

Tribe Needs To Be Careful As Trade Deadline Approaches

Written by {ga=tommoore}

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With the non-waiver trade deadline a little more than a week away, Cleveland Indians general manager Chris Antonetti has a big decision to make.

Should he be a buyer to help the Tribe stay in the race with Detroit in the AL Central Division and, if so, at what price?

Despite losing three of their first four games coming out of the All-Star break, the Indians went into Tuesday night's game in Seattle just 2.5 games behind the Tigers. The Indians were 5.5 games back of Detroit a little more than a month ago and fought their way back into the race. While we don't want to see them fall that many games back again, obviously, with the way this team has streaked (both good and bad) this season it's not unreasonable to think that they can bounce back in the standings again.

But even if the Tribe gets hot over the next 10 days and forces Antonetti's hand in making a trade, what are the realistic options and how much should Antonetti – and fans – expect to see from this particular Tribe team if it somehow finds its way into the playoffs come October?

It's important to remember that the Tribe is currently 22-32 against teams with winning records. We actually thought it was worse than that, especially in light of the fact that the Tribe is just 10-20 against the AL East Division this season, but [we trust Adam's math on this one](#). The last time we checked, the postseason is filled with teams that have winning records, so this is an important point to remember.

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While it is true that making the playoffs is always better than not making the playoffs (especially in baseball, where draft position isn't as important as the NFL and NBA), the fact that the Indians haven't had much success (so far) against good teams has to weigh in on Antonetti's thought process. Even if he believes the Indians have a legitimate chance of making the playoffs for the first time since 2007, how much should he be willing to give up just helping the team get there?

It's one thing to give up David Bell, Pepe McNeal and Rick Heiserman for Ken Hill in 1995 when you are certain to make the playoffs. It's another thing to give up a 24-year-old starting third baseman like Lonnie Chisenhall and prospects for two months of Matt Garza, which is why it was wise for the Tribe to pass on that potential deal as there is virtually zero chance the team would have been able to resign Garza in the off-season. (Not to mention that trading Chisenhall would have opened up a hole at third base.)

It seems like Houston's Bud Norris, who is not eligible for free agency until 2016, would be more the team's speed, but a trade like that would require the team to give up some prime prospects. Dipping back into the examples from the 1990s, the Tribe could give up on prospects like Jeremy Burnitz, Richie Sexson and Brian Giles because, for starters, they were not going to crack the starting lineup, the team could afford to pay for replacements and, again, the front office knew the Indians were making the playoffs so it was a matter of trying to add the missing piece (which, clearly, did not work out).

The Indians also need to keep the pipeline full of younger players that they can continue to promote to the major-league roster over the next few years to help keep the payroll in check, as the Dolans are not going to find a new revenue stream any time soon. Fans may not want to hear that, but it is a reality that Antonetti has to consider when exploring any deals.

One side of the discussion that we've heard from some fans is that the Tribe should do whatever they need to do to improve the team's chances at making the playoffs because, once there, "anything can happen." This line of thinking is usually supported by [referencing the 1997 Indians team](#) that was one out away from winning the World Series.

While that postseason certainly had enough unbelievable moments – a home run off of the

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greatest closer in baseball history, a game-winning run on a failed suicide squeeze, an extra-inning home run to clinch the American League Championship – to make even the most-cynical Tribe fan think that the championship drought was finally over, the truth is the '97 team seriously underachieved during the regular season and finally was able to turn it on in the playoffs.

This year's team, while (mostly) entertaining to watch on a nightly basis, is probably right where it should be in terms of its record and realistically could not stay on the same field with the '97 team. Think about it, other than Jason Kipnis, who on the current team is going to break into the starting lineup of a team with Jim Thome, Omar Vizquel, Matt Williams, Sandy Alomar, David Justice, Marquis Grissom and Manny Ramirez?

So while it's great to talk about how anything is possible in the postseason, is Antonetti willing to bet the future on this team being able to pull off that kind of success? Especially based on the way it has played against the better teams through the first 99 games of the season?

It's possible that Antonetti could simply do nothing, believing that the team is fine the way it is. The Tribe is getting Zach McAllister back from injury tonight, which could help stabilize the starting rotation. Now that he's been moved to the No. 2 spot in the lineup, maybe Nick Swisher will start earning some of the free-agent money the Indians gave him in the off-season. Maybe Vinnie Pestano will rediscover whatever it was he lost and return to his role as a dominant and dependable eighth-inning reliever. Perhaps the Mark Reynolds of April will return to the lineup.

That could be enough to help the Tribe stay on the heels of the Tigers ... but probably not. From the start, we've seen this Tribe team as a club that would finish the season somewhere right around .500 and they haven't really done anything to make us believe otherwise.

We can't help but wonder if, even though he would never admit it, Antonetti believes the same thing and will be OK with sitting out the trade deadline this year and just letting the season play out. The team made a lot of moves in the off-season but they never came across as moves that were created out of a win-this-year mentality. Simply put, the team may still be a year away from being in a realistic position to be a major buyer at the trading deadline simply because, even with a big acquisition, they are probably not good enough to make much noise in the postseason this year.

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And while that may not sit very well with the fan base, it may be time to get used to the idea of rooting for who the team is, rather than who fans want them to be.

Either way, we only a little more than a week away from finding out what Antonetti thinks about the current team's chances.

(Photo by The Associated Press)