

## Lingering Items - Tomorrow Never Comes Edition

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Saturday, August 01 2009 7:00 PM -

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It's a disheartening situation for Indians fans. As Gary says in this week's Lingering Items, he says the transactions of this past week seem to indicate that the team isn't about winning, but about staying afloat as if that is a goal to be lauded. Gary also hits on how refreshing it is to see all the Browns rookies signed as we head into camp, and also talks about the latest Braylon Edwards injury.



When I was a kid, I used to buy my baseball cards at a store called Don's Beverage. Don was a cranky but mostly patient sort with the kids in the neighborhood who'd redeem Coke bottles for 3 cents each in order to buy another pack of cards. Don used to have a sign over the candy section that read "Everything half off, tomorrow." When you're a grade schooler it takes you a few days to catch on to the ruse. Tomorrow never came.

That's pretty much how I feel about the Indians at this point. It's taken awhile to catch on, of course, but I attribute that more to the sophistication of Indians' general manager Mark Shapiro and my continuing naiveté that the team was about winning for not realizing it until now, but the Indians aren't about winning, they're about staying afloat as if that is a goal to be lauded.

The trades of Cliff Lee and Victor Martinez and Ryan Garko and Rafael

Betancourt and Mark DeRosa are only important if you think a professional baseball team should be about winning. When it finally does dawn on you that this is an organization that's building for a tomorrow that never comes, those trades become far more irrelevant. Aside to the Dolans: as a sign of good faith and in recognition of these economic times, I hereby grant to you an unlimited, free and worldwide license to use the phrase "Building For a Tomorrow That Never Comes" as your new mission statement. Feel free to plaster on anything you want. Look for it next week on a t-shirt at an Indians gift shop near you.

Reading and listening to Shapiro's explanation of his dumping of anything with a viable pulse made me seem positively prescient the other day when I predicted, nearly word for word, what he'd say, particularly about the Lee trade. Frankly, it's not that I'm all that great at predictions; Shapiro is just that predictable.

Just as I wrote he would do Shapiro did claim that the value they received now for Lee is better than they could get next year as if there is any way to challenge him on that point. But, again, all that misses the larger point. In the words of Bill Murray's Tripper Harrison in the semi-classic movie, Meatballs, it just doesn't matter. Even if the skies parted, monkeys flew, the heavens rained gold coins, cats started playing with dogs and Bill Livingston began writing something interesting, whether or not the Indians trade an All Star or a Cy Young winner just doesn't matter because all the best players will still end up with the rich teams in the league.

The Indians' problem is baseball's problem. If the league owners can't see how these yearly salary dumps by teams with no real shot at winning are ruining the game for a large portion of their fan base, then they should be the next to go. Without fundamental economic change that gives every team a realistic chance to actually be competitive each and every year, baseball is a rock heading for its own windshield.

This isn't to let Shapiro off the hook. He's gone off his own little deep end, so

convinced is he in his own abilities that he can't even acknowledge the crumbling mess around him. He offers his earnest sounding rationales without any sense of irony or context. If he really made the trades because he doesn't see the Indians as competitive next year either, then whose fault is that? He put this miserable team together and as far as I can tell is the architect for next year's as well.

You can go up and down the current roster, last year's roster or whatever projects to next year's roster and it is literally riddled with either bad decisions made by Shapiro or risky decisions that just didn't work out. However styled, there is absolutely nothing approaching certainty that any move Shapiro just made or will make will result in anything more than what passes for this team today.

Shapiro took a chance on offering Travis Hafner and Jake Westbrook long-term contracts and those didn't work out. Their injuries aren't his fault, certainly, but it underscores the precise point that nothing is nearly as predetermined as Shapiro would like the fans to believe including the ridiculous notion that this team is being built to compete 3-5 years out. Why wasn't the team being built 3-5 years ago for this season? Because, say it with me, tomorrow never comes.

There is no reason to think that the decisions Shapiro is making now will translate into that mythical competitive team in 3-5 years. Shapiro's track record isn't that good. More to the point, though, there are just too many variables for anyone to successfully juggle. Injuries do happen. Players don't develop in straight lines. Managers can't manage.

