One of the nice things about an extended run in the post-season is that it makes for a shorter off-season. Free agency starts this freaking Tuesday! Mark Shapiro was recently named Executive of the Year. Yet, his free agent exploits last season (Delucci, Trot, Oldberto, Foulke, etc.) were far from impressive. In Tony Lastoria's latest, he says the Indians may not be extremely active this winter, but will make some additions. And that Mark Shapiro's got to get it right this time.

Free agency starts up this coming Tuesday, November 13th. While the Indians get ready to dive headfirst into another offseason and seem poised to make a key acquisition or two, there is much trepidation on what exactly the Indians will do this offseason.

Surely a team coming off of a 96-win season and an American League Championship Series (ALCS) appearance should not invoke such fear, right? Especially considering General Manager Mark Shapiro was named the Executive of the Year for his efforts this past season.

The thing is, while Shapiro has been like Superman the past few years (winning Executive of the Year honors in 2005 and now in 2007) and has built the Indians into a perennial contender ... when it comes to free agency it does to Shapiro what kryptonite does to Superman. It renders him powerless and weak.

Some may say that the real kryptonite that has plagued Shapiro in past years and will continue to do so well into the future is owner Larry Dolan's wallet as it has restricted Shapiro on what he truly would like to do. But bottom line, since officially taking over as the general manager of the Indians in November 2001 ... his free agent track record has been far from *super*. Even in the case of Shapiro's popular "value" signings he makes every year, he has whiffed many more times than he has connected for a home run or even just a single.

Save for the Brandon Phillips fiasco , Shapiro has done a fantastic job managing the roster

since taking over the reigns from John Hart, and this past season he did his best job yet of handling his young players and infusing them into key roles on the major league team.

He has done a great job signing young players to long term deals, extending core players on the verge of free agency, and keeping intact the club's streak of not going to arbitration.

Aside from the concerns over C.C. Sabathia's looming free agent status, Shapiro has this team setup where the short term outlook has the Indians facing no real free agent dilemmas for the next two to three years.

He has built this team the right way, and it is strong from top to bottom, and it is going to be together for awhile.

But, with World Series visions dancing in his and the fans' heads for next season, he will be pressured this offseason to make the right decisions either by trade or free agency to augment this team and make it better to try and ensure they get back to the ALCS and ultimately win a World Series. Shapiro thrives in handling and evaluating young players, but when it comes to free agency Shapiro has problems every year.

Roll the tape and take a stroll down memory lane to see Shapiro's free agent resume since becoming the general manager of the Indians in November 2001. It is not pretty (you may want to close your eyes):

2001
Ricky Guttierez (2B)
Brady Anderson (OF)
Mark Wohlers (RHP)

2002
Jose Santiago (RHP)
Casey Blake (3B)
Jason Bere (RHP)
Brian Anderson (LHP)
Terry Mulholland (LHP)
Shane Spencer (OF)
Rafael Betancourt (RHP)

2003
Adam Piatt (OF)
Bob Howry (RHP)
Ronnie Belliard (2B)
Jose Jimenez (RHP)
Jeff D'Amico (RHP)
Lou Merloni (IF)
Matt Miller (RHP)

2004
Jose Hernandez (IF)
Kevin Millwood (RHP)
Juan Gonzalez (OF)
Alex Cora (IF)
Paul Shuey (RHP)

2005
Paul Byrd (RHP)
Lou Merloni (IF)
Jason Johnson (RHP)
Danny Graves (RHP)
Steve Karsay (RHP)
Einar Diaz (C)
Todd Hollandsworth (OF)
Eduardo Perez (1B)

2006
Trot Nixon (OF)
David Delluci (OF)
Roberto Hernandez (RHP)
Keith Foulke (RHP)
Joe Borowski (RHP)
Aaron Fultz (LHP)
Luis Rivas (IF)

Okay, you can open your eyes now. For those with the ability to withstand such carnage, or those that peeked, when looking at that list it should not make any fan feel all warm and fuzzy inside that the Indians will make the right moves this winter, or any meaningful ones at that.

Yes, there have been some great finds like with Ronnie Belliard, Rafael Betancourt, and even Casey Blake. But, as the old saying goes, if you throw enough crap at the wall, eventually something sticks. And there certainly has been a lot of crap thrown against the wall the past six offseasons.

The Kevin Millwood signing in 2005 is Shapiro's best offseason acquisition, although the planets really aligned on that one as Millwood needed to go to a team to re-establish his value - which he subsequently did that year - and then left by signing a huge multi-year deal with the Rangers.

Also, Byrd and Borowski have been solid signings, but nothing great.

And really, aside from the Travis Hafner trade in the 2002 offseason, he really has yet to significantly improve the team via a trade in the offseason as well. He has made attempts at doing this with trades for Scott Stewart, Josh Barfield, Arthur Rhodes, Guillermo Mota, Kelly Shoppach and Andy Marte, but none have made the impact he thought they would.

It should be noted that Shapiro does get a pass in the 2002 and 2003 offseasons because those were more about rebuilding and evaluating, so key free agent signings and trades were not mandatory. But, Shapiro has yet to make a signature signing or trade in any offseason since to greatly improve the team for the upcoming season.

