

"The Plan" - A Progress Report

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Friday, February 16 2007 7:00 PM -

I'm very excited to introduce another new writer, as the talented Paul Cousineau (he of "The DiaTribe" blog) debuts with us today, and will be added to our very talented stable of Indians writers for the coming season. In his maiden voyage on The Cleveland Fan, Paul breaks down the basics of "The Plan" ... the Indians strategy to remain competitive in a medium to small market. And he gives his thoughts on how the Indians have done so far in applying it.



Last December, [I examined “The PLAN”](#) and laid out the basic philosophies that the Indians seemed to be following in the pursuit of putting a consistent contender on the field. It's time to expand on those initial thoughts to look at a more detailed analysis of the implementation of "The PLAN" as it pertains to the players that the Indians include in their long-term plans.

The evolution of "The PLAN" has been an interesting thing to observe, particularly considering that Shapiro plied his craft at the knee of John Hart, who believed in a Beer League Softball style of bashing his way to success in Cleveland. When Shapiro took over in 2001, it was fair to assume that he would continue Hart's philosophies and beliefs, assembling overwhelmingly talented position players, cobbling together a starting staff, and manufacturing a bullpen out of castoffs and graybeards. But Shapiro has proven to be his own man, with his own philosophies, more deeply rooted in the simple credo of "pitching beats hitting", perhaps after watching the Murderers' Row of Indians hitters baffled by the Three Aces in the 1995 World Series.

But "good pitching beats good hitting" is simply one principle of "The PLAN".

The basic tenets break down this way:

Strong Starting Pitching

Obviously, if any team could develop the starting staff the Indians look to be entering 2007 with, they would do it in a heartbeat. But Shapiro, since his trade of Bartolo Colon (which was the only way to circumvent the seemingly mandatory 10 year rebuilding plan seen in Detroit and Kansas City, among others) has gone out of his way to stock what is often referred to as the "waves of arms" that are designed to hit Cleveland when the parent club is in need of some new ammunition. Out of his 6 1st Round Picks since 2002, ½ have been college pitchers – one with disappointing results (Guthrie), one with promise (Sowers), and one with very limited experience (Huff) – and one sandwich pick used on a high school flamethrower (Miller).

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Those "waves" are starting to whitecap. Sowers is in Cleveland and the rest of the 1st wave of Carmona, Miller, and Slocum are ready to possibly contribute this year. The 2nd wave of Lofgren, the Lewis Boys, Laffey, Ness, and Sean Smith is only a step lower.

Need proof that these aren't just highly touted names with nothing behind them? Here are the 2006 staff ERA's for the Indians' farm teams:

Buffalo – 3.44
Akron – 3.74
Kinston – 3.44
Lake County – 3.60

Those are TEAM ERA's!

Realizing that the Majors (where only 3 teams were sub-4.00 in 2006) than Minor League pitching, and a completely different animal, those numbers still speak to the quality and quantity of arms the Indians have stockpiled in Shapiro's time as GM.

Will all of these pitchers pan out? Certainly not.

Remember that Jason Davis, Ricardo Rodriguez, Jeremy Guthrie, and Billy Traber don't currently complement C.C. in the rotation. But the strength in numbers is a solid strategy in that only one or two of these players at each level are going to survive the grind and the gauntlet and emerge as viable options at the ML level.

Will Miller and Carmona replace Byrd and Westbrook for 2008? Will Lofgren replace C.C. in 2009?

Even if they're not going to have to, the idea of having a legitimate replacement starter emerge from the farm is much more palatable than seeing a contract to a middling starter replace them and do little more than clog up the payroll.

A Few (two to three) Exceptional Position Players

Truly irreplaceable MLB everyday players (or players that you would take over any other player that position in the Majors) are rare commodities in that few teams boast more than two at any time.

Morneau and Mauer
Howard and Utley
Wright and Reyes
Ortiz and Manny
Pujols and Rolen
Chipper and Andruw (five years ago)
And, of course, SuperSizemore and Pronk

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There are other good players in baseball, to be sure, but the best of the best on the same team form the core of an offense and solidify a lineup every single game.

To have three or four of these players on one team, in their prime, is nearly unheard of – but not without precedent. The Tribe of the 90's had Belle, Thome, and Ramirez entering their prime, complemented by Omar, Lofton, Baerga, and Sandy. Great players, but Joey, Jimmy, and Manny were the centerpieces.

Acquiring these rare players sometimes come by design (Mauer, the 1st pick of the draft), others by surprise (Ortiz, a FA reject). But when a team gets one of these players, much less two, it forms the foundation of a potent offense. With Grady signed through 2011 (an absolute masterstroke, particularly when you look at the contract numbers late in the deal) and Hafner signed through 2008, the Indians have a leg up on most teams when looking at offensive production.

How many of these players are in the pipeline for the Indians? That's hard to say. Would you have pegged Hafner as one of the top 3 three hitters in baseball when the Tribe acquired him with Aaron Myette for Ryan Drese and Einar Diaz? Do you think the Rangers did?

