



There's very little to be said about the Tribe's season that hasn't already been said. As the team trudges through the rest of the season trying to look like they still care, a .500 record is nearly out of the question, a playoff berth has been long forgotten, and bad baseball continues to be the flavor of the day. Luckily for Cleveland sports fans, football is right around so the corner so they can build their hopes up early in the season just to have them dashed again by Week Five.

This past week, Manny Acta told some members of the media that the Indians "have to find a solution" for left field, first base, and DH. Right, Manny, and I need a night with Katy Perry, a million dollars, and a tree in my backyard that grows Swenson's bacon cheeseburgers. Let's see which one of our wish lists comes true first.

With the way this season has gone and the monsoon of negativity surrounding the Indians front office, and in particular, the ownership, even a propaganda mastermind like Joseph Goebbels couldn't save this team's public appearance. Before you get all offended, no, I'm not comparing the Indians to Nazi Germany. I'm simply making the point that the organization's image is in complete and utter disarray and there's no end in sight. There are only so many clips of the '90s that you can attempt to use to blind the fans from what's really going on. Browns fans got the wish they wanted when Randy Lerner sold the team. Watch the revitalized fan base rally around them, even when they go 5-11 or worse this season.

Because we have time to do this with the Indians playing 41 more games of irrelevance, let's take Manny Acta's comments into context. For one thing, left field, first base, and DH are three positions that have been issues for the Indians for a long time. Travis Hafner has been a shell of his former self since 2007. The best first baseman the Indians have had in 10 years is Ryan Garko. Let that sink in. Left field has been a rotating collection of suck including household

names like Todd Hollandsworth, David Dellucci, Jason Michaels, Ben Francisco, Jeff Liefer, Shelley Duncan, Ezequiel Carrera, Johnny Damon, Austin Kearns...I can't keep going or I'll start to cry. Remember when Charlie Donovan, the GM of the Indians in *Major League*, scathingly replies, "Most of these guys never had a prime"? Yeah, that's this group.

Was this a shot across the bow from Manny Acta to ownership? Acta was a guest this past week with Jim Bowden on MLB Network's XM radio show *Inside Pitch* and told him the same thing he told Cleveland media. Acta, whose first two seasons as a Major League manager came under Bowden when he was the Nationals GM, said that the Indians needed "three bats and another pitcher" **just to**

compete

in the AL Central. That's right. We need to improve 33% of our lineup and 20% of our rotation just to

have a chance

. If that's not depressing, I don't know what is.

I firmly believe Manny Acta to be a smart man. He's very progressive in his analyses of baseball players, use advanced sabermetric stats, and, as a result, is probably on the same page with the Tribe's front office staff in that regard. I also believe that Acta's statements this past week are loaded with ulterior motives. For one thing, Acta knows that his wish list is impossible. Getting four players to man three corner spots and then one starting pitcher will cost the Indians upwards of \$40-45M, if not more, for next season. Even though there are very few guaranteed contracts, arbitration hearings for guys like Justin Masterson, Chris Perez, Shin-Soo Choo, and Joe Smith will add to the payroll, along with the six-figure contracts of the young players. If the Indians were to cut ties with Roberto Hernandez, Travis Hafner, and possibly trade somebody, then, an increase might be possible. The problem then becomes that the free agent market is about as dry as the Sahara. In my opinion, Acta was transferring blame away from himself and expressing his frustration with the situation in Cleveland. Only illogical people will blame Acta for this season. It's clear that the teams he has managed have lacked talent. If it's not, allow me to show you.

WAR (wins above replacement player) is a hard concept to grasp. Essentially, it's a way to determine how much better a player is than an Average Joe. Baseball-Reference is one of the greatest websites on the planet and houses damn near every baseball stat known to man. To them, a team full of replacement-level players, both hitters and pitchers, is worth a .320 winning percentage. That equates to a 51-111 record. In theory, and in a simplified sense, using the 51-111 record and the combination of offensive WAR (how good the lineup is above average), defensive WAR (how good team defense is above average), and pitching WAR (how good team pitching is above average) will determine how good a team **should** be. The following chart is a breakdown of Acta's five full seasons as a manager.

