In the world of professional sports, the season never really ends. The games stop for a while, but every general manager in sports will tell you it's a 12-month job. With that in mind, it's time for Erik Cassano to pause and reflect on what the Indians have done so far this offseason. A Mark Mulder signing or a major trade is always a possibility, but for now, let's labor under the assumption that Mark Shapiro has made all the significant moves he's going to make this winter. Does this team have a better shot at contending than the club that left the field at the start of October? Let the grades show the way...

In the world of professional sports, the season never really ends. The games stop for a while, but every general manager in sports will tell you it's a 12-month job.

With that in mind, it's time to pause and reflect on what the Indians have done so far this offseason. A Mark Mulder signing or a major trade is always a possibility, but for now, let's labor under the assumption that Mark Shapiro has made all the significant moves he's going to make this winter.

Does this team have a better shot at contending than the club that left the field at the start of October? Let the grades show the way...

Josh Barfield, 2B
Acquired: Trade with San Diego

I have yet to read or hear any media outlet (at least outside San Diego) that thinks the Indians got the worse end of this deal.

Once filtered through the black-death refracting lens of Cleveland sports, the Barfield acquisition is merely a bandage to cover the Indians' botched handling and subsequent giveaway of Brandon Phillips. But if Barfield has the talent of Phillips minus the head-case personality, one could make a case that Barfield is actually an upgrade because he'll be able to adapt better.

Regardless, this is a much more solid acquisition than even the Andy Marte deal of a year ago. Marte is very talented, but he was bought largely on spec, and it cost the Indians an effective two-hole hitter

in Coco Crisp.

In the Barfield deal, the Indians gave up a hard-hitting but redundant player in Kevin Kouzman off to get a talented all-around player who already has had a full, productive year in the big leagues. His bat still needs work, but Barfield could play his way into the Indians vaunted "core".

Grade: A

David Dellucci, OF
Acquired: Signed to a three-year deal

Strange as it sounds, I think Dellucci was signed to fill the Aaron Boone void.

The Indians love "clubhouse guys." They love guys who can get a clubhouse closer to that Utopian place where outfielders, infielders and pitchers come together, clasp hands and sing "Kum-bi-yah."

When it comes to the actual lineup, Dellucci is grout, squeezed in to fill cracks. Ostensibly, he'll platoon with Jason Michaels in left field, what has to be the least exciting position on the entire roster. He'll hit seventh, eighth, ninth, maybe second, maybe cleanup if he finds his way into Eric Wedge's heart like Casey Blake.

It wasn't a bad signing. It wasn't a great signing. Dellucci is what he is: Necessary. Useful. Versatile. Cheap.

Like I said, he's grout.

Grade: C

Roberto Hernandez, RHP
Acquired: Signed to a one-year deal.

You can guess the appeal of Hernandez, a old, leather-armed workhorse with closer's pedigree and volumes of knowledge to impart on the next generation of young firemen.

The danger in signing a 42-year-old pitcher entering his 17th big league season is that his wheels are going to fall off on your watch.

To Hernandez's credit, he has held off Father Time to this point. Last year, he split time between the Pirates and Mets, compiling a 3.11 ERA in 63 2/3 innings. His strikeouts outpaced his walks, 48 to 32.

But I still get uneasy with the idea of a 42-year-old pitcher being relied upon to help hold down the fort if a starter gets knocked out early. The Indians already have two bullpen guys

who might have endurance issues in Joe BorowskiFoulke. Compounding problems is the fact that Wedge's bullpen-management record is spotty at best.

All it's going to take is for one of these rusting pitchers to go down, and it could start a really bad chain reaction.

Grade: C-minus

Aaron Fultz, LHP
Acquired: Signed to a one-year deal.

Left-handed matchup relievers are the placekickers of baseball. They have one job, so they'd better be immaculate at it.

Fultz ... well, he's not too bad, but you most definitely won't be confusing him with Paul Assen macher
circa 1995, either.

The batting average-against, one of the time-tested barometers of matchup relievers, doesn't give a ringing endorsement to
Fultz
if he's applying for the job of getting Justin
Morneau
to pop up to shallow left with the bases loaded and one out in eighth.

Lefties hit a respectable .277 off Fultz last year. He actually struck out more righties than lefties, 35 to 27, largely because as a member of the
Phillies
, he faced almost twice as many
righties
than lefties.

The Indians might have signed Fultz with the idea that he'd be Scott Sauerbeck's replacement. He might actually be closer to a poor man's Arthur Rhodes.

Grade: C

Joe Borowski, RHP
Acquired: Signed to a one-year deal

Borowski has 80 career saves. All but 11 of them came in two seasons: 36 last year with the Marlins, and 33 in 2003 with the Cubs.

A career closer he is not, but what he will bring is a steadying influence and consistent, above-average pitching provided he is healthy. In other words, he's just what the doctor ordered for the ailing Tribe bullpen.

Of course, the rub is that he fell to the Indians because there are questions about his health. If not for a suspect MRI on his shoulder, he'd be a Phillie.

The positives of signing a pitcher the caliber of Borowski to a one-year deal outweigh the negatives under most any circumstances. But the Indians had better take care of him. Something tells me he's going to become the glue that holds this '07 bullpen together.

Grade: B

Keith Foulke, RHP
Acquired: Signed to a one-year deal

From 1999 to 2004, Foulke was an elite closer. The Athletics and Red Sox sought him out to be the man who nails the door shut in October games. He has a World Series ring from Boston because of that.

Then came 2005 and 2006, and suddenly, Foulke's body became downright creaky. Knee, back and arm problems all seemed to sideline him at once. His ERA soared, he lost his closer's job and became an afterthought.

His year in Cleveland will serve as an attempt to right his career. If he has the type of season the Indians need him to have, he'll be gone next winter.

I'd bet Foulke has no intention of making his Cleveland stint a long one. He made it clear he wanted to play out west to be closer to his family. But the Indians pursued him doggedly and have a good reputation for rehabbing pitchers.

Former Indians reclamation project, and now well-paid Cubs reliever Bob Howry reportedly recommended the Indians to
Foulke
.

Foulke will use the Indians, the Indians will use Foulke, everybody will get what they want. There is probably still a good closer rattling around inside
Foulke's
aging limbs, and here's a roll of the dice that says he rebounds and has a 30-save season for the Tribe.

Then he'll be gone, and the Indians will be back to square one again next winter. But for at least a year, the Indians will have a proven veteran closer with something to play for.

Grade: B-plus