

## Draft Recap: 2021 Iowa Crows

As charter member and chairman of the Perennial Doormat Club, I'll begin this year's keynote address by quote-dropping Mark Twain: "History doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes." For instance, a year ago I traded Pick 10 for Brian Anderson. This time it was Pick 5 that I dealt away, the higher pick worthy of a more lucrative variation on a theme that has dominated my tenure as GM, trading a Good Thing for several Lesser Things. Yes, if things work out perfectly, Miguel Sano is a minor star again and that lesser pick I got also scores big and badda-bing the Crows are soon playoff-bound. The joy of a perennial rebuild is hope that one of these years the plan's going to come together, as well as the knowledge that in the long run we're all dead anyway... so just relax and enjoy the ride.

**#17, GAVIN LUX (2B).** My target in the 1st Round was an outfielder. The plums, Dylan Carlson and Cristian Pache, were plucked by then. By the time I was on the clock, under consideration were Ryan Mountcastle (best bird in the hand but a brick in the field) and Leody Taveras (a long-term prospect with pretty high risks but arguably a higher ceiling **and** a solid fielder). I was about to skip on both (see below) but at the last minute took Mountcastle. Almost immediately I had some regrets over taking yet another sluggish DH/LF-type and sent out a trade feeler. In the 11th hour, Jerry agreed to give me Gavin Lux for Mountcastle — a classic swap, in my opinion. Jerry got a top prospect who immediately brings a big bat for Lawrence Park's playoff push, and I get a blue-chipper with a better all-around profile. I didn't actually draft Lux, of course, but I'm listing him as my pick.

What makes Lux especially interesting, at least to me, is that he was the player drafted a year ago with the pick I traded to get Brian Anderson. The fruits of that pick had no come full circle, which can only mean one thing: Lux will be another Brandon Wood or Shawn Abner!

***Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda?** When in doubt over who to pick, I give Jenny three names and ask her which she likes best. In this case she liked Door #3 best, Deivi Garcia. He was my favorite pitcher in the pool, but I decided not to risk taking a young arm and the rest, as they say, is history. It was an odd time to suddenly become risk-averse, but I'm not used to having a 1st-round pick and between Mountcastle, Taveras, and Garcia wanted to play it safe.*

**#23, LEODY TAVERAS (CF).** Although it definitely felt good to get Taveras after passing him over at #17, there is still no denying he's got some serious flame-out potential. But it is nice to have, at least on paper, my CF of the future.

***Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda?** Deivi Garcia was still there for the taking as well. But I wanted to focus on hitting in this draft and won't look back.*

**#65, AUSTIN GOMBER (LHP).** Usually I have a pretty good plan for the first few rounds. This year was more haphazard. What was interesting here was that about the time #65 was coming due I got a call from a friend in my other league, and out of curiosity asked him what he thought about Lewan Diaz and Jesus Sanchez. Long story short, he didn't like either too much, and this caused me to panic and take young Mr. Gomber. I now have about two franchises worth of southpaws and for the second time in my first three picks have some egg on my face.

***Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda?** Jenny and I plan to retire to Colorado, so the vague impulse to collect a few players on my (future) home team had a lot to do with why Gomber was my top pitching target remaining. The risks are obvious, but it'll be ok.*

**#75, LEWIN DIAZ (1B).** My goal is to end the draft 3-deep at every position. I like Diaz as both a lefty hitter to complement righties Miguel Sano and Garrett Cooper, and as a young "future" type. The MLB

Pipeline site has him listed as the #2 cold-corner prospect and I hope they come through on this one... the Crows always seem a bit wanting at this position!

***Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda?*** *A young Rockie, Josh Fuentes, is another young first baseman that should have been on my radar. But I'm not cramming for the drafts the way I used to, and frankly might also need new glasses — not sure how else to explain not noticing a guy who hit .320.*

**#85, PAVIN SMITH (1B/LF).** I am a sucker for those fast-food 2-for-\$6 offers. With Diaz and Smith in the bag, all I need now is an order of curly fries. But seriously, it is amazing to me the way a draft will seem pretty weak in a middle round and then suddenly reveal clumps of interesting players when I start looking deeper.

***Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda?*** *It was around this time when two things happened. First, Jeff came calling for Adam Duvall and I got Willie Calhoun in that swap. It made me little younger and we all still remember Willie as a pretty good prospect, so all's well but for one thing: Smith adds to my hoard of lefty outfielders at the cost of one of the few right-handed outfielders on my roster. Which means, ideally, that I shouldn't take Smith but frankly I like him more than Diaz and will just have to try and sort this out next year. I think if I had noticed Anthony Alford in the pool — he's having a great Spring and bats righty — he would be a Crow over either Smith or Diaz.*

**#102, JOE JIMENEZ (RHP).**

**#103, DANIEL BARD (RHP).** Back-to-back picks are a great joy, like redeeming a 2-for-1 coupon. It is said that hunger is the best sauce, but the meal tastes even better when it's a bargain. Now obviously the second pitcher, Bard, isn't really a freebie (various trades netted me these particular picks), but it amused me to take two closers with these picks, much as I had taken a pair of young first basemen with the previous two. Regarding the two righties, Jimenez had been a target of mine all along in this draft, and it seemed about the right time to bring him aboard. As for Bard, I guess the theory is that he'll be my stopper in the year ahead and might have a few more miles in the tank. And it probably goes without saying that I also like the fact that he pitches for the mile-high club out in Colorado.

***Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda?*** *Right up to the eve of these picks, I had planned to take Contreras the Younger to tandem with his older brother. While I was sort of crushed when he was 'stolen' from me at #101, as we shall see it turned out for the best.*

**#125, JORGE ALCALA (RHP).** The draft is a long grind, and I sort of got lost in the flow and then all of a sudden realized I was down to my last two picks. One of them definitely had to be a pitcher, so here it was easy to take the one name left among to group I had considered at #103. Frankly, I don't know a much about Jorge beyond his stat line, but it was good enough to roster and of course there is always one little thing that moves the needle one direction instead of another. In this case, it was a note I read in Baseball Prospectus about Buck Farmer, one of my hold-overs in the pen: Buck is the only major-leaguer with my dad's first name, George, right now. My dad's in a nursing home, hopefully mending a broken hip and celebrating #90 in six weeks, so I'm also taking this guy with a variation of the first name for the old man. And that last name isn't too shabby either: it translates as 'masculine'.

***Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda?*** *I was pretty locked-in on a pitcher with this pick, but want to mention that Anthony Alford went at #115 and I hadn't even looked at him prior to that... hmm, I wonder if we might have a bit of a clue here as to why the Crows seem a little worse every year?*

**#137, DEREK HILL (CF).** When we lived in Beaverville, the Hill's lived in a house through the backyard fence. Derek was just a baby, but our girls played with his older sister. The last time I saw him was when I was subbing in one of his 9th-grade classes, where I learned that Elise was now at the Air Force Academy and that Derek was a pretty good baseball player (just like his dad). The last major-leaguer I even vaguely

knew was Mike Boddicker (our teams played one another in the sectionals one year, and we happened to take a class together at Iowa). Anyway, Derek might not have been my head's first choice at #137, but in my heart he was fitted for a uniform back in 1997. Welcome to the Major Leagues, kid!

I used to go to a lot of games at the high school where I worked as a sub. Over the course of ten years a handful were like Derek, in that I had hopes of making them a future RUMBA pick. Jake Yacinich, for instance, played at University of Iowa and then was drafted by the Angels. He didn't have much power, but was fast and had a classic lefty swing. After a taste of AAA — and some cameos in Spring Training games that I caught on tv — at 25 his career was derailed by various injuries. And there was an outfielder named Zach Coppola, drafted by the Phillies via South Dakota State, who reached AA before calling it quits at the ripe age of 24. Finally, the best one I saw, a catcher named Spencer Navin, who did well at Vanderbilt but never hit well enough to get past high-A ball. Let's never forget what a tough climb it is to even drink a cup of coffee as a utility guy.

***Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda?** Omar Olivares was a great temptation here, in that he's probably got a better chance to stick around for a few years than Derek and, more importantly, would be a useful righty outfielder to use in the year ahead. With benefit of hindsight, I would have cut Cristian Stewart to give me another end-game pick!*

This was my fourth draft since rejoining RUMBA. This off-season continued my general pattern of trading quality for quantity, or veterans for youths. One such trade (with Overland Park) dominated this draft. In it we traded Pick #5 for Miguel Sano, Pick #17, and #103. The picks I got turned into Gavin Lux and Daniel Bard; the one I traded became Alec Bohm (and Jeff drafted a couple of guys at the end to complete his end of the bargain). Sano's having a poor Spring, but you gotta have heard that he's my Joe Hardy or Roy Hobbs (cue clips from *Damn Yankees* and *The Natural*).

We only drafted nine guys this time because some extra picks that I had accumulated were dealt for Matt Barnes. Believe it or not, we had no closer at all prior to this trade... and now, after drafting Bard and Jose Jimenez, we are awash in mediocre options to get us the final outs. In this you can see the modus operandi of a franchise that is in a downward spiral, a sort of Pollyannish hope that somewhere in this flock of broken dreams is a bird that might actually soar. So with fingers crossed we collect long-shots such as Jake Bauers, Pavin Smith, and Lewin Diaz as collective hedge against the realization of my worst fears about Miguel Sano (that no player who strikes out an adjusted 270 times a year can find long-term success, even if he does hit a lot of homers). If "ifs" and "buts" were candy and nuts it would be Christmas every day of the year here in Iowa.

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. Part of the problem was my delusion that we had a legit playoff hope — there's a big difference between "competitive" and "contender".

The 2019 draft class was at best a mixed bag. I still like Willy Adames (#10) quite a bit (and he did take a small step forward). Just two others from 2019's first 5 rounds remain: Niko 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 this lumbering LF really had anyway. In the latter rounds another keeper was stumbled upon: Tyler Chatwood (#210).

Last year, the Crows drafted a dozen new players. Dylan Cease (#30) was our top pick, and later in the draft we added Daniel Norris (via trade), Buck Farmer (#77) and Steven Brault (#100). There are also some solid hitters in this crew, but it's harder to see much star potential. But you go to war with the army you

have, and sometimes that means relying on Garrett Cooper (#47) and Nicky Lopez (#50) for now and hoping that Rio Ruiz (#126) and Austin Allen (#150) are still miracles in the making.

Here is a condensed look at my roster. The 14 new faces (drafted or acquired in the last 12 months) are in **Red**. The roster churn is sharply down from last year's 24, which is more a reflection of my flagging energy than any sort of plan coming together. Hitters have their balance, ABs, and OPS listed; pitchers have balance, IP, and ERA. We went 64-98 in 2020, and are braced for more of the same in 2021.

**CATCHERS.** The big man on campus remains Willson Contreras (3R, 567, .763, and -3 arm). His backup is ok at the plate, Victor Caratini# (E, 348, .661), but last year's +2 arm was upgraded to -1 so pitchers won't complain when Willson takes a day off. We stubbornly clung to Austin Allen\* (4R, 93, .542), last year's lottery ticket, but don't feel especially good about him right now.

**FIRSTBASE.** Part of the return from the big Carlos Santana trade was Jake Bauers\*, who didn't play at all last year even though he was healthy. He probably should have been cut, but for now I'd rather roster him instead of suffering the embarrassment. Partial return on our trade of Pick #5 was a big man to fill the void, **Miguel Sano** (4R, 558, .756), but if he doesn't rebound from a poor season the hole I've been digging is gonna get even deeper. A pair of middling draft picks landed us a couple of middling prospects, **Lewin Diaz\*** (5R, 117, .400) and **Pavin Smith\*** (4R, 111, .746), who join Bauers on the taxi squad.

**SECONDBASE.** A nice utility option around the horn (especially against lefties) is Niko Goodrum# (8L, 474, .598), which means the starter most days will be Nicky Lopez\* (2R, 507, .552). Lopez isn't a threat to win silver for his bat, but at least the glove's gold. Long-term, I think it is obvious how important it will be for **Gavin Lux\*** (5R, 189, .595) to deliver on his excellent potential.