Unlike 2005, this offseason the Indians do not have any looming roster issues with pending free agents of their own. Shapiro was in an uphill battle after the 2005 season because although the team had won 93 games and just missed the playoffs, the Indians not only had to look to improve, but had to deal with a lot of key free agents of their own such as Bob Howry, Bob Wickman, Kevin Millwood, and Scott Elarton. That was 40% of the starting rotation and the two mainstays in the backend of the bullpen.

The result was an offseason of peril in that they ended up losing Kevin Millwood and Scott Elarton to free agency and signed Paul Byrd and Jason Johnson as their replacements, lost Howry in free agency to the Cubs and replaced him with Mota in a trade, and resigned Wickman after they tried hard to sign closer Trevor Hoffman.

On top of that, the Indians also had to address the three big holes in the lineup that you all remember as The Killer B's that year: Ben Broussard, Casey Blake and Aaron Boone. They ended up bring them all back as starters, but brought along Eduardo Perez to platoon with Broussard at first base, which actually ended up being a very good move.

Fast-forward to this offseason.

The Indians are in a completely different scenario than they were in after 2005 as they do not have the free agent issues internally like the 2005 team did. Aside from bit players like Kenny Lofton, Trot Nixon and Chris Gomez being free agents, the entire rest of the team is under the Indians control for the 2008 season .

With the pickup of Paul Byrd's option, the Indians are not losing one starting pitcher as their top four starting pitchers will return in 2008, and they also have four legitimate starting pitching options in Cliff Lee, Jeremy Sowers, Aaron Laffey and Adam Miller for the #5 spot in the rotation.

Also, with the options for Joe Borowski and Aaron Fultz being picked up this week the Indians entire bullpen from 2007 is under their control and can be brought back. With Borowski, Fultz, Rafael Perez, Rafael Betancourt, and Jensen Lewis set to man the five key spots in the bullpen, it leaves the Indians the option to fill the other two spots in the bullpen for middle relief internally, by free agency, or trade.

Everyone of importance is set to return in the lineup and on the bench, and with the positions where there are question marks, the Indians will look internally to resolve them with Casey Blake and Andy Marte at third base, and with Asdrubal Cabrera and Josh Barfield at second base. Left field appears to be a position the Indians may look to upgrade via trade or free agency this offseason, although the Indians have internal options with David Dellucci, Ben

Francisco, and Shin-Soo Choo they could turn to as well.

This is why Shapiro needs to get it right this offseason.

With so little to do with the team as a whole, and so many options internally to turn to as well as so little available in free agency to supplement the team, Shapiro has to make the right decisions that improve this team and gives it the best chance possible to make the postseason and roll the dice and see what happens once they get there again.

It is rare when a team faces so little uncertainty in the offseason, and the advantage the Indians have is they do not *have* to make a move. Sometimes, some of the worst moves and decisions by baseball executives are made when teams are up against it and feel they need to do something. Desperation creates distraction as you sometimes forget to dot all the i's and cross all the t's.

Being in the position the Indians are in, they can afford to go through every trade and free agent opportunity with a fine tooth comb, dot those i's and t's, and sit back and be very selective in what they do.

One thing working against Shapiro this offseason is that this is one of the weakest free agent classes in recent memory. So, he has little to work with. The result of this, it we could see a flurry of trade activity this offseason with teams around the league, particularly at the upcoming Winter Meetings the first week of December.

The Indians may be in on just about any trade rumor involving the availability of an impact bat or bullpen arm, which will be the two areas the team focuses on this offseason.

The Indians surely have the prospect currency to make a trade to get the help they need in these areas, but it will ultimately come down to how much they are willing to pay in prospects for what they are getting in return.

This may be one of those rare instances where the Indians may allow themselves to overpay in terms of prospects for a player they really want in a trade.

If they do venture into the free agent market, they will probably stick with past strategies and look to cash in on a player or two on a one year deal in the bullpen, as well as potentially bring back Lofton to play left field or sign someone like Reggie Sanders, Luis Gonzalez, or Cliff Floyd on a one year deal. The Indians have been interested in signing all three of those players in the past, so it seems likely they may explore trying to sign one of them.

But, the splash the Indians may make will undoubtedly have to come on the trade front. Could they be a player in a trade for Jason Bay, Miguel Cabrera, Raul Ibanez, Pat Burrell or any other potent bat that supposedly is available on the trade market this offseason?

We'll see.

After lackluster offseasons the last two years, it may be time to make that one big deal. Whether that big deal comes in the form of an impact bat, or the re-signing of C.C. Sabathia, they need to use this unique opportunity presented to them this offseason to their advantage.

There will be no better opportunity in the future to strike and get that premium bat or resign a player of Sabathia's caliber.

There is no question the Indians are in a much better situation this offseason than they were after their 93-win campaign in 2005 or any year for that matter. But, Shapiro can't afford to have another offseason like he has in his previous six as general manager.

Coming off an ALCS appearance, the Indians need to be smart with what moves they make this offseason as there is little they have to do, but the moves they do make have to be key strikes that improve this team.

To get back to the playoffs and make another run at a World Series title, Shapiro has to get it right.