Players develop into these players, they don't usually don't burst on the scene and announce their arrival with a Ryan Howard-esque rookie season. Can Andy Marte develop into one of these players? Can Trevor Crowe? Can Jhonny Peralta revert back to the form of 2005, when he was mentioned in the same breath as Miguel Tejada in terms of overall production? Who knows?

For now, the Indians have Sizemore for five more years and some time to negotiate with Pronk. If he moves on, Shapiro and the boys hope that one of the aforementioned names will have moved into the realm of the elite to keep a few exceptional players on which to build the everyday lineup.

Reliable and Experienced, if Unspectacular, Bullpen

This is the one aspect of "The PLAN" that has likely undergone some revisions since Shapiro took the reins in 2001. We've seen the Good (2005 and Howry), the Bad (2006 and Mota) and the Ugly (2004 and Stewart/Jimenez ... I think I just threw up in my mouth remembering those two), but have yet to see the year-to-year reliability that good teams crave.

The "throw it up against the wall and see what sticks" method seems to be the current strategy in constructing a bullpen league-wide. The fact that relievers are relievers for a reason (that is, they're not starters or closers) is the most widely held belief in realizing that building a bullpen takes more than a little luck.

The key is to find a pitcher on the verge of a great season, not one season later. How do you figure that? Very simply, you can't. You can throw gobs of money at pitchers that have experienced recent success (like the Orioles did), but there's no guarantee that those pitchers

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won't blow up and become a burden for the remainder of the contract.

Prospects can be developed to join the ML bullpen ready to contribute; but, as we learned last year, the pressure in Dunn Tire Park in Buffalo is a tad different than standing on the mound in Fenway looking at Big Papi. The progression of relievers from effective minor league relievers to cogs in a ML bullpen is a long and rocky one. Just ask Fernando Cabrera, the man with the nastiest stuff this side of Paul Shuey.

It would be great to throw the likes of Mujica, Sipp, Mastny, Perez, and Jason Dangerously (all terrific arms with great potential) out there and cross our fingers. But the reality of that option flew over the LF fence in Comerica with Pudge's walk-off last year as Carmona raised his hands to his shell-shocked head.

In lieu of watching these guys learn their craft by sending them through the gauntlet, the idea is to find reliability and stability in a historically unreliable and unstable aspect of the team.

Affordable Complementary Players

Is it necessary to build a lineup of All Stars to put a consistent contender on the field?

Ask Scott Brosius after the 1996 World Series. Or that Red Sox RF from 2004 ... what was that guy's name again – Trot or something like that?

If the core of a team is in place to lend stability and potency to the lineup (Grady, Pronk, Victor, and to a lesser degree Blake), then the balance of the lineup can be comprised of either young players with promise (Barfield, Marte, Garko) or dependable veterans who have proven themselves to be more than proficient in one or more aspect of their game (Dellucci vs. RHP, Michaels vs. LHP, Nixon vs. RHP).

The strategy of complementing the core with these types of players keeps the payroll flexible (the young players aren't quite arbitration eligible and the older players play on short contracts for less money as they try to prove themselves to be more complete than previously proven to earn a bigger contract), allowing the money to be spent on retaining the more important aspects of the team – namely starting pitching and locking up the core position players to long-term deals.

Ideally these complementary players come from the minors to fill the holes that exist on the ML roster. But Major League Baseball is no Xanadu. If the youngsters prove not-quite-ready-for-primetime, holes are plugged with available rosters on short deals until a viable replacement can be found in the minors.

Want examples?

Michael Aubrey's body falls apart, halting his ascension as the "1B of the Future". No other internal option exists and Benuardo is born, then replaced by Blarko. Or Brad Snyder's swing develops a giant hole, resulting in 158 K's in 52 Akron AB, and Frank the Tank loses his power

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stroke somewhere between Vero Beach and Cleveland forcing Dellichaels to rear his ugly head.

Would we all like to see seven Indians in the All Star lineup every year? Sure, but what that got us was a couple of AL Pennants and no World Series flag to fly over the Jake.

SUMMARY

A number of teams have executed these philosophies effectively, most notably the Atlanta Braves and their run from 1991 to 2005. They were built around their starting pitching – Smoltz, Glavine, Maddux, Millwood and solid 4th and 5th starters as the base. Chipper and Justice/Andruw Jones made up their “exceptional players” criteria, with the likes of Javy Lopez, Fred McGriff, and Gary Sheffield complementing them. Noted stalwarts Mark Wohlers, Kerry Lightenberg, and John Rocker anchored the bullpen.

That sustained run of excellence by the Braves is what the Indians aspire to and the goal of “The PLAN” – the framework by which the Indians have been built and are being projected to remain. The names on the back of the jersey will change as the makeup of the team changes. But the principles they are evaluated by will be the constant.

The players are no different than the actors in a play. The scriptwriter has the framework of what he wants to see played out for a long run on the stage.

Sit back and enjoy the show.