

## Payroll Apologists

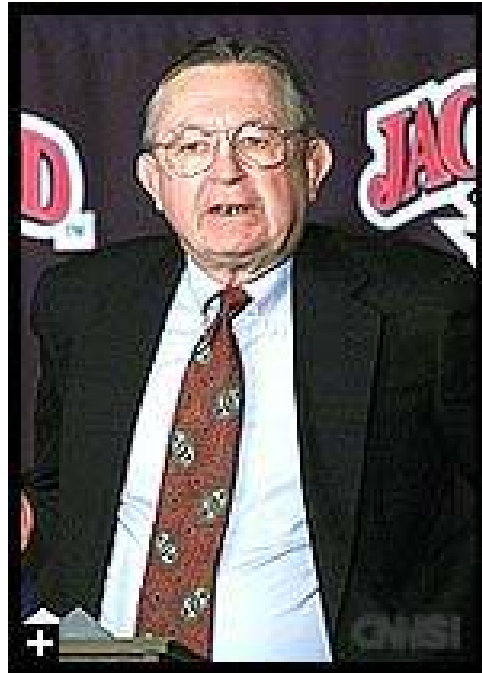
Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Monday, April 09 2007 7:00 PM -

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In Gary's latest, he takes the popular debate about the Indians payroll head on ... examining recent columns in the Akron Beacon Journal on the matter from Sheldon Ocker and Terry Pluto.

Gary notes that in Ocker's piece, he takes time out to slam the fans that question the Dolan's spending habits, making intellectually dishonest statements that artificially support his stance that spending and winning have no correlation.



The headline was promising. Too bad the story didn't live up to it.

In Sunday's Akron Beacon Journal, an enterprising copy editor must have read only the first few paragraphs of Sheldon Ocker's [story](#) about the Indians pathetic payroll and decided that the gist of the story was "If money talks, Indians are mute." Unfortunately for that poor copy editor, he or she missed Ocker's point. Beat writer turned team apologist Ocker essentially defended what has become nearly indefensible—the fact that the Dolans continue to drift further and further from funding the team at a competitive level.

Ocker's story was on the heels of Terry Pluto's [column](#) earlier in the week in which team president Paul Dolan suggested that the team is in a "win now" mode, has money to spend and that General Manager Mark Shapiro has the payroll flexibility he needs to make a deal he likes.

Pluto's column was more or less an interview with Dolan and was presented simply as Dolan's viewpoint. Fine. But it doesn't appear as though Pluto really challenged much of Dolan's assertions. But more on the Pluto/Dolan interview in a moment because more offensive was the column by Ocker who has gone from an enterprising, insightful beat reporter to a cranky, lazy team shill who probably should either be removed from the beat or start getting his paychecks

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directly from the team.

It is true, as Ocker notes, that teams with a lesser payroll can be more successful than teams that spend more. In making this rather pedestrian observation, Ocker mocks those who think otherwise, referring to his “e-mails and the learned opinions of talk-show callers” who believe that if the Dolans would spend more the Indians would be perennial competitors in the World Series.

What Ocker, and by proxy, the Dolans, doesn't want to acknowledge is that it's also true that when lesser spending teams are successful, it's fleeting and still the exception and not the rule. Teams that consistently spend like the Yankees are consistently in the hunt, plain and simple. The Yankess might not win it all every year or any year, but they are always in the mix. Kansas City, on the other hand, never spends and is rarely competitive. In the last 17 years, they've had a winning record just four times. Even then, their high water mark was 84-78 in 1993.

Tampa Bay, another team that never spends, has never won more than 70 games since they entered the league in 1998. But since ending a four-year sub .500 streak that began in 1989, the Yankees haven't come close to a having a losing record. In that time span, however, they've won 100 games four times, and between 95-99 games five times. Even the one team that seems to defy the odds on a regular basis, the Oakland As, have not won 100 games during that period. Ocker's right, the fans are idiots. There is no correlation between spend and result.

But far more offensive than Ocker's slam at fans who rightly question the Dolans commitment to consistently producing a competitive team is the exercise he went through to try to prove his point. He compiled a list of former Tribe players “many” he claims, were traded because they “made more money than the Cleveland market could sustain.” The problem with his list is that it is wildly inaccurate and in most cases doesn't support his underlying premise.

