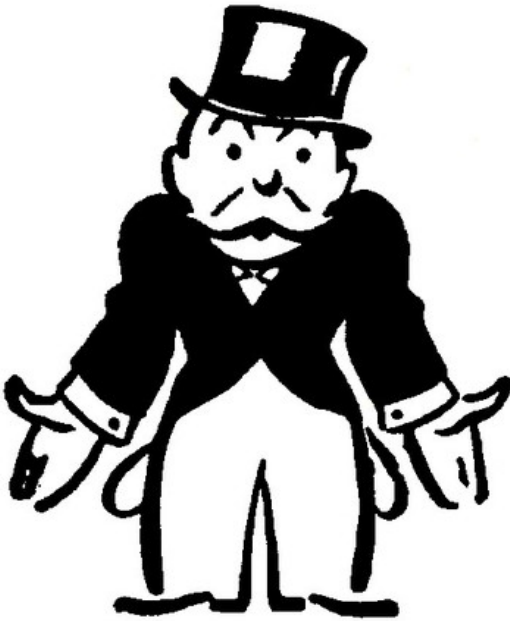


Unable is Not the Same as Unwilling

Written by {ga=tommoore}

Thursday, January 26 2012 4:00 PM - Last Updated Thursday, January 26 2012 11:40 AM



When the news came out that the Detroit Tigers were planning to sign first baseman Prince Fielder to a nine-year, \$214 million contract, the cries from Wahoo Nation rang out as loud and clear.

“The Dolans are cheap!” ... “Why don’t they just sell the team?” ... “Well, there goes the season.”

We’re not trying to say the Dolans are ideal owners, but they are far from the worst. If your only definition of a bad owner is “someone without deep pockets,” then, sure, they are bad owners.

The feelings among a large segment of the fan base have become an annual part of Indian summer, providing a backdrop that is every bit as familiar as a John Adams drumbeat.

But does that make them true? Or realistic? Let’s take a look.

Clearly, Larry Dolan bought high when he purchased the Indians from Dick Jacobs. That, along with the weakened economy, has left the team cash poor. We certainly doubt that Larry and his son, Paul, go home at night and roll around in piles of cash, laughing because the Indians no

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longer a perennial contender.

Being unable to spend money is not the same as being unwilling (for example, the Seattle Mariners, who are owned by Nintendo, which most likely has more money than the Dolans).

But even if the Dolans were flush with personal cash, is it realistic for fans to expect an owner to operate at a deficit in the hopes of fielding a competitive team? Is that a sustainable business model?

Let's say the Indians were willing to hand out \$23-million-a-year contracts, where would the money come from?

One source would be to shift money from other areas of the organization to cover the increase in payroll, say from the scouting and minor league budgets.

But the organization has been down that road before, with disastrous results. In Jack Torry's excellent 1995 book, *Endless Summers: The Fall and Rise of the Cleveland Indians*, the author points out how the Indians' farm system was the envy of baseball under Hank Greenberg in the 1950s. But once the team's owners started cutting back on expenses because they lacked cash, the Tribe fell into a funk that lasted from the 1960s up until 1995. (If you haven't read the book, find a copy, you'll see some parallels between the Indians of the '60s and '70s and today's teams).

Because just as the surest way to build a successful team is investing in your farm clubs, the quickest way to ruin a team is to cut back on the number of scouts and minor league teams in the organization.

One of the biggest areas the Indians are falling behind on is television revenue, as the creation of regional television networks is fueling the rebuilding of other teams.

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The Angels were able to sign Albert Pujols and C.J. Wilson in large part because the team recently agreed to a TV deal with Fox Sports that will bring in \$150 million a year.

The Rangers are on the brink of a similar payday, as they will start pulling in an estimated \$80 million a year in TV revenue starting after the 2014 season.

Without selling a single ticket or bringing in any additional revenue, the Angels and the Rangers can both field pretty decent teams just on their TV revenue alone.

As for the Indians, SportsTime Ohio, which is privately held by the Dolan family, pays a rights fee to the Indians to broadcast their games, but cable revenue does not go to the team. The amount of revenue generated by the TV deal is not made public, but it's safe to say it is nowhere near what the Angels or Rangers are pulling in.

Selling the team is always an option, we suppose, but that assumes that someone will want to actually buy the team (maybe not a huge assumption, but still) and that the new owner will be willing to spend from their own pockets on big-money free agents (a much bigger assumption).

Because unless there is some TV executive out there withholding a huge payday because they have a grudge against the Dolans, we don't see how a new ownership group will be able to mine an untapped revenue stream that has eluded the Dolans.

That brings us to the notion that the Indians can't compete and the Tigers have the division wrapped-up before spring training even begins.

Why?

Sure, Fielder is a good player, but he's slow on the bases and doesn't play defense very well. Plus he's not that much of an improvement over Victor Martinez, who Fielder is replacing in the Tigers' lineup.

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According to the [SweetSpot at ESPN.com](#) , Fielder's expected offensive output should mean three more wins for the Tigers this season, but that is based on 2011 stats. No one knows what impact playing in a different home park will have on Fielder's numbers (for example, Fielder hit 24 of his 38 home runs in 2011 at home).

Plus, having Fielder at first base means the Tigers have to do something with Miguel Cabrera, possibly moving him to third base. Having below-average fielders at the corner positions could offset any potential offensive uptick the Tigers could receive from Fielder.

And let's not forget 2008, the last time the Tigers made a big splash in free agency and supposedly locked up the division: Detroit finished in last place, 14.5 games out of first.

The Tigers are also going to have problems when Martinez comes back in 2013. The team will have three players, in Martinez, Fielder and Cabrera, who are full-time designated hitters or defensively challenged first basemen that will make a combined \$60 million. Throw in Justin Verlander and Detroit will be paying around \$80 million to just four players on their roster.

While money can make it easier to win, it doesn't guarantee anything.

The Indians still have a say in this. Solid pitching from the starters and the bullpen can go a long way toward taming the Tigers.

After all, isn't that why they play the games?