

A Transitional Lazy Sunday

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

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While everyone's attention these days is turned to Antawn Jamison and Tiger Woods and Google Image searches of Lindsay Vonn and Julia Mancuso and Tanith Belbin, the calendar on the wall tells me that pitchers and catchers report today and that the first full-squad workout is scheduled for this Friday. That's right, friends of the feather, Spring Training is upon us and, while that may be the biggest news some places, the bigger news on the Reservation is the official passing of the moniker of "The DiaperTribe" from the 3-year-old to the 1-month-old by virtue of having only one boy in diapers. While Spring Training is unquestionably an exciting time of year that we've all been waiting for, the news that there's only one diaper-wearing boy in the house once again supersedes all other developments that could happen anywhere in the world around these parts.

Nevertheless, the long winter finally seems to be relenting (not with snow on the ground in Cleveland, but at least in terms of being able to watch baseball under the Arizona sun) and baseball season is inching closer to being a reality once more and not just something that is debated in print, on computer screens, and in projection models. No, they're getting ready to actually throw that ball around and are getting ready to swing those bats in preparation for the 2010 season. Since they're getting ready for the 2010 season, we probably should do the same and get going on a Lazy One.

Before starting off in the news of the week that's worthwhile for inclusion here, let's get the pleasantries out of the way, in that I won't be including the weekly dissection of the lunacy that's coming from The Three Amigos (Hoynes, Ocker, and Ingraham) in anticipation of the 2010 season, who seem to be stuck in this endless rut of ignorance and pessimism. In the best interest of everyone here, I won't examine how absurd the process by which these guys come to their conclusions truly is nor will I allow myself to get myself all worked up about how they're the major source for Indians' information despite their weekly failure at attempting to remain relevant.

You can find their inane ramblings and their misuse of things like PECOTA projections and sit-on-the-fence "insight"...I know you can. The fact that you're reading this is a pretty good indication that you harbor many of the same thoughts and feelings as I do. Just for some perspective before moving on, realize that more people are subscribed on Google Reader to this site than they are the Indians' coverage on cleveland.com (no, seriously...check it out) and while I don't mention that to beat my own chest or use that gauge as some great barometer of what people are reading, it is telling that we now find ourselves in this digital age when people are able to seek out opinions and information that they value...and the coverage from the three

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long-time beat reporters (and subscribers to Ocker and Ingraham combine for about 10% of the subscribers here) for the Tribe simply don't qualify as such.

With my blood pressure in check, let's finally get this thing going...

Outside of the return of Rusty Branyan to the Indians, the biggest "news" of the week for the Indians involved the long-expected announcement that [Chris Antonetti will be ascending to the position of GM at the end of the 2010 season, with Mark Shapiro moving up the corporate ladder to Team President](#). The move came as a surprise to nobody, as this has been in the works since the Cardinals offered Antonetti their GM post after the 2007 season and the Indians countered to retain Antonetti with GM-type money and with the understanding that Antonetti would be Shapiro's heir apparent as Indians' GM. That understanding will finally come to fruition at the end of this year and, while there's not that much of interest in this story, the timing of it does present an interesting scenario.

With 2010 looking like a certainty as a transitional year, Shapiro will be completing his tenure as GM helping the early stages of the second rebuilding process that he oversaw. Thus, does anyone else find it interesting that Shapiro's final year (if he's choosing when that final year is) at the GM helm is a season in which the Indians are very unlikely to compete?

That is, Shapiro could have insisted on sticking around until after the 2011 or the 2012 season, when the prospects of the team competing look to be brighter or when he could hand the reins off to Antonetti, with the team contending or at least closer to contention. Instead, the transition will come about half of a season after the second rebuild/reload/whatever began in earnest, with Antonetti coming in more or less after Shapiro will have been the point man on most unpopular decisions.

There's no question that Antonetti has been instrumental in every move that the Indians have made with an eye past 2010 and Shapiro has on more than one occasion called him "my co-GM", with [Terry Pluto even asserting](#) that "Antonetti has been handling much of the daily GM duties for at least a year".

The interesting aspect of this revelation is that, if "Antonetti has been handling much of the daily GM duties for at least a year", that would mean that Shapiro was the GM and the point man (in terms of public perception on who was pulling the trigger) when the Indians made the decision to trade Lee and Victor this past summer. Now, realize that Shapiro will still be the GM (again, at least in terms of public perception) when...not if, when the Indians trade (or at least attempt to trade) Westbrook, Wood, Peralta, and maybe even Branyan this coming season. By the time that Antonetti will assume the GM reins, all of the dirty work will have been done in the rebuild, with the roster purged and the contract situations of Lee, Victor, Wood, Westbrook, and Peralta in the rearview mirror...all completed in the "Shapiro regime".

