

Where Are All The People At?

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Tuesday, July 03 2007 7:00 PM -

Despite a 51-32 record (32-11 at home), the Cleveland Indians rank 25th in Major League Baseball in attendance at a paltry 24,327 fans a game, barely half capacity. The 36-45 Baltimore Orioles are outdrawing us, and the 33-49 Washington Nationals are right on our heels. Paul Cousineau is not happy about this fact. In his latest piece, he debunks the arguments that our readers have given him about why they aren't showing up at the Jake to support this team.



The Indians currently stand 25th in attendance in MLB, averaging 24,327 fans a game to watch a 51-32 team. To put that in the proper context, that is merely 1,571 more fans than Washington (currently 33-49, 13.5 games out in the NL East) averages per home game and 372 fewer fans than Baltimore (36-45, 14 games out of the AL East) averages per home game.

The Indians are 51-32, right? Those numbers aren't transposed?

We're at the beginning of July, so weather can't be an excuse anymore.

The Cavs' magical season is over, it's not like there's something more

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exciting in town that's occupying people's time.

While the attendance improved recently (with the biggest walk-up crowd in Jacobs Field history against the Devil Rays on Monday), the Jake still sits at about 80% capacity filled on a "good" night like Monday.

What gives?

Why are people staying away in droves from Jacobs Field?

Is the economy in Cleveland THAT bad?

After doing an admittedly unscientific poll, two answers came up most frequently:

I'll come to the games when the Tribe starts winning.

Rather than just dismissing this out of hand (as it should be), I'll instruct these people to look at the standings every now and then. They're

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right there in the sports page, usually on page 4 of the PD. If you look REAL close, you'll see that the Indians are at the top of the AL Central and we're about 1/2 of the way into the season, so they have played some games.

OK, that was a little dismissive; but I have no time or respect for this argument.

These are the same people who hopped on the bandwagon in the 90's, quickly hopped off due to some arbitrary move that somehow offended them ("how dare they get rid of Sandy Alomar") or when the Jake was no longer the "place to be", and will break their Tribe gear out of mothballs once the calendar turns to September.

Nothing bothers me more than these fair-weather fans and while I accept them for what they are and realize that their interest in the team is what differentiates a season with 3M people in attendance from 2M, it doesn't mean I have to like them.

I'll come to the games when the Dolans start spending money.

Now I think I've got it.

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People are upset that the Indians' payroll is \$61M, 23rd of 30 MLB teams in terms of spending. They feel that the Dolans' contention that they would "spend when the time is right" has rung hollow and are looking for the Dolans to reach into their pockets to add the necessary pieces to bring the "multiple World Series" that the Dolans promised in their introductory press conference.

They feel that if the Dolans were to push up that payroll number, everyone would magically appear back at Jacobs Field because a high payroll guarantees a winner, right?

So that's why the Orioles (\$95M) are perennially successful?
No...

Perhaps the White Sox payroll (\$109M) shows how spending money on players is a sound strategy for building a team?
Wait...

I know that the Red Sox, the Tigers, the Angels, and the Mets all sport big payrolls, but this doesn't guarantee any modicum of success.

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If the Indians were like the Pirates, who sport a \$38M payroll and haven't been relevant in 15 years, fine. But, the last I time I checked the Indians barely missed the playoffs in 2005 and are playing pretty good baseball right now.

Did the 2006 regression scare that many people off?

Are they just waiting for this team to fail because that's what they've come to expect as Indians' fans?

Or is it really this payroll thing?

Before people fly off the handle and start rattling off all of the FA signings that have failed in the past two years (Jason Johnson, Danny Graves, Roberto Hernandez, Trot Nixon, etc.), I know – I'm right there with you with the ulcer to prove it.

But realize that all of these players were working on short deals that don't handcuff the club by burdening the payroll with a high salary and a low output.

Should the Indians spend money just to spend money regardless of how it affects the team in the future?

Should burdening the team in four years with a cumbersome contract be overlooked to add that “one piece” or to give a player a contract with more years than common sense dictates?

