

The Big Six

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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If the Cleveland Indians have a set of goals for the season scrawled on a piece of paper inside the mind of general manager Mark Shapiro, it probably says "when you don't know where you're going any road will get you there."

Here's a test: on any night watch the Indians for as long as you can stand and then try to write down exactly what you think they were trying to accomplish. On the list of things you're likely to write down, "win games," if it appears at all, will be down at the bottom. For a team rebuilding that's understandable. The real problem is that at the bottom also will be "developing a team that someday will win games."

During this past off season Shapiro spent a lot of time talking about how this team needed to get a better start out of the gate than in seasons past. Shapiro all but painted the picture that the team's slow starts was the primary reason Eric Wedge now has "former Indians' manager" as part of his title.

To that end Shapiro and the brain trust that brought you this roster went about supposedly revamping the spring training experience as if the only thing that stood between this roster and on-field success was a better cut of steak at the training table. Manager Manny Acta placed more emphasis on winning preseason games than did his predecessor (as well as most of the other current managers) and indeed from that perspective the Indians' spring was a success.

But a distressed room doesn't suddenly get a makeover just because you move a few lamps

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around. When the season started this team was still the uneven mess it looked like on paper in the off season and thus it shouldn't have surprised anyone that April again was miserable. It was bound to be.

Then again, we're likely to be saying the same thing at the end of May, June, July and August as well. By September fans will be so focused on the Browns that they won't notice whatever fate awaits the Indians' then.

The Indians 9-13 record at the end of April projects to a 66 win season. Since most figure this team to win about 70 games anyway, it seems like they are right on pace.

It would be one thing if this team was built with the intent of taking its lumps early while it gels into a competitive unit late. That's just not the case. It's a team that seems to have been built with only one unifying theme: don't lose too much money.

Even that task isn't going to be easy, not with a lineup featuring the Big Six.

The Indians as constructed are mostly a mess. Of the seven players on the roster making over \$1 million this season, 6 of them are among the least productive. Unfortunately, three of those six look to be around for a few more years. The Indians have no other choice.

What it all adds up to is a cringe-worthy lineup with only the occasional bright spot or, in mathematical terms, a team that deservedly is on pace to win 66 games, for years to come.

I've railed against Russell Branyan being on this team plenty of times so no need to turn over those shovels of dirt again. Nothing he's done since his return changes that assessment. The best that can be said is that he's not guaranteed any money for next year. All he's doing on this team is eating up space and inhibiting the development of players that might actually have a chance to be on this team a year from now. His \$2 million dollar salary is essentially a gift that Branyan would be wise to put in a CD. I hope he sends a thank you note.

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You could say the same thing about Travis Hafner, except that his salary is now in the multi-millions, 11.5 of them to be exact.

It's actually hard to watch Hafner these days because so much of what he isn't now is wrapped up in what he used to be. It may be that injuries have robbed him of his ability to be productive any longer. It also may be that his lack of productivity at the plate is exacerbated by his contract, with 3 years remaining, that has become the millstone around this franchise that prevents it from putting a more cohesive lineup on the field. Hafner not only is collecting \$11.5 million this season, which equates to about \$100 per bad swing at this point, but the Indians are also on the hook to pay him \$13 million each of the next two seasons. Hafner is like that stock you bought at \$85 a share and held on to even as the company went bankrupt. What else could you do?

The sad fact is that the Indians could be as productive with Andy Marte and pick a player making the minimum as they are with Branyan and Hafner in the same lineup at about 1/12th the cost. This alone goes a long way to explaining the mess that is this lineup.

Yet if these two were the only problems then maybe things would look brighter. But then I watch Jhonny Peralta slumber through his existence at third base like the kid in the back of your high school science class who, when he was there at all, was usually sleeping.

Peralta, with his \$4.85 million salary, is like a trust fund baby just gliding through life hoping the money never runs out. Fortunately, it might. He's due \$7 million next season, but that's a club option which, if exercised, means Peralta has some incriminating pictures of someone stored in a safety deposit box. If neither Shapiro nor his hand-picked successor Chris Antonetti can't find someone to be as productive as Peralta for 1/10th the price then the Dolans should sue for malpractice.

You could make the case, weakly, that Peralta is still pouting over being moved to third base. But really he wasn't any better at short, either. He has occasional streaks where he's semi-hot at the plate followed by long streaks where he looks like he'd rather be any place else. Mostly though he continues to occupy a spot in the heart of a very weak offensive lineup because his guaranteed salary makes it impossible for the Indians to put anyone else there.

Branyan, Hafner and Peralta are mostly old stories at this point. Unfortunately another player

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that's becoming an old story is Grady Sizemore. Like Hafner, Sizemore's high water mark was 2006. Since then he's been on a steady and mystifying decline.

That might be fine if Sizemore were still earning league minimum. Instead he's making \$5.7 million this year and is scheduled to make \$7.6 million next season. In fact Sizemore's salary and productivity make a perfect "X" on the chart with the crossover point being that 2006 season.

There's no question that Wedge had trouble grooming Sizemore in the same way that Wedge had trouble developing most players. Yet at this point the problems with Sizemore seem to be beyond the grasp of nearly everybody. Except for the occasional spectacular play in center field, he looks nothing like the player that was poised to become the Indians' next superstar to be traded. Right now he looks like just another spare part among the many cobbled together in order to field a line up each day.

You can blame Shapiro for giving Hafner an outsized contract and for placing too much faith in a player like Peralta who never quite deserved it. You can find a healthy number of baseball executives that would agree with you, too. When it comes to Sizemore, though, there probably isn't an executive in baseball that would yet turn his back on him. And yet, where he seems to be headed is for a career that mirrors that of Rick Manning. That isn't awful, but it you shouldn't pay nearly \$8 million a year for it either.

Then there's the money being chewed up by Kerry Wood as he sits in the spot where he's apparently most comfortable, the disabled list. But his \$11 million for next season is a club option which means that if he somehow survives the whole season in Cleveland he won't survive the off season.

The same applies to pitcher Jake Westbrook, with his \$11 million salary. He is the last of the Big Six as he's a free agent next season. His injuries caused him to miss all of last season but let's be honest, before that he was a career .500 pitcher anyway with an ERA well over 4.00. His history indicates he would never have received full value from what they were paying him anyway.

Fausto Carmona is the last of the 7 players making at least \$1 million this season. Of the group

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he's been far and away the most productive. He's also the most mercurial of the group and always on the verge of being a few pitches away from the mess he's been the last two seasons or, stated differently, on the verge of making the Big Six the Big Seven.

Which means, of course, that as long as the majority of this group stays in tact, and it could for the next few seasons, there's really no reason to think that April 2011 or 2012 is going to be any better.