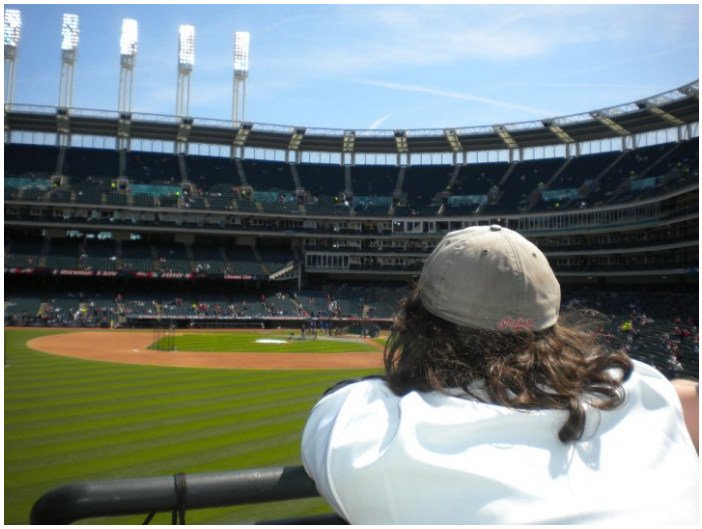

As if we haven't been kicked in the balls, or the female equivalent, enough as a city, now, the Detroit Tigers will represent the American League in the World Series. While the sports gods are at it, why not send the Pittsburgh Steelers to another Super Bowl? Maybe Michigan win will the Rose Bowl. It's only a matter of time before Lebron gets to hold that NBA championship trophy in one arm and his playoff MVP hardware in the other.

This is exactly why sports seasons end for me the second the Cleveland teams are done. The offseason began on October 4 and hopefully the offseason began long before that for the Indians front office. It appears as though it will be the Tigers and the St. Louis Cardinals in the World Series. Both teams have payrolls above $110M and made key free agent signings in the offseason that have seriously impacted their 2012 run. Carlos Beltran and Prince Fielder aside, it's how these teams are constructed that the Indians seriously need to look at.

We'll start with the Detroit Tigers. Consider how the core of their team has been acquired. Justin Verlander was drafted out of Old Dominion. Miguel Cabrera was part of a terrible trade with the Florida Marlins that sent prospects Cameron Maybin and Andrew Miller to Florida. Maybin, now with the Padres, and Miller, now with the Red Sox, both did very little for the Marlins. All Cabrera has done is hit .323 with a .980 OPS over five seasons.

Beyond those two studs, the Tigers have nobody else who would be considered elite. The Tigers paid $5.23 million per win above replacement player for Prince Fielder this season. To put Fielder in perspective, he was worth .7 wins more than Carlos Santana and Jason Kipnis. Not combined. Individually.

So, what is it that turned the Tigers into a World Series participant? Part of the equation is trades. Dave Dombrowski's two pitcher acquisitions at the trade deadline over the last two seasons are a big part of why the Tigers are where they are. Doug Fister has been terrific for the Tigers since being acquired at the trade deadline in 2011. Anibal Sanchez, their big move in 2012, pitched the Tigers to a 2-0 series lead by shutting out the Yankees lineup for seven innings in Game Two. That was the most pivotal game of the series.

When the Tigers had to cut costs, they didn't miss. Curtis Granderson was shipped to New York as part of a three-team trade that included getting rid of Edwin Jackson. The Tigers got Austin Jackson and Phil Coke from New York and Max Scherzer and Daniel Schlereth from Arizona. Coke became the closer after Jose Valverde crapped the bed. Scherzer's turned into a premier strikeout pitcher. At 25, Austin Jackson looks like he'll be a fine Major League hitter and an elite defender.

Keep in mind that this is a Tigers team that has trotted out horrible Major Leaguer Delmon Young most of the season. ALCS MVP or not, the guy is a well below average player. The revolving door of Brandon Inge, Quintin Berry, Don Kelly, Ryan Raburn, and others is overcome by great front office moves and Miguel Cabrera.

Yes, the Tigers have money. Mike Ilitch is worth just shy of $2B. But, it's General Manager Dave Dombrowski and his staff who have set the Tigers up for victory. The bulk of the money that the Tigers have spent in free agency has mixed results. Certainly, Fielder was a nice addition, at a very steep cost. They have paid Joaquin Benoit $5.5M per win over the last two seasons. They signed Jose Valverde to a three-year $23M deal to be worth 3.5 wins over three seasons.

How's this for an incredible stat? The feared Tigers offense that everybody raved about was worth **13.9** wins above replacement players (by comparison, the Indians' position players were worth 15 wins). 15.5 wins came from Cabrera, Jackson, and Fielder. It was actually the pitching that propelled the Tigers to this position.

Pitching. That thing that Shapiro and Antonetti used to tell us about all the time. That thing that somehow got lost in the shuffle.

What about the Cardinals? Well, their offense was excellent. They were second in batting average, first in on-base percentage, fourth in slugging, and third in OPS among the 16 National League teams. Even with the loss of Albert Pujols, the Cardinals used a balanced approach to rack up 26.2 offensive wins above replacement player. Every single one of their starters was a positive WAR.

It was the Cardinals offense that made up for a pitching staff that was incredibly pedestrian. Their pitching staff was only 11.5 wins above a collection of replacements. Only two starting pitchers were worth more than one win.

The Cardinals have relied on mostly homegrown talent. They drafted Yadier Molina, Allen Craig, Jon Jay, Matt Carpenter, Jaime Garcia, and the majority of their hard-throwing relievers. They traded for David Freese when he was 24 years old and in the Padres system. Contributions from Lance Berkman, Matt Holliday, Carlos Beltran and Rafael Furcal certainly didn't hurt. Berkman, Beltran, and Furcal were all signed to short-term deals because they wanted to play for a winner. Holliday was re-signed after being a deadline deal in 2009. As far a couple other guys, the Cardinals acquired Jake Westbrook via trade and then re-signed him. Adam Wainwright was acquired for JD Drew in 2003, at the age of 21.

The Cardinals have done it right and have gotten a little lucky along the way. They built up the pitching corps, got a lot of hard-throwing arms, and then bought veteran free agent players to milk the last production out of them.

What does all of this mean for the Indians? Well, it means that they've got a long way to go and they need a lot of things to go right. It also means that it's very, very difficult to make a playoff impact without a couple of superstars. What the Cardinals did offensively is not the norm. It was a collective effort, the kind we only see from extremely high payroll teams like the Yankees or Red Sox. What the Tigers did is more like it. Three guys carrying the load and the pitching making up for it.

And, yes, it also means that payroll needs to go up. Not only do you have to acquire the necessary talent, you have to keep it. A Justin Verlander does you no good unless you're willing to throw a lot of greenbacks at him to stick around. See Sabathia, CC. Or Lee, Cliff. Not only that, there needs to be enough money to absorb a blow. The Joaquin Benoit contract for the Tigers is horrible. A $5.5M mistake from the Indians cripples a third of their free agent budget. It's impossible to work under those conditions.

Players in Major League Baseball are volatile commodities. There are very few who are remarkably consistent, especially from a pitching standpoint. It's impossible to be flawless when acquiring or evaluating talent. Wiggle room is essential. For the majority of the last 13 seasons, Shapiro and Antonetti have had zero wiggle room. What wiggle room they have enjoyed, they have failed miserably with. See the Jimenez trade and the Hafner extension as proof.

The playoffs are a reminder of how far away the Indians really are.