



As the World Series plods along and the Indians fill their coaching staff under new manager Terry Francona, the wheels should be spinning on this winter's free agent crop and possible trade partners for some of the Indians players. Tough decisions will have to be made regarding Travis Hafner, Ubaldo Jimenez, and Roberto Hernandez, followed by tough decisions to fill the ballclub's holes with whatever resources are available.

Mark Shapiro participated in a [very candid Q&A Interview](#) with Pat McManahon of FoxSportsOhio.com this past week and shed some light on what the thought process is of the front office. It was a strong set of questions from McManahon, omitting the softballs that usually get hurled at the Tribe and their front office members. McManahon cut right to the core, talking about player evaluation, fan perception, and Shapiro's transition from the personnel side to the business side.

As usual, the haters have been out in full force, blasting Shapiro for some of his answers and criticizing his performance. A lot of what Shapiro said in the interview resonated with me because he did what all of us want he and GM Chris Antonetti to do – take responsibility. Shapiro directly referenced taking accountability twice and said something similar regarding how the team didn't do its due diligence on Jason Knapp, the player with the highest upside from the Cliff Lee deal.

I swore I wouldn't do this anymore, but I do sympathize with Shapiro a little bit based on his answers to these questions. He's absolutely right when he says that he could give the fans a better explanation as to the challenges and the hardships this team faces, but they either wouldn't understand or would simply block it out. The kind of cost-benefit analysis that the Indians have to do on players has to be insanely detailed because they have to maximize every

dollar. Trying to explain that to the fans, using sabermetric terms and throwing out stats like WAR and Ultimate Zone Rating, and trying to get people to comprehend runs created and SIERA (skill-interactive ERA), is an exercise in futility. Fans don't want to have to think. They want to mindlessly enjoy. They want no part of having to understand what the front office goes through. They just want wins. The process of acquiring or developing wins doesn't matter. It's their job and it's something they have to be good at because of the positions that front office personnel are in.

In the interview, Shapiro notes that one win in free agency costs about \$9M, citing that players often regress in the later years of the contract and aren't worth as much. Right there, that's Mark Shapiro telling you why the Indians don't believe in long-term contracts. It tells you why the Indians attempt to pluck veteran guys out of the free agent pool on one or two-year deals. They hope to maximize a couple years of production and get out before the player falls flat on his face.

Baseball-Reference and Fangraphs, two of the most valuable baseball statistics databases on the internet, both have different formulas for calculating wins above replacement player. There are discrepancies, like B-R has Sabathia at 51 WAR while Fangraphs has 61.6. Carlos Pena, this past season, a free agent the Indians were interested in, was worth .5 WAR according to B-R and .9 WAR according to Fangraphs. That right there shows you that every algorithm for player evaluation is calculated differently. Where the Indians might find value in one player according to their data, another team may see far less value. We don't know anything about the Indians player evaluation system, except that it hasn't really worked, but it's not from a lack of effort.

Consider how pissed off you are when the Indians lose 90 games. Or, maybe, you aren't pissed off. You're just apathetic. You don't care anymore. Imagine the guy sitting in front of his computer who rationalized that giving Casey Kotchman \$3M was a great investment. No matter what evidence he gave, no matter how compelling his argument, which, it clearly was compelling enough to sign him, it was all for naught because Casey Kotchman was one of the worst starting position players in the Major Leagues last season. Imagine his disappointment. How upset are you when you spend several hours putting together a toy for your kids only to find out that it doesn't work or a piece is missing? How irritating is it when you type out a report or a slideshow presentation, only for your computer to crash and delete everything you had? It happens. It's downright soul-crushing. But, what do you do? You start it all over again.

In 2011, Kotchman was paid \$750,000. He was worth 2.8 wins, according to Fangraphs. Taking into account what Shapiro said about how much wins cost, about \$250,000 per win is a

mind-blowing number. Kotchman clearly overachieved in 2011, but let's say that the Indians projected him out to 1.5 wins for 2012. So, they paid \$2M per win, well below the market rate in free agency for wins.

There is no way that the Indians projected Casey Kotchman to be worth -1.5 wins. He had his worst season ever. People will criticize them for signing Kotchman without looking at the rationale. It doesn't matter to them. Kotchman was horrible and that's that. It could have been a very savvy signing had Kotchman held up his end of the bargain...

And that's part of it, too. Shapiro and Antonetti's job is to find the players that make the most sense from a cost-benefit analysis perspective. Then, it's up to the player to live up to that analysis. Whose fault is it when the player doesn't perform? Do you blame the front office for not exploring every possible outcome or do you blame the player for not producing? The front office doesn't have a crystal ball. Unless there are very obvious red flags, the onus is on the player to make the front office look good, not the other way around.

There's a method to this supposed madness. A method that Shapiro outlined as best he could in the interview. A method that many GMs around the league use. The Indians aren't alone in using sabermetric analysis to evaluate players. The Indians aren't the only team who view WAR, wins above replacement player, as a critically important stat. There has to be a realistic correlation between wins and dollars.

With all of this in mind, fans need start having realistic expectations for the Indians. They are never going to be a perennial contender unless a billionaire buys the team. The revenue stream in Cleveland, pardon the term, sucks. Shapiro mentions in the interview that, since the mid-90s, four Fortune 500 companies have left Cleveland. Without corporations buying suites, box seats, or hosting company events, there is a financial void that cannot be filled by people buying \$10 bleacher seats. It is what it is. The Indians can't miss on players they acquire, whether it's via the draft or trading. Their margin for error is so incredibly small that Justin Verlander couldn't hit it with a fastball.

As a diehard fan who wants nothing more than to see the Indians succeed, it's a hard realization to come to. Every fan takes it differently. Some still support the team and buy season tickets. Some walk-up whenever they can go to a game. Others swear off the team entirely, secretly hoping to get back on the bandwagon one day.

Baseball is a game of perspective. The perspective it takes to be an Indians fan is one of realism. The Indians will not be trading for Alex Rodriguez this offseason. They will not suddenly win 95 games. They will not have a payroll above \$75M. Obviously, it's a frustrating situation, not just for us fans, but also for the players and the front office. Manny Acta was fired because of the frustrating circumstances the team faces.

Everything from Shapiro's interview becomes more relevant as the Indians approach free agency with a despondent fan base and the front office excitement that comes with having a proven manager in the dugout for the 2013 season. The front office is tasked with the same chore they always have, year in and year out. Find us production for as little money as possible. Every year, that job gets harder and harder as escalating salaries and greedy agents take advantage of the flawed economics of baseball.

In summation, either you want to understand the plight of the front office or you don't. Those who don't might as well be reading a book and skipping to the last page of every chapter just to find out what happens without having to see what led to the event. Everybody wants to win, the players, the fans, the front office. To me, the fans have an obligation to know what it takes to win if they want to criticize. That's a total pipe dream, but, in my perfect world, that's what happens.