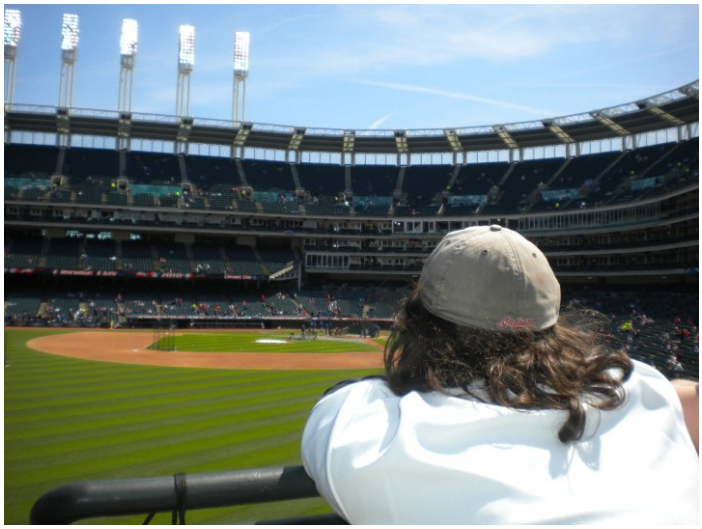

Chris Antonetti says the money is gone. It's been a great offseason for the Indians, who have addressed several of their key needs and invigorated certain portions of the fan base by being active players in free agency. However, there are still holes to be plugged and, apparently, no money to plug them with. After going on a spending spree with Daddy Dolan's credit card, thanks to a recently-increased credit limit, Antonetti and his staff will now to have to do something they have practiced many times – fill holes on a tight budget.

In the past, the Indians have taken their coupons to the register to get guys like Casey Kotchman, Chad Durbin, Austin Kearns, Shelley Duncan, Orlando Cabrera and Kosuke Fukudome. The vast majority of these bargain bin signings have been epic fails, though, to their credit, they at least spun Kearns into Zach McAllister. These signings were calculated gambles, hoping to get above replacement-level production at a cheap cost. Unfortunately, while the logic was sound, the personnel didn't fit and the front office was chided for making poor decisions.

Minor league deals like Travis Buck, Mark Grudzielanek, Justin Germano, Jamey Wright, and Vinnie Chulk, to name a few, have had varying levels of success. These late-offseason moves are generally nothing more than a crapshoot. The goal is to catch lightning in a bottle. To find a player with past success who is available due to an injury or poor performance the previous year.

It's now that time of year again, with just a handful of good free agents left on the market. The notable names, like Michael Bourn, Joe Saunders, Kyle Lohse, and Shaun Marcum, don't appear to be attainable, if the Indians are out of money. Bourn is well out of the Indians' price range, while Saunders and Marcum will likely make somewhere between $6-9M per year for a year or two. The Indians could still surprise us and find some scratch to sign an impact guy, but

every indication seems to be that they will be shopping at Big Lots instead of Target.

In my estimation, the three biggest remaining needs, in descending order of importance, are a starting pitcher, a bench player with a good enough bat to be a designated hitter three or four times a week, and a left handed reliever. On a Ramen noodle budget, this will require creativity and low-risk gambles. The Indians have in-house options capable of filling these holes, but I can't imagine that they are comfortable with them.

Like I said, the biggest need, to me, is a starting pitcher. As of now, the rotation will feature Justin Masterson, Ubaldo Jimenez, and Brett Myers. Those are the three locks. That makes me pretty uncomfortable. Masterson should be better, but there's no guarantee, as the Indians downgraded defensively at third base and it remains to be seen how Mark Reynolds does at first base. As a ground ball guy, Masterson's success is directly correlated to the defense behind him. That is not improved from 2012 and it was pretty bad last year.

Ubaldo Jimenez is an enigma. Some new ideas from manager Terry Francona and pitching coach Mickey Callaway could be helpful, but Jimenez's mechanical issues are a major problem. Getting Jimenez straight would be a lot like signing a free agent starter, but anybody holding their breath about that will probably suffocate by mid-May.

Brett Myers, if healthy, should be a stable third starter, who won't be in Cy Young contention, but won't post an ERA close to 5.00 either.

After that, it becomes a jumbled mess. Obviously, the name everybody is most interested in is Trevor Bauer. With just 162 innings at the minor league levels, the Indians may opt to take it slow with Bauer and let him work on his command in Columbus. With Josh Tomlin out for the year recovering from Tommy John surgery, Carlos Carrasco will return from missing a year for the same procedure and recovery. He is a complete unknown, though the smart money would be that he starts the season in Columbus. He will also probably be held to an innings limit in his first season back.

