

Flipping the Script

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Tuesday, October 19 2010 9:18 PM - Last Updated Wednesday, October 20 2010 7:40 AM



As the MLB playoffs continue with former Indians dotting the post-season rosters, the amazement that 2007 was merely three years ago never ceases for most Tribe fans. The excitement, the promise, the feeling that this was just the beginning, the cautious optimism that the Indians had created a burgeoning juggernaut, unfazed by the Yankee mystique and built on their own young talent...remember all of that, just three years ago?

Unfortunately, as we all sit and watch the aces for each ALCS squad square off against each other (again) in a meaningful playoff series (again), the Indians find themselves at the bottom of another “cycle” and, if it wasn’t obvious from the attendance figures, the descent has taken its toll on an already abused fanbase.

To that end, I thought I would share an e-mail that I received from my buddy Mike last week that I’ve been unable to extract from my head, as Mike admitted to me that the past three years have given him serious pause about the investment involved in being an Indians’ fan. Lest anyone question the fanhood at hand, this is the guy who earned extra money in high school by ushering at Jacobs Field, that drove from Chicago to Cleveland for every playoff game in the 2007, and who was known to launch Rally Pies on unsuspecting victims on those magical Fall nights a mere three years ago.

Despite that level of, well...love, Mike’s feelings about the current Indians echo what I think most die-hard Indians’ fans are wrestling with. He wrote me that after 2007, “to see what happened next just destroyed me. A lot of it was due to bad luck, but quite a bit was due to baseball economics. Hafner/Westbrook injuries coupled with drop offs from some just destroyed us. After being as invested as I was, seeing that happen, and then seeing how ruthless the current MLB financial setup is with a team like us. How can I rationalize that kind of investment again?”

Realizing that the MLB landscape was not going to be changing any time soon, I asked him what would bring that passion back – if it was simply a matter of winning again. His response was jarring:

A rebirth of sorts would help, but remember, we all stayed engaged in the early to mid 2000’s partially because we were still ignoring the MLB financial elephant in the room and partially

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because the new young players were so exciting. Ultimately, I don't know what will bring me back. I hate to say it's just winning, but that's not the only thin as I have no connection to this current roster. At the end of the day, maybe what really bothers me deep down is they've never addressed the organizational shortcomings. Clearly someone was failing miserably at their job for the past 5 years.

You want the PR nightmare?

There it is, die-hard fans unsure if they want to emotionally invest themselves in the continuation of this new "cycle", certain that the economic realities of baseball will deep-six any possibility that the Indians can use the same group of players to mature and contend together for a period longer than three to four years and, more importantly, the horrifying descent of the last three years showing that the Indians' organization was ill-equipped to sustain the success that they had built from 2003 to 2007. Seeing the same faces in the Front Office and the same message being preached from said Front Office as we embark on what we all hope is another trip up the standings, it feels like 2002 or 2003 all over again and, as Mike says, "how can I rationalize that kind of investment again" if we already know how this story ends, with the sucker punch landing in our guts?

That's why the Indians are at a crossroads in terms of how they're perceived by their fans. Sure the optimists will always see that half-full glass and the naysayers will always have their teeth to gnash, but the core of the fanbase is wavering by the dual existence of MLB's uneven playing field (and [Craig Calcaterra points out the real "power" of the Yankees here](#)) and the fact that they've heard this sermon before from the same preacher and they aren't quite sure if they're ready to buy into the message again.

Despite this, the Indians are out there with the script that we've heard for far too long, one that was relayed from [Mark Shapiro to B-Pro's John Perrotto](#) again recently as he outlined the issues (outside of trading CC and CP Lee in consecutive seasons) facing the Indians:

"One of them is demographics," Shapiro said. "It's a smaller city. A second is the economic troubles we've had as the city tries to re-shape itself. This has been a devastating period for the city. But there are two other factors. We need to win. We need to put a winner on the field and we need to improve the level of entertainment we offer within the ballpark."

