It has been the hot topic of the offseason for the Indians. No, not the black hole still in left field, or the reloaded Detroit Tigers. Not the Mitchell Report, and certainly not the acquisition of Jamey Carroll. The hot topic around the watercooler all winter has been whether or not the Indians can and will resign Cy Young lefty C.C. Sabathia. We asked our Roundtable to weigh in with their thoughts on whether or not the Tribe could resign the hefty lefty.

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The hot topic around the watercooler all winter has been whether or not the Indians can and will resign Cy Young lefty C.C. Sabathia. It won't change once the season starts either, as half the talk will be about whether the Indians can make another World Series run, with the other half focused on counting down the starts before Sabathia's career as an Indian ends. With Sabathia on the verge of free agency after this season, most fans have a fatalistic viewpoint on how the C.C. contract negotiations will shake out. You would be hardpressed to find many who have faith that the Indians will do whatever it takes to resign the important ace lefty.

C.C. has been saying all the right things about wanting to stay in Cleveland, calling it his home. Also, General Manager Mark Shapiro has even broken his own negotiating protocols, allowing negotiations to carry into spring training and even into the season if need be. Strangely, there has not been one peep about the Indians even checking out what Sabathia may fetch them on the trade market.

While the fans have so little faith the Indians can keep Sabathia, it appears Shapiro is digging himself a strong foothold and actually may believe he has a good shot to retain his ace. Or, he is crazy.

We polled the Indians writers here at TheClevelandFan.com to get their thoughts on the situation. Will the Indians resign Sabathia? Should they? How should the Indians handle the situation? The TCF crew opines:

Tony Lastoria: I may be seeing things through rose-colored glasses, and I may be putting too much faith into GM Mark Shapiro, but I have a good feeling the Indians are going to extend Sabathia and keep him in the wigwam at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario for the next several years. Maybe I am drinking too much Kool Aid, or I am delusional and forgot to take my medication today, but to me there appears to some momentum and a glimmer of hope that the Indians can and will resign Sabathia.

C.C. has been saying all the right things this offseason, which is nothing new as one of this town's biggest traitors Jim Thome said the same things up until he bolted town with his "rock" for the almighty dollar. C.C. even has commented recently that talks with the Indians are progressing well. That may be lip service, but there may be more to it than that. Shapiro made overtures recently that the contract they offered C.C. a few weeks back is "the largest they have ever offered to a player". This remains to be seen if Shapiro misspoke, or was misquoted, because the largest contract ever offered to a player was the 8 year $136 million one to Manny Ramirez in December 2000. And, there is absolutely no way the Indians offered that kind of a contract to Sabathia.

Still, the Indians have made it known that they have a willingness to carry negotiations into spring training, and even into the season, which is something they never have really allowed in the past. When deals have been close with players going into spring training, or near the end of it, they always let is carry over some if they felt there was momentum for a potential deal. Most importantly, the Indians payroll situation for the next several years is under good control and very manageable. Plus, they have already backed up the Brinks truck for Jake Westbrook and Travis Hafner not even a year ago, two players that fans at this time last year gave the Indians no shot at resigning.

So, I'll predict the Indians DO resign Sabathia. I think the Indians understand the importance of keeping very good pitching, and they certainly have the revenues and payroll flexibility to add his hefty contract. It is all about the length of the contract and not the per year amount, and the Indians comfort zone is four years. The key may be Johan Santana agreeing to a reported 6 year $137 million deal with the Mets. That deal INCLUDES the 2008 season, which means he essentially got a five year extension, which may be right up the Indians alley. The Indians wanted to try to sign him to four years for around $18-20 million per season, and may now be able to do that if they go an extra year giving him five years like Santana. In the end, I think they sign him to an 6 year $109 million extension with a vesting sixth option for 2014. Get it done Shapiro.

Brian McPeek: Will C.C. stay or go? You have to be kidding me. This isn't hard to follow at all. It's pretty much like how spring leads to summer which leads to fall which is followed by winter before we head back to spring again. There is also a cyclical phenomena for mid market teams. You draft and grow an outstanding young player. You shower said player with more cash and years than other players of his age and ability receive from other clubs. Stud player performs like stud and then enters his contract year. Player makes all kinds of overtures about wanting to stay, front office makes all kinds of promises that all is being done to keep the player. Then player either leaves after the season for a huge contract elsewhere, or is traded for a package of more young players, from whom you hope to develop the next big thing.