You can almost hear the howling this July when...again not if...the Indians trade Westbrook and Wood and Peralta - that it's more of the same from Shapiro, who will have traded those three, along with Sabathia and overseeing the moves of the 2009 summer. After the 2010 season,

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with the dirt from the unpleasant portion of the rebuild on Shapiro's hands, he steps aside (or up, more accurately) and Antonetti comes in with a fresh slate and with the idea that he's a new man in the post, who will bring a fresh perspective for the 2011 season and beyond.

Now think about what figures to happen going into the 2011 season, with the contracts of Westbrook, Wood, and Peralta coming off of the books and with some of the questions facing the Indians now hopefully answered. Antonetti then has the opportunity to come in, identify the needs of the 2011 team and with the financial flexibility to make the moves that were not feasible or even prudent this off-season.

Remember, if you're following the idea that the 2010 season is going to be similar to the 2004 season, the Indians made the move to sign Kevin Millwood to front a young rotation to start the 2005 season and something similar could happen prior to the 2011 season...all under the watchful eye of Antonetti.

Maybe it's looking too deeply into the timing of this and it's certainly not meant to assert that Shapiro is nobly willing to take the brunt of the blame for the ugly portion of the rebuild, but not interested in receiving any credit that may be coming down the line. Rather, it's to imply that public perception is important to a team that struggling to sell tickets and if people want to believe that things are going to change after this season because Antonetti will replace Shapiro (and not attribute it to the extenuating circumstances in play), perhaps that's by design. The way that the off-season after this year figures to run in stark contrast to this one certainly does look like the timing of the "power transition" is designed to put Antonetti in charge when the team's flexibility is greater and with the young players they've been stockpiling one year closer to contributing to what could be the next incarnation of a contender.

While that timing aspect may simply be for public perception, there's not much doubt that The Polo Shirt Mafia - or as Anthony from Willoughby (who is probably in the air right now on his way to Goodyear) brilliantly calls them "Lacoste Nostra" - lives to fight another day and the Indians figure to make similar moves that we've seen for the past seven years or so.

That doesn't mean that Antonetti will simply be a clone of Shapiro, if you'll remember that Shapiro was (a long time ago) the protégé of John Hart and Hart's hand-picked successor, and while there is a difference here as Shapiro will stay in the organization (which Hart did not), time will tell what kind of GM Antonetti will be.

Antonetti's unquestionably highly-thought of in MLB circles and has been for quite some time if you remember that he was courted by the Cardinals and was famously the subject of a grassroots campaign (complete with [campaign buttons](#)) by USSMariner.com to have Antonetti named the Mariners' GM position (albeit while Bill Bavasi was still the GM, strip-mining the farm system for marginal veterans) back [in](#)

[late 2006](#)

, then again

[in mid-2008](#)

. Those links (both of them) from USS Mariner are worth the read by the way, if only to see how quickly perceptions change in MLB (fair or not) as the Indians were seen as the model franchise

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making all of the right moves not more than 2 to 3 years ago, an honor currently bestowed to...the Mariners.

One question that would seem to follow in this expected news would be to ask who Antonetti surrounds himself with, in that it could be telling if certain Front Office types who may be held in high regard by Shapiro may find themselves in other (less influential) places in the organization. While Shapiro and Antonetti may speak in the same dialect, with the same diction, while dressing similarly (hence, "Lacoste Nostra"), does anyone really believe that they don't have differing opinions on matters such as which other Front Office members contribute the most to the success of the team?

As for a best guess as to who plays the role of Assistant GM (formerly occupied, to some critical acclaim, by Antonetti) in the new arrangement, a name to remember would be Mike Chernoff, the current Director of Baseball Operations. Back in June of 2008, Will Carroll put together [a list of potential future GM's](#)

with Chernoff coming in at #6 on the list with Carroll stating that:

The youngest person on the list, Chernoff has become the de facto No. 3 in Cleveland, and likely would have taken over the Assistant GM slot if Chris Antonetti had left for another organization. While having Antonetti and Shapiro above him on the organizational chart might seem like a tough ceiling, it's also giving Chernoff the chance to learn from some of the best in the business. Shapiro and the Indians have a great internship program, and have developed a number major league staffers in the past decade. Even so, Chernoff might end up being the best. The son of WFAN's program director, no one thinks that Chernoff will be intimidated by the media, though his age will likely be held against him in the near future. "Someone's going to go after Antonetti," a GM said, "and end up with Chernoff. That's not a bad thing."

From that list, 3 of the names that appear above Chernoff (Jed Hoyer - #1, Jack Zduriencik - #2, Mike Rizzo - #4) have become GMs in the past year and a half and the list was actually written based on the idea that Antonetti was being courted by St. Louis.