**THIRDBASE.** Brian Anderson (E, 600, .810) had a nice year at third, but I traded for him a year ago because he was able to patrol RF so it stings that he lost that flexibility. Acquired in the same trade was Mike Moustakas\* (3R, 417, .799). Oddly enough, Moose learned how to cover multiple positions but unfortunately forgot how to hit. Returning backup Rio Ruiz\* (2L, 555, .713) is looking kind of iffy, but we're still hopeful that he turns out to be more than just a cipher.

**SHORTSTOP.** A year ago, this seemed like the strongest position on the team. No more. Elvis Andrus (E, 309, .582) not only failed to bounce back, but accelerated his decline (but at 32 it seems reasonable to hope the move to Oakland will do him well). The clear starter is now Willy Adames (2L, 555, .813), who is still arguably the only 1st-round pick that I have made during my 4-year return engagement here at RUMBA.

**LEFTFIELD.** Corey Dickerson\* (1R, 582, .713) had a down year but we hope it isn't the new normal. Hanging around on the fringes of this roster are a pair of marginally good prospects with the dreaded '5' fielding tag — Christin Stewart\* (1R, 270, .524) and **Willie Calhoun\*** (2R, 300, .491) — and that gives me trio of left-fielders that bat left-handed and are lamentably bad hitters given their defective defense.

**CENTERFIELD.** A pair of good fielders form a nice L/R platoon on paper, but alas neither Jackie Bradley Jr\* (3L, 573, .814) nor JaCoby Jones (4L, 291, .848) hits RHP all that well. The same holds true for the kid I drafted in the 2nd Round, **Leody Taveras#** (2L, 357, .703), but I won't hold it against him. Deep depth is provided by **Derek Hill** (1R, 33, .258), whose good field/no hit profile might prove useful down the road given the defensive liabilities at both corner spots.

**RIGHTFIELD.** With Brian Anderson shifted to the infield, I guess it's only fitting for one of our incumbents at first, Garrett Cooper (8L, 360, .853), to give outfield more of a try this year. Joining him is one of our better players, Robbie Grossman# (8R, 498, .826) and what counts on this team as another prospect, **Sam Hilliard\*** (4R, 315, .710).

**ROTATION.** The remarkable thing about our six starting pitchers — Kyle Freeland\* (3R, 213, 4.33), Tyler Anderson\* (6R, 180, 4.37), Dylan Cease (5R, 174, 4.01), Sean Manaea\* (4R, 162, 4.50), Alex Cobb (4R, 156, 4.30), and Steven Brault\* (3R, 129, 3.38) — is that they are all returnees which meant I avoided the usual inning worries this draft. None is anything special, of course, but I must say even this mediocre group is a big improvement from last year. There is a heavy tilt leftward to this staff (which reminds me, I should have moved the fences accordingly!). The rotation depth, Caleb Smith\* (2L, 42, 2.57), Tyler Chatwood (7L, 57, 5.30), Nick Pivetta (7R, 48, 6.89), and Kolby Allard\* (8R, 102, 7.75) is a reflection of my reliance on quantity over quality. We might get lucky with a few of these guys, but our real hopes for the future are the returns of two righties who did not pitch in 2020, Domingo German and Miles Mikolas.

**BULLPEN.** Just two members of the bullpen are returning from last year: long-man Daniel Norris\* (3L, 84, 3.25) and my erstwhile set-up man, Buck Farmer (7R, 63, 3.80). New members of this murder of Crows include a trio of veteran closers: **Daniel Bard** (5R, 75, 3.65), **Joe Jimenez** (5R, 69, 7.15), and **Matt Barnes** (8L, 69, 4.30). Rounding out the bullpen are some younger and slightly more interesting future options: **Jorge Alcala** (9R, 72, 2.63), **Austin Gomber\*** (2R, 87, 1.86), and **Jose De Leon** (5R, 18, 18.00).

The great thing about Spring is the way most of the guys on a roster have upside. I'd love to think all 45 of my guys are the building blocks of 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...