

Wedge's Fate Tied To Shapiro

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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For the legions of fans out there calling for the head of Eric Wedge, Tony Lastoria has a message. Stop obsessing over it cause it ain't gonna happen. In this fascinating look at Eric Wedge's meteoric rise through the Indians farm system, his relationship with Shapiro, and the overall structure of this franchise ... Lastoria comes to the following conclusion: when Wedge gets canned, Shapiro will go with him.



Right now, there is a growing sentiment among fans that Eric Wedge needs to be relieved of his duties as manager of the Cleveland Indians. Not long ago, I'd have quickly tried to put out that fire before it even started, but nowadays I find myself almost willing to offer up some Kingsford and Open Pit of my own, and get ready for a Wedge Barbecue.

I'll admit, I am not the biggest fan of Wedge these days. His inability to be an effective in-game manager, be it handling pitchers, executing several different offensive/defensive strategies, using his bench, etc, is just nauseating to sit through and watch. If I had a vote that meant anything, I'd probably vote to have him fired as well.

But, such a decision ultimately falls on Indians General Manager (GM) Mark Shapiro. And, like it or not, Wedge might be the most secure manager in the major leagues, regardless of how bad the Indians are playing this season.

What you must understand about Wedge, is GM Mark Shapiro doesn't view Wedge as a hired hand. Shapiro views him as a business partner, and in this thing together. They both share a virtual identical vision on how the baseball team should be run, as well as with their core values. When Shapiro hired Wedge after the 2002 season, it was with the intent that both he and Wedge were in this for the long run. Shapiro is very loyal to Wedge, almost a blind loyalty which could result in Shapiro's ship sinking with the Indians at some point. So, unless Mark Shapiro is fired by Indians management, Wedge won't be getting a pink slip from Shapiro anytime soon.

Formerly In His Corner

At one time, I was in Shapiro's camp and was a big fan of Wedge. He did a great job of taking over during the rebuild and helping so many young players get accustomed to the big leagues in such a short period of time. He provided excellent leadership, and showed the patience that most managers don't have with such a young team. He stuck up for his players right or wrong, and lead by example in everything he did.

Wedge didn't come out of nowhere. He was groomed for the job by Hart and Shapiro, and shot through the Indians player development system, managing for five seasons from 1998-2002. When Shapiro took over as GM officially on November 1, 2001, it was only a matter of time before the two men of like mind became partners win or lose, succeed or fail at the major league level. Wedge was considered one of the top up-and-coming managers in baseball, bringing with him a ton of accolades from his short time managing in the minors, and thus was named manager of the Indians on October 29, 2002.

During his five year managing career in the minors, Wedge did put together one heck of a resume. In his second season in the Indians minor league system, he guided the Kinston Indians to the Carolina League playoffs and was named the Carolina League Manager of the Year in 1999. He later managed at Buffalo for two seasons (2001 and 2002) and made the International League (IL) playoffs each season going a combined 178-108 (.622). In 2002, he lost in the IL Finals, and was named Sporting News Minor League Manager of the Year. In 2001, after guiding the Bisons to a franchise record 91-51 season, he was named IL Manager of the Year and Baseball America AAA Manager of the Year.

Wedge was a great fit for this team while The Plan was being implemented in 2003 and 2004. But, Wedge's warts as a manager really started to surface and show themselves in 2004 and 2005 when the games started to mean more. And with that, the fan outcry for his dismissal as manager of the team has grown at a steady pace. But, as long as Shapiro is at the helm, those cries are pretty much falling on deaf ears.

Continuity At the Top

Not only is Shapiro loyal to Wedge, but he is also very loyal to the top decision-makers in the front office and has created continuity from the front office

down to the coaching staff. Keeping new hires to the coaching staff and front office to a bare minimum guarantees that Shapiro's vision and philosophy is not lost in the transition. Thus, since Shapiro's arrival as GM, almost every front office vacancy has been filled from within, and every coaching vacancy filled from within.

Fans recall when Shapiro was announced as the 14th GM in franchise history and how he tore the team apart and rebuilt the team from the ground up. But, few fans recall how Shapiro pretty much did the same thing as well with the front office and coaching staff from the major league team on down.

When Shapiro was promoted to GM, he also promoted several front office personnel from within. The quintet of Shapiro, John Farrell, John Mirabelli, Chris Antonetti and Neal Huntington have been together in their current roles since that offseason. Shortly after being officially named GM, Shapiro appointed Mirabelli as Head of Scouting and Assistant GM, Antonetti as Director of Baseball Operations and Assistant GM, Farrell as Director of Player Development, and Huntington as a Special Assistant to the GM. With that, the top five decision makers in the Indians front office have been together since the start of the 2002 season.