For a national perspective on the transition, Ken Rosenthal has [an interesting piece](#) on how the new structure appears to be part of the Indians' "plan" for dealing with their status as a small-market club, in that it creates a new arrangement for the organization, both in terms of baseball decisions and business decisions. Rosenthal touches on the new arrangement, but also gets into each of the men whose titles will be changing:

Creativity is paramount for such clubs, particularly now that high-revenue teams such as the Yankees and Red Sox are operating with ruthless efficiency. □

The Indians, at least, are trying. □

Much as they appear to be going about business as usual - Shapiro and Antonetti will remain 1-2 on the executive depth chart once they assume their new positions after the 2010 season - the team's latest plan is actually fairly unique. □

Shapiro will oversee baseball and business. His goal will be to fuse the two more seamlessly, helping the business side build revenue to support the baseball operation. In a market as limited

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as Cleveland, the Indians need such a cohesive vision.

While Shapiro admits that he has "a lot to learn" about the business of baseball, leadership is perhaps his greatest strength. He will spend part of the season attending marketing and budget meetings. Antonetti will assume an even greater role on the baseball side.

--snip--

So, after this season, it will be Antonetti's turn; Shapiro still will be involved, but he, too, looks forward to the franchise being re-energized by fresh ideas, fresh energy.

The Indians' new manager, Manny Acta, is excited to be in Cleveland; he chose the Indians over the Astros. Antonetti, meanwhile, is highly regarded within the industry, and has spent years waiting for his chance.

Some of Shapiro's friends wonder if he will remain fulfilled in his new role, but for now he wants to stay in Cleveland. If he grows disenchanted with his position, he can always become GM of another team.

The Indians' position is not hopeless. Oh, Shapiro gave out his share of bad contracts, like every GM. He also drew criticism for the Indians' lack of success in the draft. But he compensated for those failures with shrewd trades, and the Indians' farm system again is ranked among the game's top five.

A rapid turnaround is possible in a division that lacks a financial behemoth, and the front-office stability should only help.

Moving on, [The Hardball Times presented their compilation of prospects](#), with the Indians ranked as the #3 farm system behind only the Rays and the Rangers and that's included because it goes back to the Rosenthal piece and the creativity that some of the small-market teams attempt to employ. Notably, and since the Rays are always at the top of lists like this one from THT, I thought it would be interesting to pass along

[this little nugget from the Rays' owner](#)

, who appeared on a local radio show earlier in the week and had this to say:

"We did out-spend ourselves last year (at \$63-million) and completely have out-spent ourselves this year...and unfortunately we're going to feel the effect of that the next couple years for certain. ... There's no \$60-million payroll next year either, let alone a \$70-million payroll. It's going to be a tough transition, but it's something that given the economics of the game and specifically the economics of what we are in Tampa Bay and in St. Petersburg, it makes it impossible to do it for more than a couple of years."

Sound familiar and sound like a team that hopes to make the "transition" to perennial contender through young players who aren't earning the salaries that FA creates?

To that end, there's [an interesting piece from Ben Reiter in this week's print edition of SI](#) that examines how small-market clubs may be making some headway in attempting to compete in

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an unbalanced system. While the piece is entitled "Hope Springs Eternal", Reiter doesn't mince words in pointing out the disparity at play in MLB as well as laying out how certain teams have attempted to play with the big boys:

It's a cliché to say, with pitchers and catchers reporting to spring training this week, that this is the most optimistic time on the baseball calendar. It's a moment when hope springs eternal for all 30 major league franchises, when the low-revenue have-nots dream of those long-ago days when championships didn't seem directly tied to franchise financial statements. Most of the time it's also a delusion-it has been six seasons now since a club with a payroll ranked in the majors' bottom half has won the World Series.

--snip--

Small-market teams such as the Twins, Rockies (the World Series runner-up in 2007) and Rays (who lost in the Series in '08) have followed a four-part model: draft well; trade mature assets (players who are stars but who are likely to be plucked in free agency by a rich team once they become eligible) for top prospects; sign cornerstone young players to long-term deals, thereby buying out some of their arbitration and free-agent years at what might prove to be a below-market salary; and be selectively active in the free agent market, signing players to one- or two-year deals that will not handcuff a team down the road.

Look again at Reiter's "four-part model" for small-market teams to compete and apply it to the Indians over the last 8 years or so...what did they miss, the "draft well" component?

Maybe...but more importantly, a couple of those long-term deals that they did hand out to players that they thought would be cornerstones of the franchise blew up in their face, effectively "handcuffing the team down the road". There again, we get back to this dead horse that we've been beating this whole off-season, in that the universe that the Indians exist in MLB is one that forces them to be nearly perfect in their decisions, with any miscalculation forcing them to blow it up and attempt to build it back again in short order every few years.

So, we're back to the "build it back again in short order" portion of the show and the performances on the diamond start this week in Goodyear. To that end and just to bring this all back around to pitchers and catchers reporting today, Tribe Daily continues their countdown to Spring Training, examining [the pitchers](#) , then [position players](#) , on the 40-man roster who will be under the Arizona sun, competing in Cactus League action (with

[their schedule available here](#)
) as the 2010 season is close.

Pitchers and catchers are in Arizona, a plan is in place for the Indians past 2010, and changing a 3-year-old's diaper no longer looks to be on my radar...yeah, things feel right in the world on this Sunday morning.