--snip--

"The trouble is, people are looking at this in the context of the mid-'90s Indians," he said. "That was obviously a very different market. We had top five payrolls. And we did not spend beyond our revenues in the mid-'90s. We spent what we made. There's probably only one team in baseball that spends significantly beyond their revenues. All the rest spend about what they make. The biggest markets make a ton of money, and don't even spend their revenues. So the model you might emotionally ask for, an owner to use the team as a philanthropic endeavor and to continually fund huge deficits beyond revenues—you're asking for something that doesn't exist. There is no place where that exists. So changing an owner is not going to change that."

Just to finish the thought, Shapiro says in the piece that, "we're at the hump or just over it," as far when the Indians will attempt to field a winning team" and attempts to dispel what Perrotto calls "the perception among fans is that ownership lacks the money to bankroll a strong roster".

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That reasoning is actually sound in that Cleveland is struggling and the Indians are in a different place, in terms of revenues, than most other MLB teams...and a couple in particular. However, Indians' fans are already acutely aware of this and realize that CC was going to go to the highest bidder and that CP Lee is going to go to the highest bidder, as well as the fact that the Indians were never going to be that highest bidder.

However, this rationale doesn't make it any easier for anyone to stomach the "emotional investment" and the sucker-punch that lurks around the corner. [Terry Pluto hit on this a couple of weeks ago](#), in that the Indians should change their message, embracing the role of the underdog, but it goes further than that. The Indians shouldn't just be embracing the role of the underdog, they should be trumpeting the fact that the two aces in the ALCS are players who made their MLB debuts for Cleveland and that it isn't a coincidence (and [read this on Lee from Joe Pos](#)) that the Indians had built a rotation around CC and Lee in the mid-2000's.

They should point out that they DID identify the generational talents and put the plans in place to sustain that level of contention. However, they shouldn't shy away from the fact that those best-laid plans were undermined by slow starts, injuries, regressions, and a failure to augment the parent club with a steady stream of young talent – the lifeblood of any successful franchise.

On that last topic, they've started to admit the mistakes as [Shapiro had this to say on the draft failures to Stephanie Storm of the ABJ](#), "We admit it's definitely the worst-performing component of our overall operation...we can't afford to not excel in every facet of our operation."

But again, the message should be stronger than that and the season that fans just endured – with Crowe and Huff...um, underwhelming and Sowers spending the entire year in AAA because no other team wanted the former First Round Pick – should compel them to admit that it's simply "the worst-performing component" of the organization. Let it be known that people are on notice on the corner of Carnegie and Ontario and that the mediocrity won't be tolerated, much less rewarded, anymore.

If that doesn't sound like the Indians' public face...well, that's part of the problem as the Indians shouldn't be sending out letters to season-ticket holders (like [this one that arrived in my mailbox this past weekend](#)), gently selling the future of the team (which Corey Kluber is, apparently, a major part of) on the premise of hope.

Rather, they should be pointing out that they pulled this off once before and while the end result didn't flesh out the way they thought it would, they'll be damned if they're not going to do it again. They should say that the economics of baseball aren't going to dictate terms to them because they've learned from their mistakes and are creating that model franchise with a full pipeline of young players that was promised back in 2002.

Maybe it will come off as grand-standing and maybe it involves more chutzpah than we've seen

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from the corner of Carnegie and Ontario for a while, but the organization needs to get a little ballsy in terms of talking up what they've done, own where they're at, and, most importantly, where they think they're going.

By no means is this to suggest that the Indians need to become some polo-and-khaki version of the "The Kenny and Ozzie Show" that plays to packed houses (and some critical acclaim) on the South Side, nor does it mean that they have to go to the comic sans font or the extreme side of the ledger and guarantee a championship before the Yankees win another one...as some perspective is always necessary and appreciated.

Rather, the Indians need to find a new message to yell from the street corners.

Toady, we hear the same message that was preached in 2002 – that patience is a virtue and that brighter days are ahead – but here they sit, eight years later, right back to where they were before.

