

Status Quo Ante

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, February 23 2010 8:54 AM - Last Updated Friday, April 02 2010 9:02 AM



There's been little if any buzz about the recent announcements by the Cleveland Indians regarding current general manager Mark Shapiro and his assistant, Chris Antonetti. But then again maybe that's because there's been little if any buzz about the team they plan to put on the field this season.

For those of you too bored to either care or pay attention, at season's end Shapiro will be leaving the daily grind of general manager duties and the two or three cell phones that job requires at all times for the relatively tranquil environs inside the team's presidential suite. Antonetti, meanwhile, gets his wish and becomes the new Shapiro.

In corporate terms, this is what's known as an orderly transition. Larry and Paul Dolan obviously are well pleased with what the team of Shapiro and Antonetti have brought them to date. What all this means then is pretty obvious. As we say in the legal business, status quo ante.

According to Shapiro, Antonetti has been almost functioning as the general manager anyway as he was the key decision-maker in hiring new manager Manny Acta. I've always liked Shapiro's relative honesty, particularly as it contrasts with his brother-in-law Eric Mangini, who treats his lunch order as a state secret. But Shapiro has always fudged things just a little and I suspect that's true in this case as well. Acta is his hire but the intention of associating him with Antonetti is to avoid any questions that Antonetti might get later about whether or not he desires to put his own guy in place.

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In associating Acta with Antonetti, Shapiro is merely trying to avoid the itch he got when he took over the Indians and inherited Mike Hargrove. Shapiro for reasons that still have never been fully explained, didn't much care for Hargrove and as soon as he got his sea legs in the general manager's job, pushed Hargrove overboard. At the time and even now, the canning of Hargrove seemed like a move of a newbie general manager just itching to branch out on his own, which is what Shapiro ultimately did when he hired and fired both Charlie Manuel and Eric Wedge. But no such branching out will take place in the near term. Acta is Antonetti's guy, at least for public consumption.

But back to the real point of all this and that's the fact that these front office moves have elicited nothing stronger than a yawn from anyone and that includes the usual suspects from our local print media. Not a contrarian among them. Maybe they just see no news value in Shapiro replacing himself with Shapiro, Jr..

This isn't a knock on Antonetti. By all accounts, he's a bright guy, just like Shapiro. He operates from the exact same vantage point as Shapiro. With money lacking, they use all manner of statistical analysis to give themselves an edge in finding the right amateurs to draft and the right bottom-feeder free agents to sign.

I suppose you can get picky and point out that the Indians' self-acknowledged biggest weakness has been its amateur draft and that Antonetti has been overseeing it, but that's quibbling. No one was going to much argue about Antonetti's promotion because, ultimately, it doesn't matter. To say that somehow the Dolans are making some grievous error in keeping things as is would be to ignore all that we already know about how this franchise will be run for the duration of their ownership.

It's not that the Dolans are cheap, per se. I've seen the case made about all the money they've spent and while I can argue forcefully to the contrary, the point is that, well, it's a circular argument. The Indians have been sliding down the payroll ladder for years and the business model firmly in place isn't going to change until there's an ownership change.

Besides, with the shadow of Shapiro presiding over everything anyway, it really doesn't much matter who will sit in the general manager's chair. It remains Shapiro's team to run.

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In that context, there really is no news in last week's announcement except that Indians fans don't have much to look forward to for a long while. Both Shapiro and Antonetti can say with a straight face that they remain committed to bringing this town a championship just like the guy in front of you at the beverage store with a fistful of numbers is just as committed to winning the lottery. You know it isn't going to happen just as he knows it isn't going to happen. And yet, if the stars align just right and the ping pong balls come out in just the right order, then it's Easy Street.

Both Shapiro and Antonetti (not to mention the Dolans) have to know by now that this team is entrenched in a do-loop of mediocrity. Whatever advantage they think they gain from the sophisticated computer programs they run, they still operate in a league that's economically broken and without nearly the funds to field a team that can compete with the New York Yankees on a regular basis. In other words, the Indians chances each season depend on a 1,000,000,000-1 alignment of the planets, the stars and the galaxies. It could happen, certainly, just as it could happen that Carrie Underwood will show up at your doorstep and proclaim you the man of her dreams, but neither is all that likely.

Put it this way: All of the young talent is nice, but when a team's major off-season acquisition is Russell Branyan (yes, him again) and that can't even be officially announced until he passes a physical, what real hope do you have to compete for a World Series?

The evidence of a proud franchise on the fast decline is all around. According to reports, only half of the loges at Progressive Field are rented for the season. Sure, that's a reflection of the economy, but it's an even bigger measure of corporate and fan indifference. There's just no great entertainment value in taking a client to an Indians game these days.

Meanwhile, just across the plaza are the Cavaliers who, operating in the exact same economy, have no trouble selling out at significantly higher prices. It's easy to attribute it to LeBron James, but that's just half the story. Danny Ferry has used the resources of a well-heeled owner to field an elite team while Dan Gilbert has ensured a game day experience that makes each home date an event.

Sure, if LeBron James leaves Cleveland the Cavs economics will change dramatically. But something tells me that if that happens Gilbert and Ferry will find a way to field a highly competitive team and keep the fans entertained so that the money will still flow.

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At Progressive Field, the Indians have all manner of promotions and sell every kind of food imaginable, but there isn't really much that has changed about any of it over the years. The Indians' game day experience still consists of giving away a trinket as a way to divert the fans attention from some really average baseball. When was the last time anything really interesting happened?

But don't take my word for it. If you want to appreciate the full level of fan indifference, consider this item from this week's Crain's Cleveland Business. The Indians apparently have been running a promotion (who knew?) that asks fans to explain their economic circumstances in the form of an essay for the chance to win a 12-pack of tickets. To date, the contest has yielded "nearly" 500 entries.

That doesn't exactly strike me as a landslide of interest. If the economy was really keeping fans away, wouldn't something like 5,000 entries have been received by now?

What this all says is that right now there aren't even a healthy number of people willing to scrawl a few words on a piece of paper in order to get free tickets. If the Indians were smart, they'd just give every entry so far a 12-pack of tickets and call it a day. It may be the only way to get an extra 500 people at the games.