

## The Giant Sleeps

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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As the Cleveland Indians are finding out in rather painful fashion, decisions have consequences. When CC Sabathia and Cliff Lee were traded in consecutive years and fan favorite Victor Martinez was similarly dealt, a fan backlash erupted that is hitting Larry and Paul Dolan where they can least afford it, in their wallet.

According to an article in this week's Crain's Cleveland Business, the Indians have sold the equivalent of 8,000 season tickets for 2010. That's accomplished through a series of full and partial game packages. It also represents nearly a 33% drop from the 2009 season and an approximately 45% drop from 2008.

Now you know why the Indians only off-season acquisition the Indians could afford was Russell Branyan. Indeed in that context his signing represents a near perfect metaphor for the state of the franchise.

Crain's notes that by contrast the Philadelphia Phillies and the Minnesota Twins cut off season ticket sales at 24,000. The Twins, of course, just opened a new stadium so the enthusiasm there is understandable.

But what is less understandable is that right now the Indians are scraping near the bottom with teams like the Pittsburgh Pirates when it comes to season tickets. That should trouble the Dolans more than anything else. The Pirates have been awful for nearly two full decades. The Indians, on the other hand, at least have had some success in far more recent times.

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The Crain's story reaches the predictable conclusions by quoting the predictable experts: attendance is cyclical and will improve as the team improves. History certainly bears that out but this may be one time where past performance truly is not indicative of future results. The truth staring them in the face is that this may not be a cycle at all.

The Indians' renaissance of the 1990s pivoted off of the opening of Jacobs Field. Until then the team was toiling in Pirates territory and without the new ballpark they'd probably still be. But the opening of Jacobs Field and the significant streams of revenue it opened up for Dick Jacobs gave the team the kind of money it needed to compete on equal footing with any other team.

As a result, it could and did buy good, solid and proven free agents to fill in the holes as the younger players developed. Management did its part, too, by hitting more often than missing on free agents and rookies.

But the shine of Jacobs Field has worn off. Now known as Progressive Field, it's still one of the best facilities in baseball but it's no longer an attraction in and of itself to the casual fan. The Indians of this year are either a team people will pay to see or won't on its own merits and not because they play in a novel ballpark.

At this juncture, it doesn't look like too many will be willing to pay. The season ticket base gives the Indians a Cleveland Municipal Stadium-like attendance base of just 648,000 fans. That means that even if they triple that amount in single game sales, they still won't draw 2 million fans for the season.

And that's just the folks in the stands. The Crain's article doesn't mention it but the Indians are similarly struggling in selling loges, another significant source of revenue. All told, even if the Indians could slash their payroll by trading Travis Hafner and Jake Westbrook, they'd still lose money at the end of the season.

And the really chilling reality in all of this is that there isn't another attendance jolt like the opening of a new stadium lying in their immediate future, either. Consequently, the Indians ability to move the needle on attendance and hence revenue is more or less completely related to their ability to get better on the field.

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That's a tall order, particularly when you operate in a league where the only level playing field is the one between the foul poles.

For too many years now, the Indians front office has been swinging and missing on acquiring good young talent, the kind that comes cheaply. Their drafting record rivals that of the Browns, or maybe it just seems that way because every mistake in this atmosphere is bound to be magnified. Making matters worse is that the team has pretty much run out of high-priced talent to trade, meaning that the only prospects will be the ones they draft.

What you see on the field now is pretty much what you're going to be seeing for awhile. There will be movement around the fringes, there always is. But unless this group suddenly gets good it's going to be taking its lumps for awhile without any sense at the moment that it ever will be good enough and cheap enough to truly compete for a playoff spot.

Which gets you right back to the issue of attendance. If it tracks performance, and it usually does, the Dolans will be taking their lumps for awhile as well. But perhaps it's not just performance related. While the economy certainly had some bearing on the drop in attendance, fan backlash is a major part of it as well. Crain's quotes Bob DiBiasio, the Indian's vice president of public relations and someone who's been associated with the team for 31 years, as readily acknowledging that he's never seen anger from fans on par with last summer's.

The breadth of DiBiasio's statement is sweeping but very explainable. In the '70s and '80s there wasn't much anger because, frankly, there wasn't much to get angry about. Fans understood the Indians had lousy ownership and a lousy ballpark. They had witnessed institutional incompetence for so long that they were numb to the fact that there was even a team in town. It's pretty much what Pirates fans are like right now.

But if anger is driving Indians fans, and there is every reason to believe that it is, then even a few upticks in performance aren't going to make much of a difference. Indians fans are angry now because they've been to the show. They know that this team and this town are capable of great things if given the right circumstances. They also know that this ownership really hasn't followed through on its pledge to the community to deliver consistently competitive teams. Twice in the last 5 years the Dolans and their management team have been given that opportunity and twice they've deliberately squandered it by not taking the necessary next steps.

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In fact, each time they stood still which, in professional sports, is the equivalent of stepping backward.

The fans have also seen that general manager Mark Shapiro has been rewarded for his approach by being named club president, which more than anything else says that things aren't likely to change. Mix all of this together and you more or less land on a spot that suggests the only path forward is of the sea change variety.

There was a point in the '80s where the Indians had Case Western Reserve University study the fan base. The study concluded that this attendance-starved team was really a sleeping giant and that all the fans needed to see was a little success and they'd turn out in droves. Not exactly a revelation, certainly, but it at least gave confirmation that there was a fan base ready to spring into action when given an actual reason to do so.

The chicken-and-egg nature of remedying the situation Tribe teams in the past experienced eventually was solved when Dick Jacobs bought the team and got Jacobs Field built. The added money begat better players begat better attendance. This time the team doesn't look to be so lucky so for now whatever form of sleeping giant remains is locked into a deep and prolonged hibernation.