That leaves Zach McAllister and Corey Kluber, who both showed flashes of being able to handle the big leagues, but are not guys that you want to count on just yet. Regardless of what happens the rest of the offseason, one of those guys will start in the 2013 rotation, with the

edge to McAllister for having more experience and more success in 2012.

The second-tier of options includes a couple of southpaws, David Huff and Scott Kazmir. Kazmir, who was signed to a minor league deal due to his performance in Puerto Rico during winter ball. Both of these guys are longshots for the rotation, but could be in Terry Francona's bullpen. More on that later.

The rotation is better than 2012, but that's not saying much at all. Myers will replace Lowe and should be more consistent throughout the season. Beyond that, McAllister and Kluber are upgrades to Tomlin and Jeanmar Gomez. However, it's still a rotation that needs help.

Let's assume that the Indians cannot sign one of the big three left on the market – Kyle Lohse, Shaun Marcum, or Joe Saunders. The problem then becomes that most of the pitchers left on the market are extremely damaged goods. They are guys who missed all of 2012 with injuries or, at the very least, missed large portions of the season. If they haven't had Tommy John, they have had shoulder problems. This goes back to the whole "lightning in a bottle" thing I mentioned earlier. It's a crapshoot and you have to hope you gamble on the right guy. On the bright side, minor league deals are very cheap and carry no risk.

Jair Jurrjens is intriguing. My guess is that he wants too much money, being just one year removed from an All-Star season and making $5.5M in 2012. The allure of Jurrjens is that he has a track record of being a successful pitcher and he would be willing to sign a one-year deal because he would be a free agent in 2014. Rebuilding his resume with a strong 2013 would benefit him when he hits the open market and Cleveland is a great place to do that. Not only would he be guaranteed a rotation spot, he could pitch as high as third in the rotation. One big issue with Jurrjens is that he has made just 53 Major League starts over the last three seasons. He would seem to have more upside than McAllister or Kluber, given his 2008, 2009, and 2011 seasons.

Another pitcher who I would seriously consider is Tim Stauffer. Stauffer, who missed nearly all of 2012 with elbow and shoulder injuries, could be a helpful piece for what the Indians need. Think about this: If Trevor Bauer begins the year in Columbus, it's hard to see him being there past early June. Carlos Carrasco may have shaken off the rust by then to be a valuable part of the Indians' starting pitching depth. As a result, Stauffer fits perfectly, if he's healthy enough to go through Spring Training and make the ballclub. In his career, over 43 career appearances, 33 starts, in the first half, Stauffer has a 3.20 ERA and a 2.70 K/BB ratio in 219.2 innings. In 53

second half appearances, 37 starts, his ERA balloons to 4.68 and his K/BB ratio drops to 1.56. Stauffer obviously wears down as the season goes on. Also, if the Indians did decide to keep him around, he could be a good long man for the bullpen, since he's pitched in relief before. Stauffer would fit well in a fifth starter role, with McAllister being the fourth starter, if Bauer starts in Columbus. That would give Kluber more development time in a stress-free environment, because he does seem to have some upside as a guy who can pitch at the back end of the rotation and still miss bats.

Frankly, the worst case would be to rush Trevor Bauer out of necessity. If Antonetti and Francona feel that he is ready to pitch once every five days in the big leagues, that's one thing. If they throw him out there because they don't have enough viable options, that's a mistake. It's an indefensible mistake because there are enough fringe Major League starters in the organization and some attractive minor league contract candidates on the market still.

The question of DH is certainly a big one. As my TCF colleague Al Ciammaichella pointed out a couple weeks back in a thread on our message boards, American League designated hitters had an OPS+ of 101, second only to center fielders, and combined to hit 325 HRs, second behind first basemen. It's a very important offensive position and the Indians don't have one.

Some people believe that the Indians can use the DH spot to rotate guys like Asdrubal Cabrera, Jason Kipnis, Carlos Santana, and Mark Reynolds to keep them fresh and give them a quasi-day off. Others, like me, would like to see the Indians get another bench bat capable of being the DH three or more times a week. The reason for this is simple. Though the Indians bench depth, with Mike Aviles, whoever the fourth outfielder is, and Lou Marson, is good enough to rotate these guys in, but lineup continuity is a big deal to me.

Yan Gomes, acquired in the Esmil Rogers trade, is one possibility, especially because he can play 1B, 3B, and catcher. Gomes showed power in his brief 43 games, 98 at bat, stint with the Blue Jays, hitting four home runs. Gomes has impressive minor league numbers, with a career minor league OPS of .828, but it is aided by a .921 OPS in 83 games in the very hitter-friendly Pacific Coast League.

