

The Genesis Of A Plan

Written by {ga=consigliere}

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In his latest, Tony Lastoria goes back in time and examines the beginning of the Indians rebuilding process, affectionately known as "The Plan" to most of the Indians fan base. Lastoria provides damning evidence of the sad shape John Hart left this franchise in as the reigns were passed over to Mark Shapiro. And makes a solid argument that Shapiro had to do what he did back in 2001. A helluva read from a helluva writer. Enjoy.



Coming off a 91-win season where the Indians won their division and made the playoffs, there have been many who have debated whether "The Plan" the Indians adopted to rebuild the franchise was ever really necessary. Whether the team truly needed to be rebuilt, or that the cupboard in the farm system was really that barren.

On the surface, yes, things appeared to be okay. In 2001, the Indians made the playoffs for the 6th time in the last seven years, and had their 8th straight winning season. But below the surface, problems loomed for the franchise. The team was aging rapidly, the team was under new ownership, the GM position was in transition, and attendance was starting to decline (under 40 sellouts in 2001). These problems had been creeping up on them for the past 2-3 seasons, and they were something the organization needed to address quickly.

It didn't take long for change to happen.

When the final out of Game Five of the 2001 AL Divisional Series game between the Cleveland Indians and Seattle Mariners was recorded, an anticipation of change was in the air. John Hart was ready to officially step down as Indians General Manager on November 1st, and former Assistant General Manager Mark Shapiro was ready to take full control of the franchise.

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When Shapiro took control of the franchise that November of 2001, one can only wonder what he must have thought after he took a long, intensive look into the Indians organization and what John Hart left for him to work with in 2002 and beyond.

One thing is certain: Hart left a complete mess.

Hart did his successor no favors in leaving the organization in as good of shape as the one he inherited from Hank Peters in September 1991. Sure, the Indians were perennial losers when Hart took over, but Hart took over a very healthy franchise that had a solid nucleus of talent and a new ballpark on its way.

When Hart took over as GM that September of 1991, he had the likes of Charles Nagy, Albert Belle, Sandy Alomar Jr, Carlos Baerga, Manny Ramirez and Jim Thome already in the system. Instead, what John Hart left Shapiro was an aging major league roster filled with players in the twilight of their careers, a laundry list of players heading to free agency, and an Indians minor league system ranked 26th out of 30 teams in 2001 (per Baseball America). The Indians roster was in a state of chaos.

When Shapiro replaced Hart, many fans probably felt the change in leadership in regard to baseball operations would be transparent, and that the product and results on the field we all had grown accustomed to would continue. But, for a lot of fans, what Shapiro laid out as the direction of this franchise was something the fans never saw coming.

Shapiro could hardly be sanguine about the very near future of the franchise. Not only did he assume control of an aging team with no help from the minors on the horizon because of bad trades and poor drafts in the 90s, but fan support already was in decline. As a result of the decline in attendance, new owner Larry Dolan was mandating some payroll cuts and a much stricter budget due to expected losses in revenue and because they were paying out so much in revenue sharing. And, unbeknownst to Shapiro at the time, their two most recent drafts in 2000 and 2001 were a complete disaster.

With all these factors in play, it is easy to see what ultimately led to Hart's abrupt decision to resign and bolt town.

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At the conclusion of the 2001 season, the team was no longer a team with a solid nucleus of young players to build around. It was no longer a team that could be peppered with a few new free agent additions to fix holes from departing players or much needed upgrades. The Indians were in decline, and nothing short of going out in free agency and spending an exorbitant amount of money on several free agents could keep them from taking a giant step back in 2002. Even still, while unrealistic to expect such spending, there would be no guarantee we would even keep winning. All we would be doing is postponing the inevitable.

Shapiro had several question marks with the team, and it was obvious he needed to be proactive and some sort of rebuild was required. The problem was, he needed to make a decision on what path to lead the team down. Would they embark on an all out rebuild? Or, would they try a transition plan, which would consist of rebuilding but contending at the same time?

The backlash from Indians fans with either choice would be harsh. Indians fans had grown accustomed to seeing All-Star caliber players up and down the lineup during the "Era of Champions" from 1995-2001, and the expectation would be to keep a lineup of such players. Shapiro knew the fans would never fully embrace such change, but it was inevitable they needed to rebuild the farm system and retool the major league roster going into 2002 and forward.

Thus, "The Plan" was first idealized.

To keep it simple, "The Plan" originally called for retooling the Indians roster and minor league system while the Indians hoped to contend, but after the team struggled in early 2002 it was later modified in June 2002 when Shapiro decided to dive headfirst into a complete rebuild and put plans of contention on hold for a few years. "The Plan" called for Shapiro to completely disassemble the aging Indians roster, and completely rebuild it from the farm system up.

