“We will spend when the time is right.”

This statement will probably end up as an epitaph on Indians owner Larry Dolan’s tombstone.

These are the immortal words expressed by Dolan in a press conference a short time after the Bartolo Colon trade in June 2002. In the day and age of internet message boards, mailing lists, and talk radio/TV, this type of comment is not forgotten. And, can divide a fanbase.

Here we are three and a half years later, and fans are still griping about whether or not Dolan can finance this team. The debate has carried on many a day on internet message boards and talk shows, almost becoming a sideshow like the Tim Couch vs. Kelly Holcomb debacle of years past. People familiar with that nasty exchange that went on for about two years know it tore Browns fans apart, and in some ways, is doing the same thing with Indians fans.

In that press conference sometime late in 2002, the Indians unveiled “The Plan” which had three basic principles: rebuild the team to be a contender by 2005, develop a strong core of talent, and keep the minors stocked with talent to sustain success at the major league level.

To date, everything promised with “The Plan” has happened. The Tribe contended in 2005 winning 93 games, which was more than four of the seven years in the “Era of Champions” from 1995-2001. They also have developed a strong core of players in Grady Sizemore, Jhonny Peralta, Travis Hafner, Victor Martinez, Cliff Lee, and CC Sabathia. They restocked the farm system and have a plethora of talent ready to debut with the Indians this year and many seasons to come.

In the end, there has turned out to be one big problem with that Plan: their timing.

The timing to jump into free agency in the 2005-2006 off-season could not have been any worse. To make matters worse, the sleeping giant known as the Chicago White Sox finally awoke and decided be a player in the Big Market game.

Of course, it figures, as this kind of shit only happens in Cleveland. We finally have a good team again, yet the freaking White Sox after years of mediocrity have one of the best seasons in baseball history, and NOW decide to start spending some of that Big Market Dough they have had lying around all these years. What the hell has White Sox owner Reinsdorf been waiting for the last decade?

The free agent crop this off-season was one of the worst ever, if not THE worst ever. Most of the top free agents this year would have been 2nd or even 3rd tier in a normal free agency period. As a result, some foolish deals were passed around to players who will never come close to providing the signing team a good return on their investment.

Some of those 2nd and 3rd tier guys that fit into the Indians spending habits in the 90s have become over-priced. Guys like Eddie Murray, Dennis Martinez, and Orel Hershiser who we signed to deals that paid them around $2M to $4M a year, would be getting deals well above that now. Eddie Murray made $3M per year in 1994 and 1995, yet in 2006 Casey Blake will make $3.05M and Ben Broussard $2.5M. That's not inflation, that's insanity. Yeesh.

So, the Indians took their best shot in free agency this off-season, and came up empty way more times than not. The Indians targeted players at positions of need, namely BJ Ryan, Trevor Hoffman, and Brian Giles. They lost out on all of those player, Ryan because they didn't want to go 5 years, and on Giles and Hoffman because those players took less money to stay in sunny San Diego.

The Indians also went out and pursued Nomar Garciaparra and Eric Byrnes. For Nomar, it was between the Indians and Dodgers, and he took less to go to the Dodgers to be near his home. For Byrnes, he took less to sign somewhere else for the security of a starting position since he would have been the 4th outfielder here.

They were able to save the off-season from being a complete loss by making a few decent signings. They were able to lure Paul Byrd to sign here for 2 years $14 million, and Jason Johnson at 1 year $3.5 million. And, they did sign Eduardo Perez to compliment Ben Broussard at 1B. All three of those signings were typical Shapiro value signings, and good attempts to replace the production of departing players like Kevin Millwood and Scott Elarton, or help Broussard in a platoon role.

But, with the pickings slim and most of their choices shunning them for

less money elsewhere, the Indians were unable to make many impact signings. And, it appears how the off-season has shaken out has worn on Shapiro. After signing Eduardo Perez, Shapiro commented that "We've done what we had to do, but we didn't necessarily make some of the improvements that I wanted to make."

Of which, another problem is staring at the Indians: Expectations.

During the rebuild, expectations were low. But, now that they have proven to be a good team and were one of baseball's top teams in 2005, expectations for 2006 and beyond are through the roof. Fans think the time is right, and as a result are expecting Dolan to deliver on that promise. But, that's tough to do when there really isn't much to buy.

Apparently, the problem is that it seems people took Dolan's "spending" comment to mean something along the lines of diving heavily into free agency and inflating the payroll a large amount when the time was right. Afterall, Dolan did say "there is plenty of money" when the right time came along. In turn, this has led to some unreasonable expectations.

But, is it possible that Dolan's comment about the "right time" maybe was more about STARTING to spend and taking long term risks than just the notion of spending itself? That's the problem with his comment, it is so subjective, that it can be taken a million ways. Thankfully, since he made those comments, he pretty much has learned to just shut his mouth and let Shapiro do the spinning and talking.

It seems pretty clear that the Indians have started to spend and take some risks. Even with such a subpar free agent class, the Indians still added around $23 million in free agency by resigning Ronnie Belliard, Scott Sauerbeck and Bob Wickman to more expensive deals, and signing Perez, Byrd, and Johnson. And the team payroll in 2006 will be at least $55M, which is up from $42M in 2005 and $34M in 2004. How is this not spending?

Go back to 2004 when the payroll was trimmed down to $34M. Since "The Plan" to rebuild was put in motion late in the 2002 season, how many multi-year contracts did the Indians sign players to, and how many multi-million dollar deals did they sign players to from late 2002 until last off-season?

Zero.

That's zero multi-year deals, and zero multi-million dollar signings in over two years. In the 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 off-seasons, the Indians biggest free agent acquisition was Brian Anderson for one year at $1.5M. They mixed in other free agent signings those two off-seasons for $1M or less in Ron Belliard, Jason Bere, Shane Spencer, etc.

Clearly, they were in a rebuild phase and did not want to commit long term dollars to a player. And, for the most part, fans understood this.

Then, last April, the Indians signed Victor Martinez (6 years $22.5M),

Travis Hafner (4 years $12M) and CC Sabathia (3 years $24.75M) to long term deals. All three deals, which include their option years, were significant signings. This was the first signal that Dolan felt the time was right, and that payroll would start to progressively increase. They had a team on the cusp of contending, and a core of players to build around for the next 4-5 years was being identified.

This year, more players are expected to sign long-term deals. Cliff Lee will most likely get a long-term deal sometime after the season starts, and Grady Sizemore and Jhonny Peralta will get long-term deals completed this year, or at the latest this time next year.

In the end, this off-season which was once probably viewed by the Indians as opportunistic quickly turned into an off-season from hell. Not only did the Indians lose the American League ERA leader in Millwood, one of the top setup men in baseball in Howry, and still have question marks at 1B, RF, and 3B, but they also lost out on several free agent targets. All the while, the White Sox appear on paper to have gotten better with the acquisitions of Jim Thome and Javier Vazquez.

The Indians should still be a good team in 2006, and should come close to their 93 win total in 2005. However, with a much better free agent class next off-season, some big prospects like Andy Marte, Brad Snyder, and Ryan Garko all ready to contribute, and the Indians only having a few players eligible for free agency…..

…..the right time might be 2007.