Year

Team

Off. WAR

Def. WAR

Pitch. WAR

Total

Actual Record

Hypothetical Record

2007

WSH

10.8

-2.2

8.4

17.0

73-89

68-94

2008

WSH

7.5

-1.2

4.1

10.4

59-102*

61-101

2010

CLE

16.4

-1.6

6.7

21.5

69-93

73-89

2011

CLE

17.0

-2.5

8.1

22.6

80-82

74-88

2012

CLE

16.7

-2.0

-1.4

13.3

54-64**

64-98

* - Nationals only played 101 games due to a postponed game that didn't need to be made up.

** - 2012 stats through Wednesday's game

What the above chart illustrates is the statistical evidence that Acta has never once been handed the tools it requires to compete. (For comparison purposes, the 2011 New York Yankees finished 97-65. Their oWAR (25.4) + dWAR (-0.3) + pWAR (27) was 52.1. So, their hypothetical record would have been 103-59.) Given these numbers, including a negative WAR from the Indians' 2012 pitchers, it's completely understandable for Acta to be frustrated and voice his displeasure with the ownership. The Indians don't need to be 52 wins better than replacement-level, because it will never take 103 wins to win the Central Division. But, they're clearly 12-16 wins above replacement player short, even in their best season.

To illustrate how hard it is to get what Acta is asking for, consider that Josh Willingham's oWAR this season, with 30 HR and 88 RBI by mid-August to go along with a .917 OPS, is just 3.9, though it will likely finish the year around 4.5. Carlos Beltran's oWAR currently sits 2.8. He will also improve to probably around 3.5. Had the Indians signed those two players they would have paid \$20M for around eight offensive wins. Being that the Indians are around 12-16 wins short, and possibly more, that means an investment of \$40-45M. In other words, it sounds like Acta was exactly right about his wish list.

The job that Acta has done the last two seasons should be applauded. He's not an expert handyman by any means, but he's a guy who can walk into Home Depot and know what tool he needs to do the job. Unfortunately for him, the Indians ownership and front office supply the tools and he's forced to try and pound in a three-inch nail with an Allen wrench. The Indians will probably overachieve again for the second straight year under Acta if we're going solely off the record with WAR factored in. Individual WAR numbers will go up and down, but the Indians will certainly win more than 64 games. It's hard to envision them going just 10-32 the rest of the way. Just how much better than that is anybody's guess.

Earlier this season, Chris Perez took a not-so-thinly veiled shot at ownership, attendance, and the fact that free agents don't want to play here. The Dolans sidestepped that criticism with help from Mark Shapiro and Chris Antonetti, saying that they do not agree with Perez's views. Deep down, Antonetti, and Shapiro to an extent, have to be frustrated with the financial shackles that they're put under. That being said, Antonetti likely made the final call that Willingham's defense wasn't good enough to guarantee a third year. So, they're all guilty to varying degrees.

When you start to look at the analyses that a front office has to do in order to make informed decisions, it's easy to see why it's so hard to stay consistently good in baseball, no matter what the payroll. The Yankees are paying over \$200M to be 52 wins better than replacement-level. Each win above replacement level is costing them, on average, \$3.85M per season. Similarly, the Indians, if they had signed Beltran and Willingham, would be paying \$2.5M per win, assuming their production was the same and the Indians record reflected that.

This is why baseball's economic system is FUBAR'ed (f'd up beyond all recognition) to teams with payroll restrictions. The only solution is to throw more money at the problem. The Dolans can't do that. I've always tried to contend that it was possible for the Indians to compete with the Dolans in the owner's box. It takes nothing short of a miracle for that to happen. The only way the Indians can get into a consistent state of competitiveness is to get an owner with very, very deep, Grand Canyon-like pockets.

Why were the Indians able to compete in 2007? Because their pitching overachieved so much (21.5 WAR) that they could be a playoff contender. Think about that for a minute. The Indians pitching staff in 2007 was nearly 23 wins better than the 2012 Indians. The offense was about 3.5 wins better than the 2012 offense.. The 2007 Indians were nearly 42 wins better than replacement-level. With a payroll of \$61,289,667, the Indians paid \$638,434 per win. In today's MLB, that's so far from the norm that it's not even in the same universe.

I know this has been a difficult column to follow along with, as WAR is one of those baseball stats that rivals quantum physics in terms of clarity. It basically took me 1500 words to say that we're f'd and explain why.

So, when Manny Acta told the media what the Indians needed, he knew what he was doing. He was absolving himself of any blame if he's fired over the next little while, whether that is at the end of this season, during next season, or if his contract isn't renewed so that he can find work somewhere else.

Which, he could be hoping is sooner rather than later.