

Empty Seats

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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We live in an era that tends to lack context with its past. If it happens now then surely it's never happened before but even if it had, what we're facing now is still unprecedented.

It's against that backdrop comes all the recent kvetching about the low attendance last weekend at Progressive Field, as if no one in this town had lived through the '70s and '80s.

There were times in those decades, with a population in this town that was much higher and the competition significantly less, that the Indians had even worse trouble selling tickets. Heck, in those years when the Indians could actually put a million paying fans through the turnstiles, they'd award the poor saps who wandered in during some mid September game a trinket inscribed with "Thanks a Million" to signify this dubious achievement.

The Indians today are in the death grip of futility certainly but it's not like we haven't been down this road before.

In his encyclopedia of the Cleveland Indians, Russell Schneider recounts the desperate times that were the '70s and '80s, when the Indians were under-capitalized by another local product with a good heart. The Indians could barely afford to pay their bills. Even in an era where the Yankees had not yet quite discovered that outspending everyone else was the key to championship, the Indians were a desperate franchise that literally invented the financial trade that seems so common with the team today: one good player for three lousy ones.

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Gabe Paul, the beleaguered general manager, had none of Mark Shapiro's spit and polish but he had a similar gift of gab. He didn't try to snow the public about the relative merits of players that everyone knew weren't any good. But he would try to snow the fans about how he understood their angst, that the Indians were building for the future and that this town was a sleeping giant waiting to bust as soon as a winner was produced. That's what Paul did all the way until the time he did then what everyone else now seems to do, join the Yankees.

You see, what Paul really knew then is the same thing Shapiro knows now: The money to realize a better future isn't on the way.

Around that same time that Paul was trying to pull the wool over fans' eyes, Case Western Reserve University (if memory serves me right) released a study that concluded that the Indians were indeed a sleeping giant, as if some sort of empirical proof were needed to back up Paul's bluster. University researchers proved, as only university researchers can, that fans would indeed attend Indians game if the team could just become a winner. The study's conclusions were embraced with a collective "duh."

These days I don't hear much talk about "sleeping giants." It's already well known that this town will support a winner, as 455 straight sellouts at what is now called Progressive Field will attest. But what I do hear is the same underlying theme: we're just another year or two away from better days. Be patient.

There's no reason now to think any differently about this team then people thought 40 years ago, presuming they can remember that far back. The situations are that similar.

You could quibble that the Indians under the ownership of Steve O'Neill were worse off financially than they are right now under the ownership of Larry and Paul Dolan. That's probably true in the same way that it's better to have suffered multiple compound fractures in your leg then it is to have had it amputated, though neither is pleasant nor fixable in the short term.

Besides, that kind of debate misses the point. Players today just like players then understand when a franchise is being run on a shoestring. All things being equal, they'd prefer not being in the situation. Where current ownership and management are really failing this franchise is in

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their inability to foster an atmosphere where a player feels like he could ever spend his entire career in this city. You don't develop CC Sabathia or Victor Martinez and then ship them out when they become too expensive and not send a message to the rest of the players in the organization.

That puts the Indians in a perpetual spin cycle of boom and bust and there isn't a damn thing that current ownership has the ability to do about it.

Even if they were of a mind to, it would be very difficult to tell. At this point I honestly don't know what the Indians are trying to accomplish with the team they're fielding at the moment. Surely neither Shapiro nor Chris Antonetti, nor either Dolan for that matter, honestly believes that this is a competitive team they're trying to sell the public on right now. Not with this lineup.

What then, do they think? Fans hear about building to a competitive level over the next few years but that's what they also said a few years ago so surely that's just the kind of stock lie you tell the public to get them on to another topic. It's the kind of thing Gabe Paul said each and every year as well.

That no one can really tell at this point what this Indians team is all about isn't even the scariest thing about to ponder. That would be the fact that there really is no substantive difference between the franchise then and now.

In essence, the problem really plaguing this team is the same that's been plaguing practically every Cleveland team. It lacks an identity that fans can either grasp or support. This team isn't about pitching. It isn't about hitting. It isn't about moving runners over or manufacturing runs. It isn't about anything other than being a "small market club" for whatever that means.

Right now the Indians, led by Shapiro, seem to carry the burden of being a small market team heavier than any other city. It's the reason the team can't compete, can't sign free agents, can't draft the players it really wants and can't sell cold beer at reasonable prices.

For awhile, fans were buying those excuses but the lack of paying fans now suggests those

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days are ending.

There is nothing unprecedented about the current drop in attendance nor will there be if it drops further, which it likely will. But that doesn't mean the red flags flying on a daily basis should be ignored.

The Indians were almost disbanded 40 years ago because the franchise was such a mess. The current Indians aren't that desperate yet, but anyone who thinks it can't get to that point must not be a student of history. Right now you have to wonder whether that group includes the Dolans and Shapiro.