How about Travis Hafner? Before you close the browser tab with this article, hear me out. Obviously, Hafner is an injury risk and a guy whose best days are behind him. That being said, here are his splits against RHP over the last three seasons:

2010: 351 PA, .385 OBP, .863 OPS

2011: 260 PA, .404 OBP, .887 OPS (also hit .302)

2012: 191 PA, .361 OBP, .798 OPS

The theory would be this: Play Hafner three or four times a week, on average, against right handed pitchers who throw in the high 80s to low 90s. If we assume Hafner plays one-third of the games and gets four plate appearances per game, that's 212 plate appearances. Even with his injury concerns, that should keep him fresh enough to be a productive part-time player. You can rotate Reynolds, Santana, and Cabrera in at DH against lefties, since Aviles and Marson are both better hitters against southpaws.

The goal would be to put Hafner in positions to succeed. Protect his deteriorating bat speed by picking and choosing the spots when he plays. Try to spread out his games so his legs and shoulder are able to stay fresh. With the new schedule that throws interleague play in at random, Hafner wouldn't have to sit for nine straight days like he has in the past and lose his timing.

To date, there has been very little interest in Hafner, so both parties should be able to come to a reasonable agreement if there's mutual interest.

The final hole to fill is another lefty for the bullpen. By default, with the trade of Tony Sipp and the non-tender of Rafael Perez, Nick Hagadone becomes your primary matchup lefty. I'm a firm believer in having a second left hander in the bullpen. You can't get caught with your pants down against a premier left handed batter in a big spot late in the game because you burned your only lefty or he's unavailable. For the Indians, the de facto second lefty appears to be Scott Barnes, with Huff and Kazmir possibly winding up in that role. Personally, I'm not thrilled with any of those options.

My concerns are not a knock on Barnes, as I think he could be successful in that role. But, Hagadone is largely unproven and having another unproven lefty out there is a recipe for disaster. From the small sample size alert department, Barnes had 35 plate appearances against lefties in 2012 and held them to a .200/.314/.300/.614 slash line, with a 2.00 K/BB ratio. As for Hagadone, he has a sample size of 67 plate appearances against LHB, holding them to a .155/.254/.241/.495 slash line, with a 2.13 K/BB ratio.

Theoretically, the Indians could take their chances with the right handers in their pen. Here are the slash lines of left handed batters against them in 2012:

Joe Smith: .218/.288/.297/.585

Vinnie Pestano: .237/.329/.423/.752

Cody Allen: .240/.356/.420/.776

Matt Albers: .212/.316/.303/.619

Bryan Shaw: .330/.403/.459/.862

What's interesting about Joe Smith is the conscious effort he has made to be better against lefties. In 2009-10, Smith was rarely allowed to face lefties and the small sample sizes were ugly, with slugging percentages of .500 or better, batting averages of .340 or better, and an overall lack of confidence against them. Smith was significantly better in 2011 and 2012, posting numbers you might expect from a left hander, with bigger sample sizes.

Albers's 2012 numbers are a bit of an outlier, as lefties slugged .465 against him in 2011 and .458 in 2010, rendering him unreliable against lefties. Pestano did improve against lefties in 2012, after they had an .812 OPS against him in 2011. Allen has a lot to prove this season against hitters from both sides of the plate, but he definitely looked impressive last year in his

rookie season.

While Smith appears to be a viable candidate, he's already in an important role and having another lefty couldn't hurt. One exceptionally interesting name remains on the market that I would love to see brought in for a look. Ever heard of Pedro Feliciano? Feliciano has missed the last two years due to a myriad of shoulder injuries, including a torn rotator cuff, but he's on the comeback train. After appearing in a sickening 344 games from 2007-10, including 92 appearances in 2010, Feliciano is working his way back by pitching in the Puerto Rican Winter League. In seven appearances with Leones de Ponce, he has allowed just three baserunners in 7.1 innings, with six strikeouts. Again, like most pitchers, a minor league deal with an invite to Spring Training would suffice. The Indians would be an attractive spot because they need another lefty and that increases Feliciano's chances of making the club.

Feliciano has a sizable track record against lefties, holding them to a .590 OPS and has an impressive 3.96 K/BB ratio against them. Of the five options listed on MLBTradeRumors's Free Agent Tracker, Feliciano is clearly atop the list, which includes Manny Parra, Rafael Perez, JC Romero, and Will Ohman. It looks like it's Feliciano, a trade, or hope for Scott Barnes and Nick Hagadone to be enough.

As you can see, even with limited resources, the Indians can take some calculated gambles to try and fill the holes that they have. None of these guys are names that will sell tickets or excite the common fan, but that's not the point. The point is to try and get better and the guys mentioned in this article would make the Indians better, even if just from the perspective of adding depth.

So far, with the exception of Shane Victorino, the Indians have pretty much gotten everybody that they seriously set their sights on. It's safe to assume that they know who they want to target and will make every effort to better the ballclub before they head to Goodyear, Arizona for Spring Training.