a guy like Austin Allen (see my next pick), so instead I took one of the relief pitchers that I had targeted back at #110. I truly think that Martin is worth that trade, but now had to sweat another six picks to see if I could have my cake and eat it too.

Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda? *Josh Vanmeter is a versatile player, Bobby Bradley is potentially that long-term answer at 1B that my Crows crave, and Alex Dickerson would have finally given me a little more outfield depth. But no regrets here.*

#150, AUSTIN ALLEN (CA). This is one for those bat-first catchers who might end up at 1B... and this is exactly what I am hoping for, given my team's needs. I was unsure whether Zach Collins or Austin Allen was the better choice before the draft, but am now all-in on this guy.

Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda? *As mentioned, I can get over-excited by players having a good week down in Florida or Arizona, and doubly so if they play for a team that I like. Suffice to say that we had been measuring Bubba Starling for a jersey, but decided he could wait a round. One of the hardest parts of these drafts is not being able to sign everyone to a contract.*

#170, CARLOS ESTEVEZ (RHP). I will again remark that this pool seems exceptional for its pitching depth. Estevez was not a particular target of mine (the way that Martin was), but is a lot more interesting than the pitcher I took a year ago in this slot (Hector Velazquez). We have also bought a house in Colorado Springs in anticipation of retiring there in two years, so it's also a bonus to roster a Rockie.

Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda? *I needed to address my innings need here, and thought about taking Elieser Hernandez instead. Sometimes you just have to flip a coin. And there was also a strong tug toward taking a back-up closer here... there were two of them on my target list, though, and I was still waffling over which to take, so punted the harder decision until a few picks later.*

#179, GREG BIRD (1B). This is in theory a make-or-break spring for Bird, who at this point is looking like he might never fly again. My hope is that even if he doesn't break camp with the team, he'll still get a chance to get his swing right in AAA and eventually becomes my new starter at 1B. Admittedly it all sounds a bit far-fetched, but if it isn't to draft a few long-shots like this, why have 45-man rosters?

#180, MATT MAGILL (RHP). It boiled down to Magill or Jairo Diaz, the pair of closers still in the pool that seemed worth rostering. My heart desired the Rockie with the exotic name, but my head said Magill's 4R balance rating is a much better complement to Doolittle, so I went with him. Notably, he has a bit of a sore shoulder this spring and I took him nonetheless. I should really got to get a better handle on this rebuild/tanking stuff — why did I care whether he's 4L or 4R?

Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda? *Part of me wanted to make both of these picks pitchers, eschewing the long-shot in favor of either Diaz or Lewis Thorpe. But I am not going to lose sleep over any young pitcher; aside from being usable right now, is any young arm an appreciably different gamble than Bird? It is all about the future upside at this point, and given my 1B woes I think I made the smarter wager.*

#210, STEVEN BRAULT (LHP). A year ago, Derek Holland was my IP cushion, selected pretty high at #90. He turned out to be a bust, and this was fresh enough in my mind to engender the Norris deal (already mentioned) and my delaying any hold-ye-er-nose-and-hope pick like this one to the very end. So Brault gives me a lefty (which I wanted) and an innings cushion (which I needed). And, in the context of a team with the likes of Jordan Zimmermann (6.91) and Kyle Freeland (6.73) penciled-in for roughly 15 starts apiece, I am embarrassed to say that Brault's 5.16 ERA counts as an upgrade.

***Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda?** A kid from Tampa Bay, Peter Fairbanks, would have been my choice had I not been worried about innings. Richard Rodriguez, with 65 IP, had enough of a quality edge over Brault that I had to think twice on him as well. But I wanted a lefty, and so it goes.*

This was my third draft since rejoining RUMBA. In general, I got the guys I wanted and am happy with how it turned out. But as I watch the extra rounds unfold, it strikes me that my overall strategy was a bit flawed and that I should tweak my draft-swing between now and next year. A few observations:

- 1) I continue to fail at the over-arching goal of any draft: grabbing possible stars. After Round 2 the odds of drafting a future star fall precipitously. A few months ago, I set up an equation convincing me to trade pick #10 + Jurickson Profar (27) for Brian Anderson (27) + Mike Moustakas (31). In our draft, that pick turned out to be Gavin Lux (22). While Anderson has a "bird in the hand" quality, and it is also true that there is a chance that Gavin is never as good as Brian, the fact remains that I took maybe five more good years over a chance at ten.
- 2) At the time, I felt that one advantage of trading for Moose was that I wouldn't feel pressure to draft ABs at 3B/2B. True enough, but I ended up using my 3rd and 7th round picks for those very things — clearly I still didn't feel that Moose was much of a security blanket.
- 3) Brian Anderson was the key player in that deal (from my perspective) because he gave me the flexibility to cover either RF or 3B, and neither of those positions had much to shout about in the pool. That said, I will observe that Bryan Reynolds was available at #10, a player who is two years younger than Anderson and already a tad better. One can never predict how a trade will look in a year or two, but if I am ever going to get serious about rebuilding I need to end this cycle of trading away my chances for young future stars.

Looking back at my inaugural season, the 2018 class was a forgettable one. Kyle Freeland (#54) and Victor Caratini (#92) the only two still on the club. My notable whiff that year was Eric Sogard (#72), the 30-something infielder who was cut a year later and is back with a good card this year (a few years after I gave up on him). The journey from being a team with legit playoff hopes to the hot mess we have now began here.

Last year's draft class was at best a mixed bag. I still like Willy Adames (#10) quite a bit (frankly, I have to). Just two others from 2019's first 5 rounds remain: Nico Goodrum (#83) seems ok, but we have serious doubts over Christin Stewart (#50) — we reached for an outfielder when the pool was already fairly dry, and in retrospect I have to wonder how much upside a lumbering LF really had to offer. In the latter rounds another pair of keepers was stumbled upon: Derek Fisher (#175) and Tyler Chatwood (#210).

This time around, the Crows drafted seven pitchers and five hitters. During the draft, we also traded draft picks for Daniel Norris (a 26-yo lefty who works as either a long reliever or a short starter). As for Norris, I like him just fine and needed the innings, but it is also readily apparent that I could have drafted Tommy Milone (still available in our draft after I finished) at the tail end of things and have gotten my needed innings. Hopefully my analysis is correct, that Norris really is more than just a bandaid fix.

Here is a condensed look at my roster. The 24 new faces (drafted or acquired in the last 12 months) are in **Red**. The roster churn is sharply up from last year's 14, which suggests (take your pick) either a planned

tear-down or poor drafts two years running. Hitters have their balance, ABs, and OPS listed; pitchers have balance, IP, and ERA. We are in a downward slide that has no end in sight, and are braced for a likely 100+ losses in 2020.

CATCHERS. The big man on campus remains Willson Contreras (2L, 360, .888, and -3 arm), who had another injury-filled year but was otherwise pretty darn good. His backup is ok at the plate, Victor Caratini# (1R, 244, .795), but that +2 arm will be hard to stomach when Willson takes a day off. [Austin Allen*](#) (6R, 65, .559) is probably just lottery ticket, but I feel really good about this pickup right now.

FIRSTBASE. This winter we finally cut ties with Chris Davis, who was still regarded as a good player when I took over the Crows. While Davis was busy flailing away at the lower limit of the Mendoza Line, we got from a trade two solid years from Carlos Santana, but he's 34 now so we decided to trade him away while there was still some value. Part of the return was [Jake Bauers*](#) (1L, 372, .683), a youngish and somewhat iffy prospect who can partly cover the position — and with him as the presumptive starter you can see why [Garrett Cooper](#) (3R, 381, .790) was such an important draft pick! Also figuring to get some starts at first is Niko Goodrum# (5L, 423, .743), who will also backup 2B and SS. Waiting in the distant wings is the erstwhile Yankee wunderkind, [Greg Bird*](#) (E, 35, .550), still a fairly young chicken at 27.

SECONDBASE. The sudden collapse of Scooter Gennett, a key get in the big Arenado trade a year ago, was a serious blow to a team that wasn't all that good to begin with. The hole at this position was then widened (are you sensing a theme here?) by my trade of Jurickson Profar, whose '4' fielding rating and inferior bat nudged me toward acceptance of [Mike Moustakas*](#) (2L, 523, .845) as an upgrade. Goodrum gave me some depth and a slightly better glove, but I still breathed a sigh of relief when [Nicky Lopez*](#) (1L, 379, .601) was still available in the 3rd Round. It feels good to have rostered a young starter (and a Royal to boot) at a position that seems to have a lot of turnover.

