

The Travis Hafner extension is something entirely different from the extensions handed to Jhonny Peralta, Grady Sizemore, Cliff Lee and Jake Westbrook over the past two years. Hafner is an elite player in the prime of his career -- the exact type of player Dolan supposedly wouldn't fork over the money to keep. But now he has. Was the signing spurred on by the fans making their voices heard? Erik Cassano mulls it over in his latest.



Listen to the mockingbird....

&quot;Cheap, cheap .... cheap, cheap .... cheap, cheap&quot;;

For seven years, many Indians fans saw to it that the Dolan family wallet was the most famously infamous leather-bound object in Ohio. A fan base used to the sellout-inflated ownership of Dick Jacobs and the swashbuckling GM style of John Hart had a tough time adjusting to the payroll-paring, close-to-the-vest philosophy of **Larry Dolan**, Paul Dolan and Mark Shapiro.

We ground our teeth when David Justice was traded to the Yankees in 2000. We pouted when Sandy Alomar was cast adrift that winter. We stomped around when Roberto Alomar was sent to the Mets a year later. We howled when Bartolo Colon was traded to the Expos for Lee Stevens and the Three Stooges in 2002.

(&quot;Grady who? The only Grady I know is from Sanford and Son.&quot;)

And some tried their best to swear off the Tribe completely when lovable Omar Vizquel was allowed to sign with the Giants three years ago.

If sandwich boards were more readily available, many Indians fans would have walked around downtown declaring &quot;The end is near.&quot;;

We were going back to &quot;real&quot; Indians baseball with the Dolans at the helm. &quot;Real&quot; as in the Indians of Vernon Stouffer, Gabe Paul and Nick Mileti. The financially-threadbare Indians who drew 3,000 fans a night to Municipal

Stadium, almost left town on several occasions and were the embodiment of a losing organization for four decades.

After all, Larry Dolan was the guy who got the sucker end of the deal when Jacobs decided to sell the Indians at the height of their profitability, wasn't he? Based on that, we thought he probably had the business sense of a three-toed sloth and would inevitably manage the Indians back into baseball's dungeon.

But fast forward to July 2007 .... Could it be that Dolan has heard the cries of his people?

Normally, I'd say complaining about how an owner runs his team is wasted breath. The owner is filthy rich and can afford the ivory tower in which he lives. Fans can call up radio shows and rant, bring signs to the ballpark, even stage walkouts like Orioles fans did a year ago and Pirates fans were threatening to do this year. In most cases, it's not going to make one bit of difference in how the owner runs his team.

But Larry Dolan is a born-and-raised Clevelander who grew up an Indians fan. Like Cavaliers owner Dan Gilbert, he fancies himself as a man of the people, the type of owner who eats the same hot dogs the fans eat.

Word gets around quickly in this town, so no matter how many floors Dolan would put in any ivory tower he chose to build, he'd still hear the word on the street. And the word has been that Dolan is cheap. He won't spend to put a winner on the field. He's content with mediocrity. He'll let his best players leave, or order Shapiro to pawn them off for prospects, because he doesn't want to pay them what they're worth.

The fans have given Dolan's ownership a rousing vote of "no confidence" by staying away from Jacobs Field in droves. Like Jhonny Peralta in 2005, Dolan was incessantly compared to his predecessor and found lacking, justifiably or not.

Maybe it was all enough to make Dolan want to prove his critics wrong in a big way.

This week, Dolan ponied up \$57 million to keep Travis Hafner in Cleveland potentially through the 2013 season, when he will be 36. As of now, the \$13

million he will make in 2011 and '12 will be the highest annual salary in Indians history.

A sum of \$57 million is a lot to commit to a designated hitter. There is a school of thought that says a capable designated hitter can be found for far less than what the Indians will pay Pronk.

It's true, with an arthritic elbow that prevents him from playing in the field every day, Hafner will need to put up monster numbers every year -- in the .300/40 HR/120 RBI range -- to earn his new lofty salary.

But considering that the Indians don't have a hitter anywhere in their farm system who projects as being able to produce anything close to Hafner-type numbers in the majors, it's a wise investment. A Hafner replacement wasn't going to come out of the Tribe farm system.

But while this was a signing that made sense for the Indians from a baseball standpoint, for Dolan, it meant something more. For Dolan, this signing was a statement that he's is going to back up the hard work Shapiro and his baseball people have put in to rebuilding the Indians.

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Maybe it wasn't any one particular thing that steeled Dolan's resolve to lose the "cheap" tag, but whatever has happened, he is spending with a purpose. He is spending to prove that the plan he, Shapiro and the rest of the Tribe's big thinkers first concocted five years ago can work, and is working.

Of course, the biggest fish, all 290-some-odd pounds of him, is still out there to be fried. How Dolan handles the C.C. Sabathia negotiations will likely become the true test in the eyes of fans. If C.C. walks or gets pawned off for prospects between now and the start of the 2009 season, Dolan is going to be right back on the smear list in Cleveland, and the Hafner signing will be dismissed as a \$57 million token offering to appease the fans when the real prize walks away.

But if Dolan and Shapiro can get C.C. signed to an extension, we all have to shut

our mouths. At that point, the evidence will be indisputable: Dolan gets it, even if the Indians never add a Magglio Ordonez or Gary Sheffield to the fold the way the Tigers have.

When you have a good thing going in baseball, your first job as an owner or GM is to keep the pieces you have. That's how you build a stable, long-lasting foundation.

That's how a middle-market team battles the money monsters on the coasts.