



There will no be postseason roar at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario for the 10th time in the last 11 years. It's not even close to the worst stretch of baseball in franchise history, as the Indians missed the playoffs from 1921-1947 and 1955-1994. Of course, in 1920 and 1948, the Indians won the World Series and in 1954 and 1995, they appeared in the World Series. The occasional playoff appearance has done very little to improve fan morale and it may be at an all-time low as the Indians lost over 90 games for the third time in four years, something the franchise had never accomplished in 112 seasons.

Is it as bad as it seems? Most people will say yes. Carlos Santana, who led the Indians in wins above a replacement player (WAR), would be considered the team's best player. He was 3.8 wins above a replacement player. Of Indians single-season WAR leaders, that ranks 107th in the 112 seasons of the Indians organization, including the Cleveland Naps, the Cleveland Bronchos, and the Cleveland Blues.

Without getting too much into the WAR debate, which is a statistic that is dominating the American League MVP discussion, as Mike Trout was worth 10 wins above a replacement player and, to some, that overshadows Miguel Cabrera's Triple Crown season, the Online Bible of Baseball, Baseball-Reference.com, explains WAR like this: 8+ WAR is MVP-caliber, 5+ WAR is an all-star, 2+ WAR is a starter, and anything below two wins above replacement player is a "sub" or backup. Obviously, less than zero is below replacement level.

Once the Indians select the new manager for the next few seasons, the focus will (hopefully) shift to improving the ballclub. For years, we've been told about the "core" that Shapiro and Antonetti feel like they have put together. Usually, they directly speak about pitching and defense as what they want to build around. Guess what, guys. You don't have a core to build

around. If we use the Baseball-Reference simple guide to WAR regarding my projection of next year's 25-man roster, here's what the Indians have to work with:

MVP-caliber: 0

All-Stars: 0

Starters: 6 (Santana, Kipnis, Choo, Cabrera, Brantley; Pestano)

Subs: 12 (Hafner, Hannahan, Carrera, Chisenhall, Marson, Canzler; Rogers, Smith, C. Perez, Allen, R. Perez, Masterson, Sipp)

The rest are below replacement level, including McAllister, Gomez, Tomlin, and Kotchman.

As you can see, not only do the Indians not have a full starting nine, they only have 55.5% of one. The broken arm Lonnie Chisenhall suffered derailed his season, but it's hard to envision him getting above two WAR anyway. From a lineup standpoint, the Indians have a fairly decent group to build around, as Santana, Kipnis, Choo, Cabrera, and Brantley were worth 16.5 wins this season. The 43 other guys who played for the Indians combined for -3 wins above replacement player. So, not only are their other starters not good, but neither are the bench players and depth.

Unfortunately, the majority of what the five key position players accomplished is negated by how incredibly awful the pitching staff is. The Indians used 10 different starters this season. Their combined WAR was -5.5 wins. Justin Masterson, our de facto ace, was exactly replacement level. The six guys with over 12 starts combined for -5.4 WAR. Even with just an elementary understanding of WAR, it's very easy to see that the Indians are in dire need of help.

All of this simply confirms what anybody who regularly watches the Indians already knows. The big problem is how to fix it. The bigger problem is how to fix it on a low budget with very little

tradable talent and a weak free agent pool. Frankly, I only see one solution:



That's all there is to it, folks. The Indians have to blow it up and start from the ground up. That includes parting with the "core" players who, theoretically, should be built around. This is one of those situations where you have to get worse in order to get better. It's hard to imagine a lot of scenarios where the Indians are worse, but think 2012 Houston Astros or 2002 Tampa Bay Devil Rays. Hell, think back to the Indians in the '70s.

The only way out of this downward spiral is to rebuild and hope to get lucky. Use your scouting department and pillage other teams' talent. If there's one thing that the Shapiro and Antonetti front offices have succeeded at, it's taking other teams' talent. The reason they're in this spot right now is because they swung and missed on the CC Sabathia and Cliff Lee trades. Besides that, they have a terrific track record of acquiring other teams' prospects.

Another area that the Indians need to be better in is signing international free agents. The Indians haven't done a whole lot of that lately, at least not for impact players, though they were in the bidding for Cuban import and Oakland left fielder Yoenis Cespedes. By the way, Cespedes hit .292/.356/.505/.861 and the A's were 82-47 in the 129 games he played; 12-21 without him.

Think about what the Indians were able to accomplish in 2005 and 2007 and how they did it. They benefitted from the Bartolo Colon trade in getting Grady Sizemore. They got Travis Hafner

for Ryan Drese. They got Coco Crisp for the corpse of Chuck Finley. They had major contributions from international free agents like Victor Martinez, Jhonny Peralta, Rafael Betancourt, Rafael Perez, Asdrubal Cabrera, and Fausto Carmona.

With their work in trades and international free agency, it made it easier to patchwork the holes with journeymen free agents and fill-ins. Guys like Ronnie Belliard and Casey Blake. Guys like Kevin Millwood and Paul Byrd.

Ultimately, what the Indians need is a true ace to develop somewhere in the minor leagues. Remember the magical 2007 season? CC Sabathia was worth six wins above replacement player and Fausto Carmona was worth 5.9. It was that one-two punch that made a division championship possible. It was that one-two punch that ultimately failed against the Red Sox and prevented the Indians from likely winning the World Series.

Possibly that ace comes out of the 2013 draft class, as the Indians will have the fifth pick. Possibly that ace comes via trade. Possibly that ace comes from one of the high-upside high school pitchers the Indians have drafted in the last few drafts. Possibly the Indians can catch lightning in a bottle with an international free agent. This is all that they can hope for because pitchers are well out of their price range in free agency. Aces cannot be bought in this market, they must be developed. Until the Indians develop one, they're never going anywhere.

I hate to be that guy, but, if you had any hope this offseason, you might as well store it away. Barring a miracle, the Indians are another 90-loss team next season, if not triple digits. There's simply a lack of talent that cannot be answered via trade, free agency, or anything short of a time machine. The only course of action is to stockpile prospects and be patient.

At 13.5 WAR as a team in 2012, the Indians are at least 25 wins worth of players away from being a serious contender, even in the watered-down AL Central. Last season's going rate for wins in the free agent market, at least with what I looked at for Josh Willingham (2.9, \$7M) and Carlos Beltran (3.6, \$13M), was over \$3M per win. If we carry that logic over, the Indians are around \$75M worth of players away from contention. That's not an exact number or a wholly accurate way of looking at it, but, the point is, it costs a lot of money to purchase wins on the free agent market. And, that's just position player wins. Think about how much pitching costs, which is what the Indians obviously need the most.

I've spent over 1300 words depressing you and basically telling you in October that the 2013 season is going to be an unmitigated disaster. There's a difference between pessimism and realism. This is the latter. This will get worse before it gets better because it has to. The course of action that must be taken would be a tremendously unpopular one.

Unfortunately, or fortunately for those of you who like your glass half full and your unicorns where you can clearly see them, a complete rebuild would take an acknowledgement of failure from the Indians front office. That seems highly unlikely. Therefore, what probably happens is that the status quo remains the same and so, too, do the results.

And that's about the worst outcome for this offseason.