The “fantasy roster” as he dubs it is the highest-salaried former Indians player at each position who, again, were discarded by the Dolans for money reasons. Of the former pitchers, only a handful meets those criteria. Most were unsigned free agents. And of those unsigned free

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agents, salary wasn't the issue, effectiveness was. The salary casualties were clearly Bartolo Colon, Kevin Millwood, Bob Wickman, Danys Baez and Bob Howry. The suggestion that injured Jaret Wright, barely effective Scott Elarton, Julian Tavarez, Justin Speier, Jose Mesa, Alan Embree and Rheal Cormier weren't signed because "the made more money than the Cleveland market could sustain" is laughable. The Dolans may be cheapskates, but this is hardly the list one would compile as evidence.

The same goes for the position players. Jeff Kent played exactly 39 games for the Indians in 1996. That was four years before the Dolans even owned the club. Brian Giles left in 1998, two years before the Dolans took over. Sean Casey was traded in 1997 again well before the Dolans' ownership. Josh Bard, Aaron Boone and Kenny Lofton salary casualties? Hardly. In fact, in almost every case, the player Ocker identifies fails to even minimally meet the criteria set forth.

That's the problem with being a team apologist. It requires you to bend and stretch reality to fit the talking points. Having set up a ridiculous straw man of an argument, Ocker rightly concludes that this "fantasy" team would not be superior to the current Cleveland lineup. But far more useful is considering which of the actual salary casualties should not have been and then add them to the current roster and determine whether or not the Indians would be better off.

On this score, the results are far different. Colon is a legitimate number one starter, but his trade did yield two starters: Cliff Lee and Grady Sizemore. Moreover, if the Indians are in good shape anywhere, it's starting pitching so that salary dump, while painful, has worked out fine and shouldn't be revisited. Millwood is a different story. He wasn't a salary dump but the Indians decided not to pursue him out of salary considerations solely. Keeping him would only have cost the Dolans money, \$9.8 million to be exact. While starting pitching is strength, a rotation with Millwood would make the Indians even stronger. Of the relievers Ocker chose, the three that were salary casualties, Wickman, Baez and Howry, all would make the Indians much stronger. Of the position players Ocker names, only Omar Vizquel was really a salary casualty. The jury is still out on Jhonny Peralta, his replacement. Certainly the Indians would have been much better off last year with Vizquel at short. In fact, Vizquel's presence would have solidified a shaky defense that cost the Indians a winning record.

Thus, assuming Millwood, Wickman, Howry, Baez, and Vizquel had been signed, it would add

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about \$30 million to the current payroll. However, the net addition to payroll would be about half that when you lop off the players on the current roster they'd replace, such as Jhonny Peralta, Joe Borowski, Roberto Hernandez, Aaron Fultz, Jake Westbrook or Paul Byrd. Thus, that would put the Indians 2007 payroll at, roughly, \$75 million, which would place them 17<sup>th</sup> in the league and third in the AL Central, well behind Detroit and Chicago and just slightly ahead of Minnesota. You could take this exercise a step or two further by throwing in Jim Thome, but that would probably put the payroll in the top 15, which is too much to ask of current ownership.

No one is saying that the Indians should have the highest payroll in the league. But they shouldn't have among the lowest, either. But the frugality of the Dolans, to put it generously, is why the Indians find themselves these days on the outside looking in.

As for Pluto's interview with Paul Dolan, it's easy for Dolan to say that the Indians are in a win-now mode and have payroll flexibility when the season is young and there are no trades to make. The real test, which the Dolans have failed in each year of their ownership, comes in late July when the trading deadline approaches. But while Pluto didn't take a similar disdainful view of the fans in favor of an ownership that has failed these fans, neither did he do much to challenge the assertions of Dolan on behalf of the fans.

For example, Pluto didn't seem to push Dolan on his claim of a \$69 million payroll when the true 25-man payroll is \$8 million less, or about two Bobby Howrys. And while Pluto gave Dolan a forum for recounting all the coulda woulda trades and acquisitions that the team has tried to consummate but did not in the last few years, Pluto never asked the harder question of why it is that Shapiro can never seem to get the deal closed.

There is no question that any difficult issue is imbued with a variety of perspectives. Baseball economics certainly falls into that category. But the most telling aspect of the Pluto interview was Dolan's admission that luxury suite sales are down, precipitously, as is attendance. In the end, that is the most visible evidence that the fans are fed up with the product and its prospects under this ownership. Simply spending more may not be the only answer, but if you're compiling a list, it's in the top two.