

In Francona We Trust? We'll See

Written by {ga=tommoore}

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The Cleveland Indians made it official on Monday, naming Terry Francona as the 42nd manager in team history.

“I know we have challenged ahead of us,” [Francona said about the prospect of taking over a team that just lost 90-plus games](#) for the third time in four years. “But I look forward to tackling these challenges together as a unit, as a we, always. I’m genuinely excited to do that. To embark upon a challenge together has me so excited, but it’s hard to express it.”

Francona’s hiring raises two questions.

First, if you could manage any team in Major League Baseball, why would you choose the Indians?

The Indians have not made the playoffs since 2007 and, over the past three seasons they have put together a record of 217-269.

This year they finished with 68 wins and in fourth place in the American League Central Division. The Tribe was last in the American League in team ERA (4.78), gave up the second-most walks, and had the 12th-worst batting average against.

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On the offensive side, the Indians were 13th in runs scored, 12th in homeruns, 9th in batting average, 13th in slugging percentage and 13th in OPS.

Francona has managed Philadelphia (1997 to 2000) and Boston (2004 to 2011), winning two World Series with the Red Sox – no small task given that franchise's history. While in Boston, he had six years of 90-plus victories and guided the Red Sox to the playoffs five times.

Of course, the Red Sox were loaded with All Stars and high-priced talent, something that we haven't seen in Cleveland in a long time.

Given all that, why would Francona want to come to the Indians? Doesn't it seem like he would have had other options and, if not, what are other teams seeing that the Tribe is missing?

A large part of the decision is the 12-year relationship Francona has with team president Mark Shapiro and general manager Chris Antonetti.

"The large part of the allure was my relationships already existing here," Francona said. "I believe in that so much. It doesn't necessarily ensure that you're going to win every game you play, but I like the idea of going through whatever we have to go through with the people that are in place here."

Another reason is the simple fact that Cleveland is not Boston. After spending eight years in a pressure cooker, Francona apparently is looking for a more laid-back approach.

"He can go out to dinner and not have it reported in a newspaper gossip column," [Peter Gammons wrote on MLB.com](#)

. "He is not going to manage in a fishbowl and have to hold pregame and postgame press conferences explaining everything he or his players did."

Gammons is right, of course. You only have to do those things in this town if you are coach of

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the Browns.

So did Francona take this job so he could hang out with his buddies and interact with a pillow-soft media? After spending the past year as an analyst at ESPN, Francona says he's recharged and ready to go.

"I thought it was an important year," Francona said. "Quite frankly, I think maybe I lost a little bit of perspective. Taking a year back, it's not easy to accept the fact that you need to, but I think it was healthy for me to do it. To do this job, and to do it correctly, you've got to be all in, all the time. I think I was showing some signs of wear and tear. I wouldn't have interviewed here if I didn't think it was the right thing to do.

"I understood before we got into this what may be ahead of us. It doesn't scare me. I welcome the challenge."

That leads us to our second question: does this really change anything for the Indians?

Unless Francona rolls into town with a left fielder, first baseman, a couple of starting pitchers, a designated hitter (and please, don't bring up David Ortiz; the Indians just got out from under Travis Hafner's contract, do they really want to go there again with an aging player like Ortiz?) and a Brinks truck full of money, nothing has changed.

The Indians still don't have the money to compete in the Central Division, let alone the American League of Major League Baseball as a whole. There are holes all over the roster – and may get worse if the team moves right fielder Shin-Soo Choo and closer Chris Perez in the off-season – with no hope that help will be coming any time soon from the minors.

The Dolans also don't have any spare money lying around to pump up the payroll, especially after attendance dropped again this year.

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“As excited as we are about (Terry’s) accomplishments,” [Antonetti said](#) , “I think what excites us most is what those accomplishments are built upon, the foundation. Specifically, Terry is an exceptional leader, he has boundless energy, he’s a relentless communicator and he brings a winning attitude.”

The Indians love to on about the core players on the team - Jason Kipnis, Michael Brantley, Asdrubal Cabrera, Carlos Santana, Lonnie Chisenhall and Vinnie Pestano, to name a few – but is that core really that strong? They are all nice players, but what if they are just complimentary players who need two to three All-Stars to really make the team a winner?

Then what?

“We want to improve,” [Antonetti said](#) . “We think Terry is a very good manager regardless of the specifics of the roster composition. Our goal and our objective is to figure out a way to build the best team we can. That starts with a critical assessment of where we are organizationally.”

But how critical can that assessment be if everyone in the room is too busy patting each other on the back?

“I understand the chain of command,” [Francona said](#) . “And they understand I want to make them proud. At the same time, I think we can have the ability to have an argument or two. But when you have a relationship, you go on from there.”

In ancient Rome, when the masses got upset because a fresh batch of slaves had taken all the available jobs, or there was no bread because the Egyptians were holding up grain shipments because they were riled up about the whole lack of home rule thing, or the brothels were too crowded because a fresh batch of legionnaires were back in town after being at war for several years (and yes, we’ve watched too much of HBO’s *Rome*), the Emperor were throw lavish parties and hold games at the Coliseum to help distract the masses from their miserable day-to-day existence.

The Francona hiring gives us the same feeling. The Dolans can’t do anything to really fix the

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team, so they distracted the fans by hiring a manager that everyone has heard of. Now they can point to Francona and say, "see, we're *doing something*," and hope the fans don't notice that the Tribe is far more likely to finish at the bottom of the division again next year than contend for a playoff spot.

We're trying not to bag on Francona here; there's only so much he is realistically going to be able to do. The Indians are obviously (probably?) not going to have a month next year where they go 5-24 like they did this August, but they're also not going to go 24-5 in any month.

Let's say Francona adds 10 wins to the season total, that still doesn't put the Tribe anywhere near a playoff spot.

The Indians say they trust Francona is the right man for the job. Francona says he trusts that the front office has his back. The team is asking its fans to trust that it knows what it is doing.

Even in Cleveland, where fans have been living on hopes and dreams since 1964, they may turn out to be too big of an ask.

(Photo by The Associated Press)