

Pipe Dreams

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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Mark Shapiro has been publicly confident about the Indians ability to rebound in 2007, despite the fact the team is coming off a 78-84 season and plays in baseball's toughest division. While he cautions that the team still has time, Gary Benz sees that as a pipe dream right now ... especially as free agent relief pitchers continue to sign elsewhere.



We ran into Indians owner Paul Dolan at the Ohio State/Michigan game last week. He was quite pleasant to talk with. Ever the gentleman, both he and we, and with his young son by his side and more important fish to fry, we resisted the urge to tweak him about last year's Indians disaster.

But that meet and greet did get us scurrying back to our own archives because it reminded us, again, to ask "why did the Indians trade Bob Wickman?"

As this off-season unfolds it shouldn't be a surprise that the Indians are bit players, having completed only a trade for second baseman Josh Barfield (a trade necessitated by the trade of Ronnie Belliard and the lack of attention paid by GM Mark Shapiro to the position over the last several seasons) and the recent and apparent signing of actor David Duchovny. (Or maybe it was part time Phillies outfielder David Dulicci, hard to tell) The chances of signing a closer or even legitimate bullpen help dwindles by the day.

The Los Anaheim Angels of Southern California Near Disney signed the only decent free agent, Justin Speier. The best of the rest looks like this: LaTroy Hawkins, Keith Foulke, Danys Baez, who just signed a three-year deal with the Orioles, Joe Borowski and Eric Gagne. Borowski, Baez and Gagne are closers. Baez, as noted, as been plucked by the Orioles, which means, of course, that he'll fail miserably like every other Orioles free agent acquisition. Borowski is serviceable but certainly isn't better than what we had in Wickman. That leaves Gagne, which is perfect for Shapiro because Gagne's coming off a major injury and thus will come cheaply if at all.

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Shapiro, supposedly in an email to the Plain Dealer's Roger Brown, says that "I think our chances to contend or win the [AL Central] division are better than most realize. I feel good about our chances to bounce back dramatically." Exactly why Shapiro feels so chipper is unclear, particularly if you noticed that in that same edition of the Plain Dealer, Shapiro lamented the fact that the free agent market, as expected, has spiraled out of control already, which was largely predictable due to the perfect storm of a settled labor situation, teams flush with cash, and too few quality players available.

From our vantage point, most of the holes Shapiro created remain unfilled. And nowhere is that more true than at the closer position. The foolish trade of Wickman combined with the lack of realistic alternative will continue to haunt this team through 2007. It's true, of course, that, it's early in the free agent derby. But with limited help available and limited resources to spend, pinning hopes on quality free agents is useless. That leads to only three other options: trade, reclamation projects, and standing pat.

Some have suggested that the Indians have some talent to trade, particularly of the starting pitching variety. But doing so in order to obtain a closer only diminishes the one area of quality on this team in favor of unproven minor league talent. Still, given the limited options, don't be surprised if Jake Westbrook and/or Cliff Lee find themselves in other uniforms next year. But if that happens, the Tribe won't be any stronger overall unless they go about getting additional middle relief help to compensate for a weaker starting staff.

More likely, though, is that Shapiro will rely on the strategies he's employed since he became GM and the Dolans clamped down on the spending: reclamation projects and standing pat. Shapiro is always good for signing a pitcher coming off of surgery. That's what Gagne fits the bill so perfectly. And Carmen Policy has nothing on Shapiro when it comes to selling the fans on the value of standing pat in the hopes that supposedly young talent, with another year of experience, will suddenly develop.

The fact remains that entering into last season, the Indians were still a few pieces away from being World Series contenders and rather than add to that 93-win team, as the Dolans promised, the payroll was reduced and key players eliminated in favor of lesser talents. The fact remains, too, that other than filling a hole he created with the trade of Ronnie Belliard, Shapiro has done little to improve the team thus far, particularly where it is the weakest--in the

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bullpen. There's still time, of course, but since Opening Day tickets and some ticket packages went on sale last week, the fact also remains that Shapiro hasn't yet given most fans a reason yet to invest their Christmas money in next season's pipe dream.