Yes, we all know that they've done this before and that they oversaw the rise from the ashes from 2003 to 2005 and were one game away from the 2007 World Series, but Indians' fans are left with the reality that, even if the current players turn into the stars that some of them could be, they're not Cleveland Indians for life and that the same Front Office that presided over the rapid descent, is still in place with no promise that the last chapter of this next book (2010-?) is going to be any different than the ultimately disappointing one (2003-2009) we just closed up.

Everyone remember when the Dolans said they would win "multiple championships" when they became owners or when Shapiro said that "this team will contend in 2005" back when they traded Colon in 2002?

Of course, both of those phrases were (or still are) fodder for anyone with a complaint about the Indians and their failures. Want to know something, though? As insane as those "multiple championships" sounded (or is it sound?) or as crazy as we all thought Shapiro was when he put a firm timeframe on the rebuild (and there's no doubt he regretted providing a date as soon as he spoke it), that type of braggadocio is what is lacking from this organization in the past four years.

Maybe the time has come to pull a Don Draper and make a grand gesture (and by this I refer to [his open letter in the New York Times](#) , not his actions of the Season Finale), acknowledging that the perception on the street about you has become pervasive and accepted fact, looking at the brick wall in front of you, and changing the message to remind everyone who you are, what you have done, and (again, most importantly) who you know you will become.

As a quick aside here, if you don't know who "Don Draper" is (and that's a loaded question), stop what you're doing, go add "Mad Men" to your Netflix queue (or however you handle your DVD viewing) and watch every available episode to catch up to that letter to the best show on TV right now.

No, seriously...I'll wait.

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Back to the matter at hand, this may be lunacy for Antonetti to preach a new message when he JUST became the GM, but injecting some urgency that doesn't devolve into catch-phrases and cold, calculated seminars is imperative if the Indians are going to win back that cadre of fans that are having trouble wrapping their heads, hearts, and stomachs around the last three years...and the next three.

Use the bully pulpit from the corner of Carnegie and Ontario again to move away from the talk that "this is a rebuilding year again" and say that young in-house talent are unequivocally the players that are going to lead the Indians to their next appearance in the playoffs. If the Front Office TRULY believes it, come out and declare that the assembled young talent at all levels will prevent the team from going into this valley again.

If that sounds bold...be bolder.

Put a timeframe on it – say that the team will win 90 games within the next three years and take it further that if 90 wins isn't enough to win a division title by 2013, that ownership will make the necessary commitments to earn that AL Central flag within the next five years. If that doesn't happen and the team finds itself in this "valley" again in five years, be self-aware enough to acknowledge that you're probably not going to be drawing a paycheck from the Indians five years from now because it means that the current "Rebuild/Reload/Whatever" didn't gain traction.

The time has arrived for the organization to grow a pair, to believe in what they've done already and to sell what they plan to do. Watching the Indians act like [Shelley Levene in the corner, begging for the benefit of the doubt, and not Ricky Roma screaming in the center of the room](#), has grown tired and the Indians need to find a way to regain the confidence that most have lost over the last three years and to convince people that they're equipped to take the built-in disadvantages of the system out of the equation.

If the Indians want to re-capture those that have lost hope, they must project a confidence that is not off-putting, but one that acknowledges their mistakes while promising...no, guaranteeing that better days are ahead. Harken back to the idea that the Indians are out to create a model organization and that their mistakes have given them a better idea of what "The Indian Way" (remember that?) is really all about. Convince the fans that the period that many figured to emerge after the 2005 and 2007 seasons is not far off and that the last three years have given them back the laser focus that made them successful in the first place.

The time has come to convey to the fans that the organization moved away from what made them successful...and to remind them that what made them successful in the first place is on display on the mound in the ALCS. For the Indians, it is time to stop playing the role of "The Little Engine that Could" and assert themselves into the recurring role of "The Little Engine that Did...and Will Once Again".