THIRDBASE. Evan Longoria (2L, 453, .762) is getting long in the tooth, but he has the hot corner covered for another season. My big swap with the Bombers netted two good players who can play here, a moose and a marlin, but they are plugging other holes so the main backup at 3B will be [Rio Ruiz*](#) (1R, 370, .682). My new Oriole has a youthful air about him that, so as with Lopez we hope some of his upside is revealed in the near future.

SHORTSTOP. Elvis Andrus (1R, 600, .706) seems to be in a bit of a decline, but at 31 it seems reasonable to hope there are still good years ahead. (He was actually a guy I had hoped to trade, but got nary a nibble on him — proving once again that none of us really trusts a hitter over 30). Pushing him for starts is Willy Adames (5R, 531, .735), the only 1st-round pick that I have made since my return to the league. This is perhaps the strongest position on the team, but neither of these guys showed enough stick last season to merit complacency.

LEFTFIELD. Corey Dickerson* (2R, 260, .906) went from a '2' to a '4', which just goes to show how wily-nily Strat can be with the ratings sometimes. He still swings a pretty good bat, but due to injuries it's a good thing we drafted a bevy of borderline outfielders last year. Hanging around on the fringes of this roster are two marginally good prospects with poor fielding ratings — [Christin Stewart*](#) (1L, 369, .693) and [Derek Fisher*](#) (1L, 146, .657) — and that gives me trio of left-fielders that bat left-handed. More substantial help here and now is provided by [Adam Duvall](#) (5L, 120, .882) and [Robbie Grossman#](#) (3R, 420, .682), '2's' and a '3's' with the gloves.

CENTERFIELD. A pair of good fielders form a nice L/R platoon on paper, but alas neither Jackie Bradley Jr* (2R, 494, .738) nor JaCoby Jones (3R, 298, .740) has a middle-of-the-order bat. I had hoped to draft another option in center, but failed to do so.

RIGHTFIELD. The presumed regular a year ago, Steven Souza, Jr, missed the entire year due to injury. I probably should have cut him, but as the roster spins faster in its death spiral I find myself desperate for miracle comebacks. One of my better off-season acquisitions will be this year's starter, **Brian Anderson** (2R, 459, .810), and we've also traded for a pair of DH types that might get some outfield reps: **Jose Martinez** (5L, 334, .750) and **Jay Bruce*** (2R, 310, .784).

ROTATION. Kyle Freeland* (3L, 104, 6.73), Tyler Anderson* (2R, 21, 11.76), and Sean Manaea* (3L, 30, 1.21), and Tyler Skaggs* (RIP) all picked the same year to go from boom to bust, which means that my rotation fell from being a source of pride to a grave concern seemingly overnight. Scary-bad Jordan Zimmermann (7R, 112, 6.91) and just plain scary Domingo German (4R, 143, 4.03) will be sewn into a patchwork rotation that will also include **Caleb Smith*** (4L, 153, 4.52), **Miles Mikolas** (E, 184, 4.16), **Daniel Norris*** (1R, 144, 4.49), **Nick Pivetta** (1L, 94, 5.38), **Dylan Cease** (4R, 73, 5.79), **Kolby Allard*** (3R, 45, 4.96), and **Alex Cobb** (9L, 12, 10.95). We've got the innings covered, but this has got to be one of the sorriest rotations ever.

BULLPEN. Just three members of the bullpen are returning from last year: long-man Tyler Chatwood (7R, 77, 3.76), set-up man Hector Rondon (1R, 61, 3.71), and lefty Sean Doolittle* (3L, 60, 4.05). Believe it or not, I came out of last year's draft raving about a bumper crop, which hopefully says more about the volatility of relievers than it does about my player-evaluation skills. Fortunately, there was another strong field of relievers in the draft field, and we did well to harvest **Buck Farmer** (2R, 68, 3.72), **Chris Martin** (4L, 56, 3.40), **Carlos Estevez** (4R, 72, 3.75), **Matt Magill** (4R, 51, 4.09), and **Michel Baez** (2R, 30, 3.03) in the last few rounds. It would have been nice to have gotten a LOOGY, but our last draft pick was a lefty starter who will work out of the pen: **Steven Brault*** (2L, 113, 5.16). Note I also felt pretty good about my bullpen picks last year, and today only Chatwood's still with us.

The great thing about Spring is the way most of the guys on a roster seem to have upside. I'd love to think most of them are the building blocks of a return to respectability, but frankly don't see all that many glimmers of hope. So it will probably need to get even worse before it gets better. All can say is thank God for the quick-play option...