

Just got back from a much needed vacation. I spent ten days completely removed from Indians baseball, and it gave me some time to reflect. On the future of the team. On the Indians as compared to a team with the same record in the NL. And on Larry Dolan and what he MUST do next season.



Just got back from a much needed vacation. Three days on Deep Creek Lake in Maryland, and a week with family in northern Virginia. I didn't read the PD, didn't watch one Tribe game, and spent a minimal amount of time perusing my favorite Cleveland sports blogs and websites.

The family we visited in northern Virginia has some ties to the Washington Nationals organization, and I used the time out there to watch alot of Nationals baseball. It was exciting ... the Nats reeled off a six game win streak while I was out there, just as the new ownership group took over the reigns of the team.

While the Nationals and Indians records are similar (nearly identical winning percentages), the sentiments of the two respective fan bases are very opposite right now. Indians fans are as angry as any in baseball. Coming off a 93 win season with an owner that promised to "spend when the time is right", the team has the 25th highest payroll in baseball. In addition, the team failed to improve themselves in the off-season, and many of the regulars from last year are underachieving.

The Nats fan base is very excited despite a similarly poor record, and a team that was leading the division at the All-Star break last year. They just introduced a new ownership group that is very popular in the area. They've suffered a host of injuries this season (Vidro, Patterson, Livian, Guillen, Armas, and others) that have made contention unrealistic. They have two young middle of the order fixtures at the corners in Nick Johnson and Ryan Zimmerman, and two top of the rotation guys in Livian Hernandez and John Patterson. They have a brand new park being built right in downtown D.C. for play starting in 2008. And a dynamic superstar player that

the town has thoroughly embraced in Alfonso Soriano. After being set to deal him, the fan reaction to keep him was so strong that they actually ended up doing it. And vowed today to start working on a contract extension with him.

As far as the Indians trades while I was away, it's hard to argue with any of them on the surface. Provided the team actually uses some of the savings added to coffers from dealing away the contracts of Wickman, Belliard, Broussard, and Perez on the 2007 payroll. In theory, with that money, the "10 million or so" they had to spend at this years deadline (before the season went to the birds) after striking out with Garciparra, Giles, and Hoffman ... and the proceeds of the new cable deal - Dolan should actually spend some money next season. Finally giving Shapiro a legitimate chance to build a team that can finish ahead of the Tigers and White Sox next year.

I know ... some of you have stopped reading. Another column about Dolan's pocketbook.

But it's almost impossible to not talk about. Fans live and die with this team, who has not won a title in 58 years. We have a solid young nucleus that teams like the Nats would die for. CC, Lee, Sowers, Westbrook, Carmona, Hafner, Grady, Victor, Honny, Marte. We won 93 games last year. And the ante just went up in the AL Central.

Am I the only one that remembers what the additions of vets like Hershiser, Murray, and others did at a similar juncture not too long ago?

It made me even more sick to my stomach when watching the Nats play to be reminded that the Indians are 45-58. The Indians are SO much more talented. But the Nats just play the game right, look so much more loose and confident out there. They respect and revere their manager Frank Robinson. They play above their talent level.

It's clear to me after some time away what Larry Dolan needs to do this off-season.

~Call Shapiro in his office. Tell him he has 70 million dollars to spend next season, with the ability to take that to the mid 70's if the right opportunity presents itself.

~Tell Shapiro he must fire Wedge. And that the team is going to exhaustively interview the best available respected veteran managers at seasons end.

~Sign a top end FA pitcher like Jason Schmidt. No more of this coming close bull shit. Trade Byrd for a veteran reliever pitcher for the 7th or 8th inning this off-season. Pick up Westbrooks option and hes your #5 starter.

~I actually like the young kids in the bullie. Carmona, Cabrera, Perez, Mujica, Betancourt, et al. I move Dittler to the pen, cause with Schmidt, CC, Lee, Sowers, Westbrook, and Adam Miller en route ... we're OK in the rotation the next couple years. I add a couple solid vets for depth, but no one over 2 mill per.

~Victor and Hafner are my 1b next year. Honny at 2b. Sign Julio Lugo for 7-8 million per to

play SS. Marte at 3b with Luna and Inglett as insurance at 2b/3b and corner OF. I catch Victor 70 games or so. Use the last 60 games to extensively look at Shoppach to see if you need another C. You need a strong defensive catcher in my view, Im a big proponent of that. Is it Shoppach? Is it a FA? Maybe Zaun or Molina from Toronto?

~Grady in center. Sign a legitimate FA LF. Trot Nixon? Jose Guillen? Cliff Floyd? Maybe even look at Torri Hunter or Mike Cameron and move Grady to LF? Blake in RF most of the time ... but keep him sharp at 1b and 3b. Use Choo, Francisco, Dubois, Gutierrez, and Snyder to compete for depth.

A top tier SP. A mid tier LF. A shortstop that can field the position and run.

Possibly a catcher and some vets for the pen, which hopefully a Byrd and some prospects can help provide.

Anything less will be unacceptable. If this can be done for cheaper with the same overall effect via trades, then great.