



One of our greatest pastimes as sports fans is to tear apart our hometown teams' front offices. Every misstep is Operation Market Garden and every decision that works out is nothing more than a stroke of luck. It's a thankless job, for the most part, to the men in those front office positions who are constantly lambasted by the fan base and subtly put down by the media who are censored from providing their true thoughts.

Back in February 2010, this [ClevelandFan forum thread](#) discussed the Indians passing the general manager torch to Chris Antonetti, who had recently turned down the same position with the St. Louis Cardinals. Antonetti was immediately compared to Mark Shapiro with words like "clone" and "puppet". Despite the fact that nobody knew anything about Chris Antonetti, except that he had served as assistant GM and that Mark Shapiro would still be his boss while serving under the new title "Team President", he was scrutinized.

Fast-forward to November 2010. Following another disappointing Indians season, their worst since 1992, this [ClevelandFan forum thread](#) popped up and another anti-Dolan, anti-Antonetti thread commenced. This time exploring when the right time to spend would be and a general pessimism on if the "right time" would ever come.

Now, focus on the present. February 2012. Before the unforeseen circumstances surrounding Fausberto Carnandez Heredia, the Indians payroll was in line to be somewhere between \$63-65M for the upcoming season. It remains to be seen if the Indians will spend or hold on to the \$7M salary that was going to go to Carmona, but Danny Knobler of CBS Sports [tweeted that the Indians had made an offer](#) for Edwin Jackson, so that would imply that they are at least trying to use that money for a roster upgrade. Jackson signed a one-year, \$10M deal with the Washington Nationals.

A \$63-65M payroll would be an increase of nearly \$15M from the 2011 payroll and the team's third-highest payroll under Larry and Paul Dolan. While the Tigers have clearly stolen the AL Central headlines by signing Prince Fielder, the Indians have had a tremendous offseason given the market conditions, the team's needs, and the resources that they had available.

This is the correct time to spend. Both Paul Dolan and Chris Antonetti have said all along that the team would spend when the time is right. The first two months of last season and the Ubaldo Jimenez trade produced the right time. This is a team that can contend for the Central Division crown and, as we saw with the team's run in 2007 and the recent success of Wild Card teams, you just have to get into the playoffs where anything can happen.



By being aggressive, Antonetti has had a brilliant offseason. Recognizing that the Indians had a hole in the starting rotation that needed to be filled by a consistent veteran, Antonetti secured a bargain of a trade acquiring Derek Lowe and having the Braves cover two-thirds of Lowe's \$15M salary for just the cost of a 23-year-old Single-A reliever. Jason Roberts of Fangraphs put together a [brilliant article](#) right after the trade, arguing that Derek Lowe's ERA was not nearly as bad as it looked and he could be in line for a great bounceback year. Roberts's evidence was that Lowe's xFIP, which is a stat that describes "Fielding Independent Pitching", or what a pitcher's ERA would be with an exactly "average" group of fielders behind him, was just over three-fourths of a run lower than his actual ERA during his three-year tenure in Atlanta. The Indians should have a well above average defense.

Although injuries weren't the sole reason for the Indians' 2011 collapse, they played a huge role and exposed the Indians depth. Minor league call-ups Jeanmar Gomez, David Huff, and Zach McAllister struggled mightily, while position players like Ezequiel Carrera and Cord Phelps may have been forced into more playing time than they were ready for. Luis Valbuena had to patrol left field and Shelley Duncan became an everyday player. It would be reasonable to assume that addressing the team's depth, both at the major league level and the Triple-A level, was near the top of Antonetti's offseason checklist.

Antonetti achieved that goal, signing a number of players with Major League experience to sign minor league deals with invites to Spring Training. Those include position players Jose Lopez, Felix Pie, Andy LaRoche, Fred Lewis, and Ryan Spilborghs. For pitchers, Antonetti inked Dan Wheeler, Robinson Tejeda, Chris Ray, and Jeremy Accardo. There is a track record of major league contribution among these men and none of them will have a "deer in the headlights" look if called upon.