Part of the problem is fans look at what Shapiro did to get this organization back on solid footing, but really don't pay attention to where the team was prior to all the moves Shapiro made once the plan went into action. The roster really was in decline and had several issues which needed to be addressed, and the farm system would be of no help. Here is a listing of the

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Indians top 10 prospects and what the 25-man roster pretty much was when Shapiro took over as GM in November 2001:

Top 10 Prospects (per Baseball America)

1. Corey Smith (3B) 2. Ryan Drese (RHP) 3. Dan Denham (RHP) 4. JD Martin (RHP)
5. Victor Martinez (C) 6. David Riske (RHP) 7. Brian Tallet (LHP) 8. Alex Herrera (LHP)
9. Willy Taveras (OF) 10. Tim Drew (RHP)

Starting Lineup (age in parentheses):

LF: Marty Cordova (31) RF: Juan Gonzalez (31) CF: Kenny Lofton (34) 3B: Travis Fryman (32) SS: Omar Vizquel (34) 2B: Roberto Alomar (33) 1B: Jim Thome (30) C: Einar Diaz (28) DH: Ellis Burks (36)

Reserves:

Russell Branyan (25) Jolbert Cabrera (28) Wil Cordero (29) Eddie Taubensee (32)

Starting Rotation:

Bartolo Colon (28) CC Sabathia (20) Charles Nagy (34) Dave Burba (34) Chuck Finley (38)

Bullpen:

Steve Woodard (26) Danys Baez (23) John Rocker (26) Paul Shuey (30) Rich Rodriguez (38) Ricardo Rincon (31) Bob Wickman (32)

Key players from the 2001 lineup Juan Gonzalez, Marty Cordova, and Kenny Lofton were heading for free agency. Cordova signed a 3-year \$9.1M contract with the Orioles, and only played in 140 games total during the length of that 3-year contract, eventually retiring after the 2004 season (he didn't even play in 2004). Gonzalez signed a 2-year \$24M deal with Texas. From 2002-2004, Gonzalez only managed to play in 185 combined games in three seasons, and made it through one at bat in 2005 with the Indians before his career ended. Lofton signed with the White Sox on a 1-year deal for \$1.25M in 2002, and since then has bounced around

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the league every year and has played for several teams. He has still been productive in a platoon role, as from 2002-2006 he has played in 601 games and compiled a .292 average and averaged 24 stolen bases a season.

Other position players were in decline as well, and many were out of baseball in 2-3 years. After enjoying the best season of his career in 2000, Fryman's career took a nosedive in 2001 when he tore a ligament in his elbow. Fryman played through the pain in the elbow in 2001, but in doing so it led to a shoulder injury which ultimately ended his career after the 2002 season. After averaging .322/20/103 and 35 steals a season during his 3-year tenure with the Indians from 1999-2001, Robbie Alomar followed that up by averaging .262/7/39 and 9 steals per season from 2002-2004. He has been out of baseball since 2004. Burks had a great 2002 campaign where he hit .301/32/91; however, only played in 55 games with the Indians in 2003, and only 11 games with the Red Sox in 2004 before retiring.

Others on the roster like Brayan, Diaz, Cabrera, Cordero and Taubensee became useless after 2001. Diaz's career went into the tank fast, and he has bounced around between the minors and as a backup for various teams. Brayan has bounced around several organizations since 2001, but has never lived up to the hype he had as a prospect in the system in the late 90s. Cabrera was our super utility player in 2001, but three years later was out of baseball. Cordero hung around for awhile, but still managed to only play in 56 games after 2003 and was out of baseball following the 2005 season. And last, Taubensee's career with the Indians was short-lived, as he retired after the 2001 season due a bulging disc in his back and a series of wrist and leg injuries.

Of all the position players, only Thome and Vizquel maintained a consistent level of production after 2001. Thome hit .291/49/124 in 2001, and if you take out Thome's disastrous 2005 season in Philly where he played through and missed most of the season with an injury, Thome has been one of baseball's best players since 2001. His 4-year average of his 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2006 seasons is .282/46/116. And, Vizquel was the last of the Indians greats from the 90s to leave the team, as he left after the 2004 season and signed a 3-year \$12.25M contract with the San Francisco Giants. From 2002-2006, Vizquel's average season has been .279/6/51 with 19 steals, and he recently won his 11th Gold Glove.

Meanwhile, beyond Bartolo Colon and CC Sabathia, the rotation was a complete mess. Nagy's career really had ended in May 2000 when he had surgery on his pitching elbow. In 2001, Nagy went 5-6 with a 6.40 ERA in 15 games for the Indians, and only pitched two more seasons after that before retiring in 2003. After being a rock in the rotation from 1998-2000, Burba hit the wall in the middle of 2001 going 10-10 with a 6.21 ERA. Burba pitched three more

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seasons from 2002-2004, mostly out of the bullpen, and went 10-7 with a 4.64 ERA. He has been out of baseball since 2004. Last, Finley had his worst season as a professional in 2001 when he went 8-7 with a 5.54 ERA. He ended up pitching only one more year, before retiring after the 2002 season.

