Are the Indians a small market team or a mid-market team? Have the Dolans fulfilled their promises to "spend when the time is right"? How culpable are a skeptical fan base and poor attendance figures towards the teams bottom ten payroll? Can we sign CC and Pronk? One thing is clear. This franchise, and its fan base, is at a crossroads right now. Welcome back Furls.

Since the announcement of the sale of the Cleveland Indians seven years ago, the Cleveland fan base has been very skeptical of the leadership of the team's new owner, Larry Dolan. Mere mention of his name conjures images of Ebenezer Scrooge or the legendary miser, Hetty Green , and a level cynicism and disdain as of yet unequalled by any owner in Cleveland sports. He is the man that fans love to hate, he is the fans scapegoat for small market inequality in Major League Baseball. He is easy to vilify, almost as easy as George Steinbrenner on the other side of the spending spectrum.

Dolan is not completely blameless in his vilification. Time and time again he has promised to "spend when the time is right," implying that once his team was a contender he would spend the necessary money to bring in the players and put this team over the top. This is a promise that he has not delivered upon yet. Trot Nixon, David Delucci, Roberto Hernandez? These were the free agents that were going to take the Indians to the next level? It is these types of moves that have characterized his tenure.

Dolan's primary argument has been that the realities of the small market team are such that the Indians must spend smart and when the time is right, but the bottom line is that Dolan overpaid for this team and the fans have been paying for it since.

Cleveland fans are discriminating and smart. You cannot piss on their leg and tell them it is raining. They do their homework and have access to the stories. I am sure that it has not escaped the fans' attention that the Cleveland Indians ranked second among Major League Baseball teams with operating revenues of approximately $27.2 million in 2005. They are and have been one of the most profitable teams in MLB; you cannot cry broke when your books are laid out for all to see.

In spite of this, the blame for the Indians paltry $61 million (23rd in MLB) payroll does not fall squarely on the shoulders of the much-maligned Dolan. In short, the fans are equally culpable.

Right now the Indians are second in the highly competitive AL Central, trailing the Tigers by one game as the All Star break approaches, yet the Indians are

drawing fans at a rate comparable to the worst teams in MLB. Currently the Indians rank 24th in MLB in attendance; drawing 23,778 fans per game to see a contending team in one of the best venues in MLB. The only teams underdrawing the Indians are the cellar dwelling Orioles, Nats, Pirates, Marlins, D-Rays, and Royals. If this is how the fans support a winner, what kind of attendance could the owner expect if the team's record was 30-43 instead of 43-30?

As a businessman, Larry Dolan needs to project his spending in the future against projected revenues, revenues generated in large part based on fan support of his team. For years the fans' argument has been that if Dolan put a winner on the field, the fan support would follow, but has it?

The reality of small market baseball is that the playing field is not level. The Indians players are going to have to overcome stacked rosters to

compete and the Indians management is going to have to overcome a system that rewards frivolous spending in large markets. The reality is that the Yankees and Red Sox are always going to have a payroll in the $150-200 million dollar ballpark, and that is a ballpark that the Indians are never going to be able to play in. The Indians are going to have spend their money conservatively and wisely to compete in the long term. They are going to have be cautious in free agency and they are going to have to value their prospects and resist the temptation to trade them (and long term success) for a flash in the pan run.

As fans, we need to recognize and accept this. We need to understand that competing is not going to be the birthright of the Cleveland Indians and when the Indians put a competitor on the field; we need to enjoy it and support it. This does not excuse the $61 million dollar payroll (one that is about $20 million too low in my opinion) or the half measures in free agency, but right now the Indians are

playing some very entertaining baseball in front of a half full stadium; they are playing the kind of baseball that I would have killed for in 1985.

For one reason or another, the fans have been slow to support this team. Are they skeptically waiting for a collapse? Have the Cleveland fans become so jaded that they will cut off their noses to spite their faces? Right now the Indians are competing for a title and the fans, by their support (or lack thereof), are generating the revenues that Larry Dolan is going to use to create future payrolls.

The Indians are approaching a critical cross roads in the next two years. Two of the marquis names on the roster, Travis Hafner and C.C. Sabathia are both careening towards big pay-days in free agency following

the 2008 season. If the Indians are going to compete for their services in the future, Larry Dolan is going to have to take a huge gamble not only in the players' abilities to earn and justify the expense, but in the fans' support of this team, support that until this point has been as hollow as Dolan's promises to spend.