Isn't that the strategy that got us in this mess in 2002, when the team had a \$90M payroll full of overpaid, aging players like Chuck Finley (\$7.9M) and Wil Cordero (\$4.17M) because they “went for it” by adding pieces regardless of future effects?

Since 2002, when the trade of Bartolo Colon signaled the end of the “rebuild while contending” concept, the Indians have made many wise ***non-signings*** because of the onus that a “too long” contract would put on a payroll:

To wit, Kevin Millwood signed a 5-year deal with the Rangers two off-seasons ago for \$60M. In this, his 2nd year of the contract, he has had three different stints on the DL and sports a 7.06 ERA and a 1.84 WHIP.

But the Tribe should have signed him instead of giving a 2-year deal (with a 3rd year club option) to Paul Byrd because Millwood was so good on the 2005 staff?

I think you could find some people in the Rangers' Front Office who would feel otherwise. My guess is that Rangers' owner Tom Hicks (the guy who signs the paychecks every two weeks and will do so for Millwood for the next 3 ½ years right up to the point he's still making \$12M in 2010) must feel that way.

Or maybe the Indians should have give Omar Vizquel the contract that the Giants signed him to after the 2004 season. He looked great the first two years, but he's currently toting a .585 OPS to the plate as his contract winds down.

Take Jim Thome (please...ba-dum-dum), who the

Indians hesitated to give a 5th (and 6th) year to as they thought his back might break down. The Phillies took the risk, giving him a 6-year deal worth \$85M, with a 2009 club option for \$13M.

After being moved out of Philly because of his inability to play the field (having Ryan Howard waiting in the wings didn't hurt), he's spent a good portion of time on the DL in Chicago, where he's simply been asked to man the DH role. While his production 4 years ago would have been nice, that \$14M he's paid this year (not to mention the \$14M he's guaranteed NEXT year) is an awful lot of cash to see on the DL on a regular basis.

Also, for those of you who would have liked to see Omar and Thome signed to be "Indians 4 Life", regardless of the cost, remember that

Peralta and Hafner might not be on this team and would be blocked by two underachieving, overpaid stars in the twilight of their careers. As great as Thome and Vizquel's careers have been and how much they mean to the history of Cleveland Indians baseball, that, sadly is what they've become.

Credit the Indians for seeing that and not adding extra years to their offers to ensure that they would retire as Indians.

But that's old news. We're talking about the Dolans' unwillingness to spend this past off-season to improve the bullpen with QUALITY arms and a corner OF now that they're ready to contend. That's what was

promised to us.

OK, I'll take the bait.

The Indians targeted a number of relievers in the off-season to shore up the set-up and closer role in the back end of the bullpen. They signed Joe Borowski and Keith Foulke as they were the two relievers available with the most closing experience and figured that, while both may not pan out, they should hit on one. Well, as we all know, Foulke retired and the Big Borowski has been stomach-acid-inducing, but effective.

Next the Tribe turned to augmenting the rest of

their bullpen with players that could fill the 6th
or 7th

innings, identifying players like Justin Speier, Danys Baez, and Chad Bradford, among others. Speier was the first to go off the board to the Angels (for a 4-year deal worth \$18M), causing the myriad of teams looking for help to go out of control to ensure that they would be able to fill their bullpen with “suitable” relievers.

One, in particular, the Orioles, went completely out of their mind in overpaying for Jaime Walker (3 years/\$12M), Danys Baez (3 years/\$19M), and Chad Bradford (3 years/\$10.5M).

What's been the return on their \$41.5M investment?

So far, the worst bullpen in the AL and two more guaranteed years to all three pitchers?

Regardless of what anyone says about Hernandez (none of which is PG material), at least the Indians could cut him loose when it showed he didn't have anything left in the tank.

But that's the bullpen, which can be easily fixed by finding the right mix of

relievers, young and old. What we need is a big power bat in the corner of the OF.

A RH one, at that, if I remember the cries.

You'll remember the reports that Moises Alou turned down more money from the Tribe to sign a 1-year, \$8.5M deal with the Metropolitans.

So, I believe this refers to one Mr. Carlos Lee, right? The same Carlos Lee that, as a 31-year-old OF had never achieved an OPS over .900 going into 2007 and is a

huge defensive liability today, that signed a 6-years contract with the Astros for \$100M?