The bullpen was not in as much a state of flux as the starting rotation, but there were questions on who would close and fill other roles in the bullpen. Woodard bounced around as a long-man and spot starter, but was out of baseball after the 2003 season. Rodriguez stuck around in baseball another two years, totaling 20.1 IP before retiring in 2003. Rocker's career was pretty much over before he was traded to the Indians in the middle of the 2001 season, and was officially out of baseball after the 2003 season. Shuey put up productive years in Cleveland and Los Angeles in 2002 and 2003, but injuries forced him to retire. He has attempted some comebacks, but he has been out of major league action since 2003.

The only three pitchers who ended up having any worth in the bullpen were Rincon, Baez and Wickman. Baez's 2001 campaign was his rookie year, and since then he has been a quality reliever with a 4.23 ERA and 111 saves from 2002-2006. Rincon has managed to be a serviceable left-hander out of the bullpen since 2001, although his career may be in jeopardy after suffering a season-ending shoulder injury this past May. Also, the Indians re-signed Wickman after the 2001 season to a 3-year \$15.9M deal, but Wickman missed part of 2002, all of 2003 and half of 2004 after undergoing Tommy John surgery. However, since coming back in mid-2004, he has been one of the most reliable closers in baseball.

What transpired shortly after 2001 with just about every one of the 25 players they had on the roster is amazing when looking into it further. If you are scoring at home, 14 of the players on the 25-man roster at the end of 2001 retired within 2-3 years, most of them within two years. And, for a lot of those players, they suffered significant injuries and/or saw their production tail off dramatically starting in 2002. As for the other 11 players, many have become shells of their former selves but are still hanging onto jobs with various teams. To summarize: the position players were in rapid decline, the starting rotation was a joke, and the bullpen an uncertainty.

And the prospects.....there was virtually nothing there, and the fact they were ranked so low is a testament to how badly Hart raped the system of talent in trades for veterans, and how bad our drafts were in the 90s. Sure, Drese and Riske figured into the pitching mix, but neither really blossomed into anything special. And Milton Bradley was ready to take over in CF. But, most of the Indians' top prospects were not even close to being ready to help impact the club in any way in 2002 (note: Martinez had just finished A-ball that year).

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The fact that the Indians did not have one position player under 30 except for Einar Diaz is a testament to the Indians unwillingness to continue to develop position players at the major league level once they became a contender in 1994. Manny Ramirez and Jim Thome in 1994 were the last position players they developed and kept, while players like Brian Giles, Richie Sexson, Sean Casey and others were all traded away for help they thought would help bring the Indians a World Championship. By spending most of our attention on free agents and trades from 1995-2001, Hart lost sight of what made this team a contender in the first place: our farm system and prospects.

There was no young nucleus present going into 2002 like the one of Lofton, Belle, Baerga, Alomar Jr, Nagy, Ramirez, and Thome that helped paved the way to an "Era of Champions" from 1994-2001. Those players were in large part developed from within, or traded for when they were still prospects. This is what Hart got away from, and getting back to developing your own talent and keeping it is what Shapiro hoped to accomplish with his "Plan."

In the end, only Colon, Sabathia, Baez, Vizquel, Thome, Rincon, and Wickman were still truly valuable to the team. And, to no surprise, these were the players they built around originally in December 2001 when the initial phase of "The Plan" went into action. Later, some of these players were used in trades when the second and final edition of "The Plan" went into effect in June 2002.

"The Plan" did what it set out to do, which was to rebuild the team and establish a strong foundation. After making a flurry of trades, the Indians were younger and hungrier by 2003. And, just two years later, that farm system that was ranked 26th in baseball was ranked #1 by 2003. Players in the top 10 list in 2003 included Brandon Phillips (1), Victor Martinez (2), Cliff Lee (3), Travis Hafner (5), and Grady Sizemore (7). To date, the farm system is brimming with talent that should be able to supplement the team every year going forward.

The window of opportunity was slamming quickly after the 2001 season. The average age of the 25-man roster was almost 31 years old, and every player but one player in the starting lineup was 30 or older. The combination of obtaining some poor contracts in free agency and trades along with some pretty downright awful drafts left the organization scrambling for talent going into 2002. Obviously, Shapiro did not have the advantage of hindsight to analyze all of this before it happened. But, what he probably had access to were scouting reports and tons of computer analysis that may have indicated some danger signs with several of the players on

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the roster going into 2002.

By being bold and proactive, the genesis and implementation of "The Plan" by Shapiro might have kept that proverbial window from staying shut for a very long time.