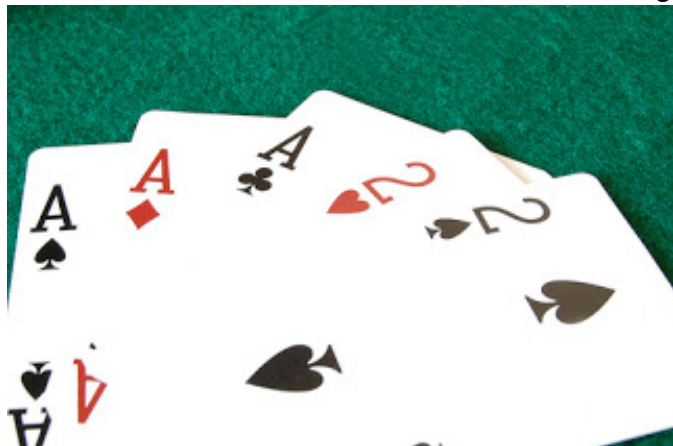


Miguel Cabrera. Dontrelle Willis. Orlando Cabrera. Delmon Young. Scott Linebrink. Jacque Jones. Edgar Renteria. Nick Swisher. For the teams of the American League Central to have done any more wheeling and dealing this offseason, they would have needed a deck of cards and a blackjack table. Will the moves of the Tigers, White Sox, and Twins pan out? Erik Cassano takes a look at the off-season dealings of the Indians division rivals in his latest piece.



Miguel Cabrera. Dontrelle Willis. Orlando Cabrera. Delmon Young. Scott Linebrink . Jacqu
e
Jones. Edgar
Renteria
. Nick Swisher.

For the teams of the American League Central to have done any more wheeling and dealing this offseason, they would have needed a deck of cards and a blackjack table.

As we all know, none of the above players will be wearing Indians uniforms at the outset of the season. The Indians front office, calculated risk managers almost to a fault, have presented us with a glacially-slow offseason in stark contrast to those of the White Sox, Twins and Tigers.

Of course, none of the above players' teams are the defending division champs, either, which helps lend legitimacy to the idea that the Tribe is the division's top dog, the team that tied Boston for the most wins in baseball last year, so the burden is on the other teams to move their chess pieces in an effort to get better.

While Minnesota and Chicago made several moves of note between them, the real story that caught everyone's attention was the frantic fortification of the Tigers. Armed with his notorious quick-strike mentality, Detroit GM Dave

Dombrowski

pulled his trade trigger early and often, securing Jones,

Renteria

, Miguel Cabrera and Willis in rapid-fire succession. By mid-December, the Tigers were the talk of the

offseason

, and will surely be at the top of most prognosticators' preseason AL Central predictions.

It would be easy for those of us in Cleveland to scoff at what the Tigers did. It seems like a panicked overreaction to finishing a distant second one year after reaching the World Series. The Tigers are gambling with their depth and their future by purging the upper levels of their farm system of top-flight prospects like Cameron Maybin, who will reportedly be the Marlins' opening day starter in center field after being shipped south in the Cabrera-Willis trade.

But make no mistake about it: If the Tigers are gambling, the Indians are gambling too.

Last season, the Indians farm system supplied the major league roster with everything it needed to mount a serious World Series charge that came up one win short. The farm system absorbed the shock of a largely-unproductive free agent class by cranking out promising youngsters like Franklin Gutierrez, Rafael Perez and Asdrubal Cabrera.

Casey Blake provided the ultimate bandage at third base, allowing the Tribe to send a struggling Andy Marte back to Buffalo. And let's not forget the full-season debut of Fausto Carmona as a starting pitcher, which succeeded beyond anyone's wildest, craziest, acid-trippiest fantasies

.

In short, as much as the Tigers treated their farm system like so much currency to spend on acquiring veterans, the Indians are treating their farm system like the ultimate safety net.

In a [Plain Dealer article](#) Wednesday, Shapiro referred to the organization's depth as "a separator." In GM-speak, that means he believes what the Tigers did to their farm system is risky, maybe even foolish, and something that could -- or maybe should -- put the Tigers at a competitive disadvantage. Depth is always a good thing, and there is no doubt that the Indians are among the deepest teams in baseball with capable, major-league ready talent.

But here is the \$64,000 question: Can the farm system not only once again shoulder the load of providing the needed upgrades that every team searches for each winter, but can it also go above and beyond that to help the Indians maintain last year's competitive margin over the obviously-improved Tigers?

In essence, Shapiro is betting that the talent the Buffalo Bisons and Akron Aeros gave the big-league club last year, and will hopefully give it again this year, is enough to compensate for the Tigers landing Miguel Cabrera,

Dontrelle

Willis,

Jacque

Jones and noted Indian-killer Edgar

Renteria

.

It sure seems like a heavy burden to place on your farm clubs.

I'm all in favor of not making moves simply to make moves, or simply as a reaction to what another team did. But the Indians still have no fulltime left fielder, a questionable-at-best situation with Gutierrez in right field, and the only upgrade made to a solid-but-shallow bullpen was

Masa

Kobayashi

, a former Japanese league star on the wrong side of 30, with zero games of major league experience on his resume.

Maybe Shapiro views this as the spoils of hoisting the title banner of arguably baseball's toughest division. The pack leader can afford to sit pretty and watch everybody else try and scramble to catch up.

But what if they did? Goodness knows, no one has been working at it like Dombrowski

since November. The fact that the Indians failed to make any moves of note outside of signing Kobayashi certainly seems like it plays right into Dombrowski's hands as he and Jim Leyland attempt to sell their team on the idea that they've caught up to Cleveland.

How will this affect both teams psychologically? The Tigers will arrive in spring training with a much-needed shot in the arm after a disappointing end to a highly-anticipated season. The Indians, meanwhile, will arrive in spring training with an excuse to look over their shoulders.

Sure, Eric Wedge can try to focus his team on taking care of their own business, but no team exists in a vacuum. Even Tribe players who insist that they never read the papers or watch ESPN will certainly hear more than they care to about the much-improved Tigers, favored to win the AL Central.

For Wedge and Indians management to believe that their players will simply shrug off the buzz that will surround the Tigers and develop tunnelvision about their own team is not realistic. They're human, after all.

Even if Wedge succeeds in cultivating a taking-care-of-business mentality among his players, they're still going to have to compete with an energized Tigers club that is a prime candidate to burst out of the gate to a fast start.

Granted, it's about how you finish a season, not how you start. But while the Indians' brass might view their offseason versus their division rivals' offseasons as a matter of headline-grabbing style versus farm-system substance, you could also make the case that there is a touch of arrogance involved on the part of Shapiro.

The Indians were good last year. Actually, they were very good. Good enough to knock the Yankees out of the playoffs, and almost good enough to do the same to the Red Sox, which is unquestionably the best team in baseball.

But fortunes change. Other teams make moves. Injuries happen. Slumps kill stat lines. By making no moves of note, Shapiro is basically betting that none of that will affect the Indians -- or if it does, there will be a ready-made antidote already in-house.

Dombrowski bet that he needed to make impact moves to make his team better. Maybe he went overboard. But Shapiro is betting that everything his team needs to win the World Series, let alone fend off the Tigers, is right there under his organizational umbrella. That might be going too far in the other direction.