Beyond all that, what's galling is how Indians fans are constantly being sold a vision of a baseball team that's like a start-up enterprise, selling its assets and hence its soul to venture capitalists on the if-come. The problem, though, is that the Indians have been around for 100 or so years and long ago should have escaped the clutches of that mentality.

But Shapiro has once again performed his magic act and, it seems the majority of

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fans are buying it. That doesn't mean they're happy with the trades or the state of the team, but as long as they are debating the merits of the latest round of Class A players acquired, Shapiro has won the battle for their hearts and minds. He knows that's an argument that can't be resolved but that does work to distract from the truth of the ugliness that's enveloped this franchise and is working to undermine its very foundation.

Given the state of the Indians, the only other person that may be smiling at this point is Cleveland Browns owner Randy Lerner. As much of a mess that he's made of his team, the Browns look positively well run in comparison to the Indians. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is a sentence I thought I'd never write.

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Speaking of the Browns, the fact that they have every one of their draft choices under contract before training camp really starts in earnest is a refreshing change from the previous regime. For reasons large and small, former general manager Phil Savage and cap master/lead negotiator Tripp McCracken never could master that most basic of tasks.

In life there are people that can get things done and there are people that watch others get things done. Under Savage, the Browns and their front office clearly fell in the latter category. It was always one thing or the other. The Browns couldn't sign this draft pick or that because they were waiting for other draft choices on other teams to sign. Browns fans knew the drill and all it ended up resulting in is a team that was never fully prepared to enter into the season.

That doesn't mean there aren't some semi-dark clouds rolling into the blue skies over Berea at the moment. Kick returner Josh Cribbs vows to not train but not play unless some serious inroads are made on a contract renegotiation. Kicker Phil Dawson isn't happy with his contract situation and either are a few others. But at least they are all under contract. That in and of itself is a major upgrade.

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Speaking of those semi-dark clouds, there also is the little issue of another season of As the Braylon Turns. Faithful reader Al Cook wrote me and asked about the ramifications of the Browns placing receiver Braylon Edwards on the reserved/non-football injury list. The short answer is, not much, but that's just part of the story.

The non-football injury list isn't like the injured reserve list. It serves as a parking area from which players can essentially be activated at any time. But because the injury is not related to football, the player doesn't get paid. Thus, technically, Edwards is in an unpaid status, except for the fact that his contract really hasn't called for any paychecks at the moment. Players get a stipend during training camp but their pay is pro-rated over the season. Placing Edwards on the non-football injury list was merely a way to tweak him, which at least this administration is willing to do.

Consider last season when Edwards hurt his ankle goofing off with Donte Stallworth after practice. A good case could have been made that the injury wasn't football related because it wasn't. Former head coach Romeo Crennel could have used it to smack Edwards back into reality by, too, placing him on the reserved/non-football injury list and would have gotten away with it long enough to make an impression on Edwards. He didn't. It wouldn't have made any difference financially but it would have at least told Edwards that the team was tired of his crap and perhaps that would have snapped him back into reality. As it was, Edwards had an Indians-like season instead.

But the rest of the story is that camp has now started and Edwards isn't participating and no one knows exactly why. Fans sometime scoff at the media's bitching about Mangini and his near abject refusal to say anything substantive about any aspect of the team's operations, including what flavor Gatorade is in the cooler, but the mystery surrounding Edwards only underscores why Mangini, and hence Lerner, owe a larger duty to the fans.

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Given the untested nature of the receiving corps, Edwards is being counted on, for among other things, leadership. Why exactly is a good question, but one I'll defer for now. Instead just focus on the fact that Edwards is injured and fans don't even know when he did it let alone how or what body part is involved. Mangini may see this as giving him a competitive advantage but it is at the expense of a fan base the team needs to bring closer not push away. Given Edwards' supposedly minor ankle problem last year, these actually are meaningful questions that Mangini should answer but won't.

This isn't about making the jobs of Tony Grossi or Marla Ridenour any easier. It's about rebuilding the basic trust that's been lost over the years. Sadly, on that score, the Browns are now closer than the Indians. When does Cavs season start?

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Given all that's taken place with the Indians lately, this week's question to ponder is simple: How did it feel the very moment when you realized that Cleveland no longer had a major league baseball franchise?