

Low Risk, Low Cost, Low Effort

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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The only way a true Cleveland Indians fan could be surprised at the state of the team's roster or the front office's refusal to improve it at the trade deadline is if he fell asleep in a cave, woke up, and thought it was 1997.

This front office and this ownership group dangle the possibility of late season moves to a starving fan base to keep interest afloat but were never serious about really doing anything. That would involve risk and cost money and if there are two things that are anathema to this front office and ownership group it's risk and cost.

The only plus side to this inaction is that by doing nothing they also did nothing dumb. The hottest of rumors involved a possible trade of Shin-Soo Choo because he'll be a free agent at the end of NEXT SEASON and because he has in his employ Scott Boras. See, the Indians front office hates Scott Boras.

Just the mention of his names causes them to wet themselves. Boras doesn't think much of creative, hometown discount type deals. He's as sentimental as a jellyfish and twice as slippery. In the 2012 offseason he'll market and sell Choo to the highest bidder and there is no chance that it will be the Indians.

So, as is the custom here in Cleveland, the angst rolls, the chat rooms explode and the talk shows crackle over the possibility of getting "nothing" for Choo as he leaves for New York or California or Detroit.

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Since we do know how this movie plays out in theory it makes sense to try and get something for Choo, in theory. But ask yourself whether you trust Chris Antonetti to get good value for Choo? Antonetti has nothing yet on his resume that suggests he's got enough gravitas or savvy to convince a team to part with legitimate prospects in exchange for Choo. Stated differently, there's nothing to inform the fan that Antonetti could have ever been on the other side of the Ubaldo Jimenez trade.

Thus the calculus is whether or not Choo's value to the team is higher as a player here for another season and a half or as a commodity to be bartered clumsily for a couple of players who we ultimately hope will get good enough to be traded down the road for other prospects.

Until Antonetti proves his meddle as a general manager the best, safest course is inaction. Better to actually watch Choo in Cleveland for another 200 games or so then to watch Choo play those 200 games for a contending team while grousing over the prospects his trade would garner as they toil in Eastlake or Akron.

Meanwhile, back where it matters, fan interest, at least as measured by attendance and television ratings, is ebbing. It's not that they can't figure out what the Indians are doing, it's that they can. The code, such as it was, has been cracked and the Indians are listing as a franchise as if this were 1989.

No question that the front office and the owners have noticed, but at the moment no one's quite sure what they plan on doing about it. For the time being they're trying to paper over the problem with promotions. But they can't have a fireworks display every night. Eventually they'll have to find an answer to the abiding question of how exactly it plans on having a team with enough heft to contend for an entire season.

It's been a nice, pleasant surprise the last few seasons that the team stayed within spitting distance of contention until the Browns' preseason started. But while the team generated some raised eyebrows for the first half of last and this season, few fans if any believed that the team was really built to contend. Even that, though, isn't the crux of the sin. It's more that there doesn't seem to be any intention to take the bold steps that contention actually requires.

The slightly broader context of this season begins with last season, extends to last off season

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and culminates, most probably, with the current disastrous road trip.

Last year's team was achingly similar to this year's model and therein lies the problem for the fans. There's been no progress. Everyone could see the holes in the roster last year that caused the team to fade just as the season got interesting. That would seem to have begged an approach to fill those holes in a meaningful way.

Yet there was nothing bold done in the offseason to give the fans even a sliver of hope that this season would be anything different. It hasn't been and so the fans, jaded by this vicious cycle of inaction, are losing interest.

Building a team the way the Indians are trying to do was never going to be an easy task. It relies on so many things going right and is so dependent on almost nothing going wrong. The front office has done a lousy job in the draft for the last several years and its impact is being felt through the lack of impact players in the minors. The front office keeps kicking the tires on retreads and it shows. Derek Lowe and Johnny Damon have very little left in their tanks. Next year's retreads aren't going to offer anything different. And the few risks it does take are always head scratchers. Grady Sizemore anyone?

We're long past debating the frugal way in which this franchise operates. It won't change and railing about it isn't going to change anything either. But we're not past debating the point as to whether Antonetti or Mark Shapiro can implement the strategy.

The early results on the Antonetti reign aren't very promising as the wave of empty seats and lower broadcast ratings readily attest. All that's really occurred is a continuation of the Shapiro reign where a previous season's ability to contend was ignored in favor of a murky longer view involving progressively cheaper players and wounded warriors and a vague promise to do something when the time is right.

Well, guess what?, the time never seems to be right and that's ultimately what has the fan base miserable. You can't keep selling the same bottle of snake oil and not have the public eventually catch on. They have. The fans may be hopelessly hopeful but they aren't stupid. They may give the front office and the owners the benefit of another off season, but when that begets next year's Derek Lowe or Johnny Damon, they'll find other ways to spend their money. That means

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that Dan Gilbert and his casino, situated comfortably next door to Progressive Field, are likely going to stay healthy for another year while the Indians take on still more water.