In fact, we tend to ask these questions when we're really quite sure of the answer based on past experience. So I will answer a question with a question of my own; which of the Indians big name free agents of the past give you the most confidence that C.C. Sabathia will remain here? Was it Albert Belle? Manny Ramirez? Jim Thome?

I'm not sure why we feel the need to ask this question each time an Indian star reaches the point of free agency. The definition of 'stupid' is to repeatedly do the exact same thing while expecting a different result. The best we can hope for is a pocket full of prospects to walk in the door as C.C. is walking out.

Erik Cassano: I'm going to say "no." Watching Johan Santana reportedly turn down five years and $100 million from the Twins, then get traded to the Mets, is a big reason why.

I can't see the Indians extending themselves much beyond what the Twins offered Santana. If Santana thought he could do better, Sabathia probably will too.

Compounding that problem is the likelihood that Santana will sign an extension with the Mets, making Sabathia the lone prized pony of the 2008 free agent pitching class.

I've long thought that in order to keep Sabathia, the Indians will have to get him signed to an extension prior to free agency. If he hits the open market, where deep-pocketed teams will have the chance to drive the price up, Mark Shapiro won't stand a chance. The Mets effectively taking Santana off the market for next offseason only increases the odds that a high-stakes war will erupt over Sabathia's services next winter. That's a war the Indians can't fight in, let alone win.

There is no getting around it: In order to keep Sabathia, Shapiro must figure out a way to justify to Sabathia that he should leave millions of dollars, and possibly contract years, on the table to stay with the organization that raised him from a pup. It was already going to be a hard sell. With Santana in New York and almost certainly about to rake in a massive contract extension, it might be a darn-near impossible sell now.

Paul Cousineau: Knowing about the success (or lack thereof) of pitchers working under long-term contracts
, I'd offer Sabathia a contract long on dollars, but perhaps shorter on years than the one that Johan Santana is reportedly demanding after being traded to the Mets. I would offer a 4 year, $89M extension with a vesting player option for a 5th year. That would give the Indians 5 more guaranteed years of Sabathia (and bump up his 2008 salary) and keep some flexibility to make sure that Sabathia's 5th year option (which is really 6 years from now) is triggered by something like the Cy Young vote or innings pitched. His contract would break down like this:

2008 - $20M (currently under contract for $11M, so $9M additional)
2009 - $20M
2010 - $20M
2011 - $20M
2012 - $20M
2013 - $20M vesting player option

Would all those numbers look like that? Probably not as there would be some progression of earnings, but you get the idea...it's a giant deal. Some could say that the Indians, small-market team that they are, couldn't afford such an annual salary...until you consider that C.C. and Paul Byrd will be paid a combined $19M in 2008 and Byrd will come off the books after this year, likely to be replaced by a suitable youngster earning a minimum salary. The framework of the Tribe's salary structure affords them the luxury of signing a few big-ticket players (like Hafner and Westbrook, to date) as the majority of the roster is designed to be filled with young, talented players earning well below fair value unless the Indians see a player that they feel is special enough to lock up (see Sizemore, Grady).

It remains entirely possible that Sabathia's people would demand a 5th year guaranteed with a 6th year option as an extension (which would really give Sabathia 6 years of guaranteed money due to him, being under contract already for 2008) which would likely give the Indians pause as Sabathia represents everything that they have strived to do as an organization - to build strong starting pitching from within. Realizing that Sabathia is essentially the poster child for "The Plan" is the moment that would force the Indians to consider the risks associated with guaranteeing the years and associated money to Sabathia versus the reward of (ideally) penciling him in at the top of the rotation until 2013 or 2014.

If he agrees to the 4 guaranteed years and the option, he's already signed. If he demands more than the 5th year guaranteed and stuck to those guns, I would let him walk...as much as it would pain me to see the Hefty Lefty walk away. The 5th year guaranteed with a 6th year option, however, remains the gray area. If the Indians are willing to extend themselves beyond what they call their "comfort zone" and Sabathia's agents are willing to point to the contracts signed by Carlos Zambrano and Roy Oswalt instead of the deal that Johan seems to be in line for, a happy medium could be reached and the Crooked Cap could be a fixture on the North Coast for years to come.

