

Repeats

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Sunday, February 17 2008 7:00 PM -

The writers' strike may be over, but that doesn't mean that Cleveland has yet had its fill of repeats. The "news" that Indians pitcher C.C. Sabathia has shut down any contract talks supposedly until after the season seems to have gotten everyone's panties in a bunch to the point that if you didn't know better you'd think this the first time an Indians player took the money and ran. Gary talks about the fan reaction to C.C.'s impending departure in his latest.



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The "news" that Indians pitcher C.C. Sabathia has shut down any contract talks supposedly until after the season seems to have gotten everyone's panties in a bunch to the point that if you didn't know better you'd think this the first time an Indians player took the money and ran. Hardly.

Reminding the fans that they've seen this movie before probably isn't helpful or useful. But just note that in recent times Cleveland fans went through this drama with Albert Belle, Manny Ramirez, and Jim Thome, to name just a few. And it probably does little good to point out that the team, indeed the city, survived despite the gloom and doom projections. The last time anyone looked, the Indians were one game from the World Series last season.

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But that is hardly the point in the near term. For now, it is enough that another top level talent, a supposedly home grown talent, will likely be wearing an opponent's uniform a year from now, perhaps sooner. Read the Indians forum on TheClevelandFan.com or listen to local talk radio (if you have the stomach) and you can plainly see the various stages of grieving that already are under way.

There are, of course, the fans who seem simply shocked by this latest development. These fans are my favorite because they are either too young or too naïve to know any better. To them, they simply can't believe that Indians general manager Mark Shapiro or owners Larry and Paul Dolan would be goofy enough to let an elite pitcher like Sabathia get away under any circumstances. To them, a pitcher like Sabathia is a once in a generation talent and if he happens to fall in your lap, you grab on with all your might and never let go.

At the root of their shock is the quaint notion that a player, Sabathia in this case, will be all sentimental about his current team, agreeing to sign with them at a huge discount simply out of loyalty. These same fans thought that with Ramirez and they thought that with Thome and that didn't work out to well, did it? The fact that these fans still think this way, given all that's come before them, speaks volumes about the height of their naiveté. It's not a criticism.

The older and wiser Indians fans, on the other hand, aren't shocked by anything. How could they be? These fans saw the Indians build a team around Alex Cole, for goodness sakes. They lived through Sam McDowell drinking himself out of the league, Tony Horton's promising career cut short by depression, Vernon Stouffer refusing to sell the team to George Steinbrenner, the 10-cent beer night riot, the sellout crowds on opening day and the 6,000 or so who showed up at every game thereafter, the hiring of baseball's first black manager and the firing of baseball's first black manager, Joe Charbonneau winning the rookie of the year and falling apart thereafter, Greg Swindell on the losing end of a 24-5 defeat in his major league debut, etc. etc. etc. The fact that any player would leave Cleveland for more money is not shocking to these fans, it's expected.

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But though it may be expected, and though the older, wiser fans may not be shocked, that doesn't mean Sabathia's imminent departure is any easier to take. That's because for the older, wiser fans, the inability to sign Sabathia is just another two-by-four called reality smacking them in the mouth.

That reality is not necessarily represented by the dreadful teams and the near misses over the years, as that really is something Cleveland has in common with virtually every other major league city. Instead, the reality manifests itself in at least two ways.

First, while Sabathia might claim to want to stay in Cleveland and even mean it, his actions say otherwise, loudly. The Indians opening volley was reportedly a four-year contract for around \$17 million a year. No one, not even Shapiro, figured that would get it done, but negotiations have to start somewhere and no one expects to get your best offer out of the gate. So the fact that the Indians offer, in context, was on the low side isn't particularly troubling.

More telling, though, is that Sabathia and his agents never made a meaningful counteroffer before shutting down the talks. It wasn't because Sabathia was at all offended by the initial offer, even in light of the Johan Santana's recent contract with the Mets. It's just that Team Sabathia didn't feel the Indians were ever going to get close enough to talk meaningfully. In that case, no good could come from continuing the dialogue. All that would happen is that at some point Sabathia would actually start to get offended when the Indians subsequent offers didn't approach Santana's deal. At that point, the average fan would undoubtedly turn on Sabathia and no matter how he pitched, his turning down a contract for that kind of money would always be the elephant in the room. Why would a pitcher of his caliber want that kind of distraction during his free agent season?

Second, Cleveland is a small-market town, as we've been told over and over again, with small-market owners, as we've seen over and over again. The Dolans may be rich by the standards of the average fan, but they don't have the scratch or the revenue streams that the owners in New York, Boston and Chicago seem

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to have and the Dolans have demonstrated no inclination to deficit spend from their personal funds.

While fans can lament those facts all they want, that doesn't mean the situation is going to change anytime soon. An owner with the financial wherewithal of Randy Lerner would be nice, but there's no guarantee that even Lerner would dip into his fortune year in and year out in order to compete dollar-for-dollar with the likes of Mike Ilitch in Detroit, let alone Steinbrenner or John Henry in Boston.

The truth is that the economic and physical realities of this market will always keep the Indians in this mode unless or until the baseball owners come up with a NFL-style form of revenue sharing. Don't count on it. It is this truth, more than anything else, which is at the core of most fans' frustration. It's what keeps free agent elite players in their prime, like Sabathia, just out of reach. In fact, Sabathia's situation is the classic case.

The Indians could afford to pay Sabathia \$20 million a year right now. In fact, if that was his current salary instead of the \$13 million he will receive, the Indians 2008 payroll would still be in the middle of the pack of the league's 2007 payroll. So it's not a money issue, per se. Instead, it's the length of the contract he demands and likely will command that is the deal breaker.

Good sense backed by statistics tells Shapiro that a seven year investment in any player is unlikely to pan out. But for a franchise whose budget is limited only by its imagination, getting three maybe four years of primetime, Cy Young award caliber pitching is worth the gamble that the next three or so years thereafter may not yield much. No team likes to eat \$60 or so million on the backend of a long-term contract, but certainly some teams are less affected by it than others and always will be. The Indians are not now nor will it ever be that team.

As the season unfolds, eventually the fans will start to get comfortable again with the notion that this team's best pitcher will be some other team's best pitcher next

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season. By May, the only real debate will be whether to trade him for something now or ride him and get nothing later. And when the season closes and Sabathia does sign elsewhere, the fans can turn their attention elsewhere. Beginning next October, LeBron James will only have only two more years left on his contract.