Enter The Pitcher Formerly Known as Fausto. The Indians had no way to prepare for the bombshell that hit them on January 19. Fausto Carmona, expected to throw 180+ innings for the Indians, had his \$7M club option picked up on October 31. Two and a half months later, Carmona was arrested in the Dominican Republic upon getting his visa renewed in his home country for assuming a false identity.



Rather than wait back and see what would happen, Antonetti adopted a proactive approach. He sought out to find a durable starting pitcher from a team who had lost faith in a promising arm. He found the perfect player in Kevin Slowey and the perfect trade partner in the Minnesota Twins. Slowey had fallen out of favor with skipper Ron Gardenhire and thus came cheap. The Twins covered \$1.25M of Slowey's \$2.75M and Slowey should enter Spring Training rejuvenated and with a chip on his shoulder after being mistreated, in his mind, by the Twins.

Slowey is a competent major league pitcher with excellent control and familiarity with the AL Central hitters. His stats won't raise eyebrows one way or another and his penchant for giving up home runs is a problem, but he still has a minor league option so he qualifies as another depth move. Slowey could definitely benefit from a change of scenery.

Antonetti also completed another trade sending cash considerations to the Rays for 1B/OF Russ Canzler. Canzler, the reigning International League MVP, has plenty of [unanswered questions](#) about what sort of major leaguer he could be, but the chance to add a solid hitter for an extremely low cost is never a bad move. Even if Canzler winds up being a "AAAA" player who rides down Interstate 71 between Columbus and Cleveland for the majority of his time in the organization, it's a low-risk, any-kind-of-reward-is-good acquisition.



The best move of the Indians offseason is the signing of Casey Kotchman. Kotchman, who has lead the American League in fielding percentage among first basemen in each of the last four seasons, was signed for a mere \$3M plus incentives. Kotchman comes with some questions. Was 2011 a fluke season offensively? Kotchman had an [eye procedure](#) done prior to the 2011 season after struggling mightily in 2010 to fix a problem that included blurred vision and depth perception issues. Whether or not Kotchman can continue his production, the price is very right for his defensive prowess.

Depending on how Manny Acta rotates Carlos Santana in at first base, there's a decent chance that Casey Kotchman will lead the American League in total chances. His fielding alone makes him exceptionally valuable to the Indians. Seeing as how the Indians will likely sell defense as their trump card over the Detroit Tigers, nobody fits that description better than Kotchman.

Furthermore, the Ubaldo Jimenez trade can be considered an offseason acquisition. Jimenez came to Cleveland as damaged goods, with a nagging hip flexor issue and potentially a finger

issue on his throwing hand. The trade was made with the 2012 season in mind. At the time that Jimenez was acquired, the Indians had too many holes in the boat and it was already starting to sink. Jimenez, with an offseason overseen by the Indians revered medical staff and a chance to re-focus and settle down, will be called upon to be better than 2011 and be an anchor for the rotation. If you add him to this list of transactions, Antonetti may get an A-plus for this offseason.

Despite few headline-grabbing transactions, Chris Antonetti has put together a spectacular offseason for the Cleveland Indians. He kept his major league bullpen in tact while improving the team and he filled the necessary holes at the right cost. Also, even though Antonetti came up short, the Indians were linked to Carlos Pena, Carlos Beltran, Josh Willingham, and Michael Cuddyer. That, alone, shows serious commitment from both the GM and the front office. It sends a positive message to the fan base, the team, and any future free agents who may become available over the next couple of years.

The aforementioned contract offer to Edwin Jackson signals that the Indians still have some financial resources to play with and they may not be done. If the Indians are done, however, Chris Antonetti successfully completed everything on his offseason checklist. He added depth. He added two starting pitchers. He improved first base defensively and, even if Kotchman doesn't hit .300 again, he will help the team's high strikeout totals and put the ball in play. He spent wisely, not overpaying for any acquisition, both in terms of dollars and prospects. He kept the core of the major league roster in tact. All while working under the constraints of a cost-conscious owner and under the shadow of the big money Detroit Tigers.

Antonetti and the Dolans have done their part this offseason to put the team in an optimal position to succeed. Now, it's up to the players to perform.