However, if C.C. sees the Santana deal as the harbinger of "what he deserves", the Indians will rightfully let him walk after the year...for better or worse.

Gary Benz: The difficulty in signing Sabathia is not the per year salary, but

instead the length of the contract he'll demand and probably command. Some quick numbers: If Sabathia was making $20 million in 2008 (the generally agreed-upon market rate for someone of his caliber), the Indians payroll would by around $84 million, which only would have put them in the middle of the pack for 2007! In other words, any suggestion that the Indians can't afford his salary will be met with great skepticism.

But Sabathia will be looking for a six or seven year deal, and though he's really had no arm trouble to speak of, he has pitched a lot of innings and it's always difficult to project the impact that will have in the out years of the contract. My personal view is that it's always easier to find a reason not to do something than to do something and Indians GM Mark Shapiro is usually pretty good at finding all kinds of statistics that will tell him that such long term contracts are often a bad deal. And he's probably right, particularly when you consider that if it takes a seven-year commitment to sign Sabathia, he'll be in his 15th big league season at the end of that contract.

That's why, ultimately, it's a tough call as to whether the Indians will resign Sabathia. Should they? Different question. Given the stability that Sabathia can bring to this team in the first several years of a contract seems to make this a risk worth taking, even if the last few years end up having to essentially be written off.

Dennis Nosco: Will the Indians Resign Sabathia? History says no. It says they will get close and then say "We extended ourselves beyond where we ever had before, but in the end, the marketplace was one we couldn't compete with." There is always a glimmer of hope that in a bad economy in Cleveland with an owner who swore he would spend money when the time was right - but hasn't yet - and with a free agent who claims to have already given the Indians a hometown discount that the impossible could happen. But don't count on it.

That being said, if the Indians' offer - and it better be their BEST offer to C.C. - is not accepted by the start of spring training, C.C. Sabathia should be traded immediately. Sorry, folks, but C.C. is worth more to us in trade than if we keep him the entire season and have to settle for a couple of late first round draft picks who, if they mature at a reasonable rate and don't crap out, could help us by 2012 when a good bulk of our current team will have turned over. Plus, when you look at our results in the last seven drafts you have to wonder if it is even worth it to have extra picks.

Our window is now THROUGH 2011 or 2012 and either C.C. is part of that entire window or we need to turn him into players who will be. The great thing is that we know exactly what the trade market is for a Cy Young award-winning lefty strikeout machine who will be a free agent after 2008 (Johan Santana). If we could turn C.C. into Phillip Hughes and Ian Kennedy or Alan Horne I make that trade...if we haven't signed C.C. by the beginning of spring training. Hughes can step in right now and be a quality starter and Horne is a year away and Kennedy about half a year away.

So, no one year shot and a lot of gnashing of teeth when CC goes to a big market. Either sign him now or trade him now. I think it is safe to say after Manny, after Thome, we are all sick of the old college try that came up just short and, of course, after we trade him, if he goes on the free agent market we can (cough!) compete for him next winter.

Todd Dery: This is a question we will be listening to every single day during the season. With Johan Santana being traded to the Mets and subsequent contract extension, C.C. Sabathia will be the #1 attraction on the free agent market. The Indians will try everything they can to sign him before the season, but in the end, his agent, like all agents do, will advise C.C. to enter the free agent market.

When and if that occurs, there is no doubt in my mind that some team will come in and blow C.C. out of the water with a contract proposal the Indians will never be able to match. Why do you think the Twins dealt Johan Santana? It's because they knew they weren't contenders with him and had to make sure they cashed out while they could because they are in a market where they cannot afford a $20 million a year pitcher.

Does that sound familiar to you? If you think the Indians are going to give C.C. $18-20 million for five to seven years, which is something he will command on the open market, you are fooling yourself. The Dolan's have already ponied up to keep Jake Westbrook ($11 million a year) and Travis Hafner ($14 million a year). I just cannot see them paying $43 million for three players in this market.