Now that the Winter Meetings are over and the Indians have addressed what they felt was their biggest need in the bullpen with the acquisitions of Kerry Wood and Joe Smith, the Indians will now make filling the remaining holes on the team (middle-of-the-rotation starter and starting infielder) priorities as the rest of the off-season progresses. In Paul's latest, he talks about teams spending less, and how the Indians may go about addressing their other needs this winter.

Now that the Winter Meetings are over and the Indians have addressed what they felt was their biggest need in the bullpen with the acquisitions of Kerry Wood and Joe Smith, the Indians will now make filling the remaining holes on the team (middle-of-the-rotation starter and starting infielder) priorities as the rest of the off-season progresses. With the $10M committed to Kerry Wood, it would seem that the lion's share of the available money this off-season has ostensibly been spent, but even if there is more money to be spent, perhaps that's not the direction that the Indians should go to fill at least one of the remaining holes as perhaps a more economical avenue may present itself.

In case you haven't heard, spending in MLB may be limited this year as most teams (at least those not moving into new stadiums in the borough of the Bronx that willing to spend the GDP of small countries to add certain pitchers to a rotation) are likely looking to commit fewer guaranteed dollars and over fewer guaranteed years given the state of the nation's economy and it's short-and-long-term future. With that mind-set (allegedly) finding a toehold, it may come at the perfect time for the Indians, seemingly flush with young, affordable players under club control able to contribute at the MLB level to make some moves with their young players to augment their roster without parting with much cash in the process.

Look, I'm not interested in engaging in the argument over spending by the current ownership group, or whether the Dolans'stake in Cablevision has to do with the Indians' payroll as I took off my "Financial Advisor" hat more than a few years ago and am pretty certain that my Series 7 certification (among the others litany of numbered certifications I once held) expired without a peep from me a couple of years back. Also, a couple of people have recently visited our nation's capital in the past few weeks who are saying that they're broke and they do a little more than run an MLB franchise. I'm not sure that I need to go much further on this as, unless you swim in a Scrooge McDuckesque pool or eschew toilet paper for a greener alternative (and I don't mean more environmentally-conscious), we all can see the writing on the wall that fiscal responsibility may be coming back into vogue around the nation, including within it's "pastime".

If you don't think that (most) teams are spending less or re-evaluating the allocation of their guaranteed dollars, how does 3 years, $37M sound for K-Rod from those big-market Met sounds? You know, the team that will play in a stadium named for a company that is receiving billions in federal money.

Is it a little lower than the 5 years and $75M that K-Rod and his agent anticipated on the open market?

Just a bit...and that's for the "marquee" closer on the market.

Now with that scene set, let's get to the crux of the discussion as most teams around baseball seem to be tightening their belts (as are most who cheer for said teams) and creativity in adding players may replace simply buying players to fill a role on a roster. As a result, perhaps the most valuable commodity in baseball is no longer simply cold, hard cash as the number of teams operating like the Indians (which is to say, within certain financial constraints) far outnumber those that don't. As a result, the commodity of young, under-contract-for-the-foreseeable future players has become increasingly important in baseball, even more so than one would think.

The idea being that most teams in baseball don't operate in this "write the check and worry later" environment that has pervaded the FA market in the last few years as teams are more eager to fill out their roster with talent without a huge cash commitment in doing so. While the answer is obvious, who looks more appealing to have on a roster in 2008 - Kelly Shoppach (.865 OPS, $400,000) or Jason Varitek (.672 OPS, $10.5M)?

If cash is king, how does one value the ability to fill out a roster with productive players playing at the league minimum for a number of years? That is, if a baseball team is able to get legitimate contributions from a player who is on the upswing of a career working under the league-minimum contract or a few years away from FA, isn't that a more valuable commodity in the league than simply having buckets of money to commit to players that may be on the downslide of his career at a largely inflated price?

And isn't that how winning teams are built and maintained?

Obviously, this isn't a new strategy as it's folly to think that teams wouldn't love to have a payroll as low as possible with a competitive team on the field year after year, but think about it in terms of the acquisition of players and how it colors the off-season plans of the Indians and the rest of the MLB teams. The Indians seem to be flush with a number of redundancies on their 40-man roster, all of whom fall under the categories of cheap, under-club-control, and (to varying degrees) successful in MLB.

Wouldn't it behoove the Indians, then, to use those commodities to acquire the talent they need to fill the holes that are on the team rather than to simply dump money into a hole on the team and hope for the best? Obviously, the way that the Indians are built is to rely on these same young, affordable players that I'm referring too here, but if the Indians have a overflow of LH starters or catchers, all of whom are under club control for the next few years (at least) and cost little more than the league minimum or an arbitration number, shouldn't they identify which players they want to keep and jettison the flotsam to augment the portions of the

roster most in need of help?

Don't you think that the Mariners were interested in Frank the Tank for more than just his defense? He'll make the league minimum salary this year (probably around $400,000) and can't be a Free Agent until after the 2012 season...so, do you think that acquiring him is preferable to signing a FA like Corey Patterson (who made $3M last year in Cincinnati) or Wily Taveras (who made nearly $2M last year in Colorado), both of whom posted lower OPS than Frank did last year in a comparable number of AB?

Certainly, this justifies the greater point - that the Indians have players that can fill out a MLB roster, perhaps not spectacularly but cheaply and at a level comparable to average MLB production...or in some cases, above it. And that, as evidenced by the Gutierrez deal, is the prudent thing for teams looking to fill holes on their roster without committing outrageous amounts of dollars on the FA market.

Then again, it always does take two to tango to make a deal like this happen. But dancing partners were found in the "Frankie Goes to the Seattle" deal, and you would have to think that the OF moves are done, in terms of dealing from depth. But the Indians still retain some fungible parts that could potentially be moved to a team in need, so long as the exchange fills a hole on the Tribe. The players' affordability in the coming years may be the great attraction for a team looking for players, playing at set (and low) contract numbers and under club control for the next few years.

Now before you think I'm advocating the decimation of organizational depth that seems to have finally been built up, or suggesting that the old "I think we can get Brian Roberts for Garko, Barfield, and Mujica" rationale is sound, know that the unstated (but obvious) factor in this is desirability...much more so than simple affordability and club control. But the Gutierrez trade illustrates perfectly how the Indians should be playing this angle, by dealing young, affordable, under-club-control players at positions of depth to teams in need and

receiving similarly young, affordable, and under-club-control players at positions of need.

As the Indians approach filling their last few needs before Spring Training, playing the cards in their hand may be a smarter play than simply reaching deeper into their pocket - and with most of the "players" at the table sitting on thinner wallets these days, a trade partner shouldn't be too hard to find.