Now Carlos Lee has certainly had a magnificent first half of the season, with 16 HR and 70 RBI, earning every bit of his \$11.5M salary (though his OPS still hasn't cracked the .900 mark). However, two or three years down the road, when Lee becomes a bigger liability in the field and (since Houston can't simply put him at DH) the Astros are forced to move him to an AL team for pennies on the dollar (likely picking up a portion of his salary in the process), the deal won't look as good.

Should the Indians have overlooked this fact to add Lee to the lineup?

Would they be the highest scoring offense instead of the 2nd highest scoring offense if they had?

The Indians certainly could have found room for Lee on this roster and the current payroll at \$11.5M in 2007 and probably for more for a few years going forward at a comparable salary, but the Astros gave Lee SIX guaranteed years to seal the deal. While it netted them the slugging OF, the extra years on the

contract will become the same albatross around their necks that Thome's did in Philadelphia.

The point illustrated by the Baltimore bullpen and the extra years on the Lee deal is that these contracts don't happen in a vacuum. The Indians, or any other team for that matter, don't simply put a value on a player and just sign that player because there's always going to be some team that goes outside the realm of sanity and comfort to make the "splash signing" regardless of how it affects the team 4 years from now.

We've learned it many, many times...it only takes one team to lavishly overpay on a contract that eliminates reason from the discussion to sign the player they feel will put them "over the hump".

Now, if Travis Hafner is locked up to the deal that is rumored to be back on the table that would keep him in Cleveland through 2012, will people come streaming back?

At the beginning of the season, the Indians faced contract negotiations with Westbrook, Hafner, and Sabathia. If 2

of 3 of those are signed this year and they still have a full year and a half to figure out a way to keep the Hefty Lefty in Cleveland, doesn't that constitute some sort of financial commitment to the team?

Is that "spending when the time is right"?

It seems that the Dolans are penalized for their young players being bargains and for the foresight to buy up the youngsters' arbitration years, making their contracts extremely club-friendly.

So, essentially, those club-friendly contracts keep the overall payroll number down.

Riddle me this Batman, whom do you prefer?

Grady (\$750,000, .870 OPS this year) or Johnny Damon (\$13M, .698 OPS this year)?

Victor (\$3M, .929 OPS this year) or Jason Kendall (\$13M, .543 OPS this

year)?

Pronk (\$3.75M, .844 OPS this year) or
Jason HGHiami (\$21M, 149 AB this
year)?

Peralta (\$750,000, .836 OPS this year)
or Julio Lugo (\$8M, .541 OPS this year)?

A bigger contract number does not
translate automatically into better player.

While seeing a payroll closer to \$80M may warm your heart or make you feel that the Dolans are putting money into this team, spending money to simply spend money doesn't exactly make good business sense. It's easy to say that the payroll should be higher without offering concrete examples of players that the Indians SHOULD have signed, taking all factors into consideration.

It's feasible that the Dolans gave Shapiro a budget around \$80M for the season and he simply didn't see the value on the FA market to merit the spending authorized by ownership. Of course, it's just as feasible that the

Dolans authorized only \$65M and the retirement of Foulke is the only thing that has prevented the Indians' payroll from being at that number.

Regardless of the case, who cares?

Does the number listed in the payroll column matter more than the numbers in the standings? While a correlation can be drawn that teams with higher payrolls are more likely to find success because they are able to outspend their mistakes, it doesn't guarantee anything. Just as relevant is the fact that a high

payroll isn't mandatory for a team to experience a successful season.

To hold tightly to your belief that the Dolans are cheapskates who shouldn't own this team, rather than accepting the team for what it is – an excellent team built on young talent and interchangeable parts that don't burden future payroll numbers allowing them to keep their own players – that's on you, it's no longer on me.

In fact, if you really feel that strongly

about the payroll - just stay away from the Jake.

You staying home to stew over that which you don't care to understand, or refuse to remove your blinders to take in the whole landscape, enhance my ability to occupy my seat in Pronkville, sip an adult beverage, and enjoy a game that the Indians are likely to win.