

## The Land Of Hopes & Dreams

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, April 07 2009 7:00 PM -

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The opening week of the baseball season. When everyone is a contender. Or are they? In Gary's latest, he talks about the current state of baseball in these challenging economic times, noting that nearly half of the teams have cut back their payroll this season from last. Gary says that the contraction of the world's economy is doing more for bringing payroll parity to baseball than anything that Commissioner Bud Selig could ever have found the spine to accomplish ... one good outcome from this economic mess.



To those of you that still read newspapers, you've no doubt noticed two things and they're both related: advertising is down and hence so are the number of pages. The good news for advertisers is that it becomes increasingly more likely their ad will get noticed. The bad news though is that it becomes increasingly more likely that their ad will get noticed.

On Monday, Major League Baseball dipped into its dwindling reserves and bought a full page ad at the cost of at least \$178,000 to announce its new season. A charming little ad, it featured a baseball as a metaphor for a rising sun with the nostalgic sentiment that opening day is special because it's about hope, faith and unbridled optimism. If that sounds like a synopsis for *Rochelle, Rochelle, The Musical*, it's probably just coincidental.

Even if opening day does represent the high watermark of fan optimism, the underlying question I have is whether what baseball is still selling in that regard is true. I used to believe it was; now I'm not so sure.

On the same day USA Today ran the ad, it also published the salary of every

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player on a major league roster along with a story that nearly half of the teams have cut back their payroll this season from last, 10 of them by at least \$10 million. As Jerry Reinsdorf, the chairman of the Chicago White Sox rightly pointed out, this reduction isn't just about the economy in general but about the number of owners who can no longer afford to have their side businesses, which also are suffering, subsidize their baseball teams.

Undoubtedly this newfound payroll discipline is being driven in some places by the larger economy. But even as you take note of that remember that two of those teams that cut back are the New York Yankees and the Boston Red Sox. The Yankees' payroll is still over \$200 million and the Red Sox are at \$121 million. Those are still pretty big numbers, particularly when compared to the San Diego Padres or the Pittsburgh Pirates, teams with payrolls of \$48 million and \$43 million, respectively.

Still the contraction of the world's economy is doing more for bringing payroll parity to baseball than anything that Commissioner Bud Selig could ever have found the spine to accomplish. Whether that will be short-lived or whether it represents the beginning of some real fiscal discipline in a sport desperate for some has a direct bearing on whether opening day will still carry the same promise to all for the next generation of fans.

For too many years now the only optimism that opening day carried for fans in most cities was the chance to lead the league in something, if only for one day. But as the Yankees, Red Sox, Mets and Cubs, and a smattering of others, have continued their personal game of Risk at the expense of the rest of the league, the chance that any other team can compete for a championship on a consistent basis becomes more and more illusory.

In some ways, the Indians are the embodiment of the false promises that the major leagues have become. After an amazing run in the mid 1990s, the Indians have been inconsistent since. Because their business model is based on a mid-market budget, they simply can't compete for front level talent on the free

agency market. Their success or failure is far more organic and hence iffier.

CC Sabathia is a nice example. For many years, the Indians were able to retain Sabathia as they nurtured him from raw rookie to one of the game's premier pitcher. In that time, they watched helplessly as his continued success made it all the more likely that his future would be in New York.

The presence of Sabathia on the roster, particularly in the last few years, made it easier to build a pitching staff. Like second string quarterbacks and middling starters in the NFL, the major leagues are filled with players that can be a fourth or fifth starter. Finding that front-line number one starter is every bit as difficult and usually as expensive as finding a top line starting quarterback.

With Sabathia gone, the Indians suddenly find themselves struggling to build a staff. Cliff Lee may not quite have the emotional makeup to be the number one starter and Fausto Carmona is still far too raw. That leaves the entire starting pitching unsettled, to say the least. Unless the bullpen is terrific, and the presence of reliever Kerry Wood makes that more likely than a year ago, the rest of the team will struggle.

There's no reason to rehash why Sabathia is gone or even whether he should be. But whatever your view of the Dolans' financial wherewithal, there is no question that the Indians cannot compete economically with New York, Chicago or Boston. Thus they say goodbye to Sabathia and have to find another way to bring promise to a city that hasn't since a World Series title in over 50 years. It isn't easy.

It's a story that's been repeated all over the league, from Oakland to Pittsburgh and a host of cities in between. And as it plays out year after agonizing year, opening day becomes nothing more than a reason for the average fan to call in sick.

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It's hard to know just yet what fortunes or failures are in store for this year's Indians but it's recent past more than tell the story of what it's like for a team that has to play the numbers game each year. You really never do know what you're going to get. And the Indians are a team with a good front office. There are fans in many other cities that don't even have it that good.

The point though is that as the economic disparities between clubs have widened the expectations that fans dreamed of having have contracted proportionately. It's just not true that every team starts opening day with unbridled optimism.

Maybe, on the other hand, that's always been the case. The Indians of my youth, which is to say the vintage of somewhere from around the mid 1960s to the mid 1980s were never going to win and that was well known before the vans left for Tucson each winter. For those fans, and I'm one of them, opening day was akin to a holiday, something to be celebrated for a discrete moment for what it was and not what it promised to bring.

But at that time, the differences between teams related more to abject incompetence than payrolls run amok. The Indians had severe financial challenges, but mostly they were bad because they had bad owners, played in a lousy ballpark, and had a front office that never met a trade it didn't like.

These days, teams no longer simply compete for talent on the basis of shrewdness. When it is superstar talent that is in issue, money talks. Meanwhile the rest of the league looks for other ways to build a roster by promoting young players that may not be quite ready and trying to wring out one more year of production from an aging veteran just trying to hang on.

Baseball has always been the quintessential metaphor for life and maybe that's the way to view its current state. As the economy forces everyone to re-examine their own overhead in a vain attempt to cut expenses until things improve, baseball ends up being forced to do the same thing. But where most believe that

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life still holds promise for those willing to work hard to achieve, baseball is still falling short.

But if the one outcome of this latest economic mess is to further bundle teams around similar payrolls, then baseball has a real chance to live up to the promise of its 2009 ad. Let's just hope that it isn't 2020 before that promise actually gets delivered.