Mirabelli, Antonetti, Farrell, Huntington and Wedge are Shapiro's closest confidants. They assist Shapiro in everything from player acquisitions, contract negotiations, and day-to-day operations of the team. All of these hires and promotions came from within. He wanted people he can trust and who he knew understood his philosophy working with him, and that feeling carried over into his selection on who to manage this team in 2003.

Coaching Stability

Not only has Shapiro provided stability in the organization with the manager and front office, but also with the assistant coaches on the major league team on down. Under the Shapiro era, like the front office, the Indians continue to promote from within.

Before Wedge's debut season started in 2003, he wasn't happy with pitching coach Mike Brown. As a result, the Indians let him go and replaced him with Carl Willis from the minor league system. Willis and Wedge coached together for several years in the minors, with Willis serving as Wedge's pitching coach at Buffalo in 2001 and 2002, and at Akron in 2000.

When Eddie Murray was eventually let go, they replaced him from within with Derek Shelton. Shelton was signed before the 2003 season as a Hitting Coordinator for the entire Indians Player Development System, and is responsible for streamlining the Indians entire approach to hitting in the minors, from the Dominican teams all the way to Buffalo. His work with the kids in the minors from 2003-2005 made him a perfect fit for the organization to replace Murray in June 2005 since he had already worked with several of the players on the Indians roster in the past, and future callups will have been exposed to him as well.

Joel Skinner was a holdover from the Charlie Manuel era, but is another coach who made his way through the minor league system prior to his appointment to Manuel's staff in 2000. His body of work in the minors and the accolades he received greatly mirror those of Eric Wedge. When Buddy Bell left to take the Kansas City Royals job during the season last year, the Indians temporarily filled the void with Special Assistant Robby Thompson, but permanently filled the bench coach position this offseason by moving Skinner into that role. Also, other coaches on the major league staff like Jeff Datz and Luis Rivera have been promoted from within after being in the organization for several years.

Going Forward

So what does all this mean?

Basically, this is an organization built from the ground up. And with that, the notion they might go outside of the organization to hire a manager to replace Wedge is for intents and purposes a pipedream for fans.

Shapiro has repeatedly demonstrated in the past with front office personnel, assistant coaches, and the manager that he is loyal to his own and that he prefers what he knows over what he doesn't. This could be a weakness of Shapiro as GM, but it is pretty much obvious that if Wedge were to get fired on Shapiro's watch that his replacement would likely be a Joel Skinner or Torey Luvullo (Buffalo manager). Not a Lou Piniella, Tony Pena, Jack McKeon or anyone like that who fans consistently wish for. Hiring any of those people goes completely against Shapiro's philosophy.

In fact, even before Shapiro, this organization since the 1990's has really never gone out of the system to make a major hiring. When Indians manager Mike Hargrove was fired after the 1999 season, did they go out and make a major

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hiring to replace him as manager? No. They hired Charlie Manuel from within. When John Hart stepped down as GM, did they go out and hire a hotshot up-and-coming GM from another team or an unemployed popular GM? No. They promoted Mark Shapiro from within. And, when Mark Shapiro leaves or is fired, you can bet one of Chris Antonetti, John Farrell or John Mirabelli will be the next Cleveland Indians GM.

Wedge is signed through 2007, and the team has club options on him for 2008 and 2009. While he may not be going anywhere soon, the fact they haven't picked up either one of his options tells you all you need to know. If they were very satisfied with his body of work as a manager, they probably would have at least picked up the 2008 option by now, and maybe even the 2009 option. Clearly, the only reason he is here or will continue to be here is because of Shapiro's loyalty. Like Wedge, Shapiro's contract expires at the end of 2007, and with that Wedge's fate ultimately ties in with Shapiro's fate.

In the end, Shapiro and Wedge truly are partners in their undertaking to get the Indians into the playoffs and win a World Series Championship. Shapiro has surrounded himself with people he feels he can trust and who he believes carry the same vision and values as he does. He has done this by sustaining continuity throughout the organization. Don't expect that philosophy to change anytime soon.

Until the day arrives in which the name on the door to the General Manager's office at Jacobs Field reads anything other than "Mark Shapiro," the name on the door to the manager's office is going to read "Eric Wedge" as well.