Every year, when the Cleveland Indians conduct their annual salary dump, general manager Mark Shapiro talks about the drawbacks of his team's "mid-market" status. He talks about the need to "maximize resources."

What he doesn't talk about is his inability to do just that. According to numbers from USA Today and Major League Baseball, the Indians are 24th out of 30 teams in maximizing the efficiency oftheir payroll. Meaning that Shapiro isn't doing his job nearly well as most of his counterparts in other major-league cities. As has been pointed out elsewhere on this website, the 2009 contracts of Travis Hafner ($11 million), Jake Westbrook ($10 million) and Kerry Wood ($10 million) aren't helping matters.

At their current pace, the Tribe is en route to winning just 67 games this season with a payroll of about $82 million. That calculates to a cost in payroll of $1.22 million per victory. At that rate, the Indians would need a payroll of about $100 million to go 81-81, and they would need a payroll of about $110 million to hit the 90-victory mark.

Incidentally, the six teams with a lower "payroll efficiency" than the Tribe are the Red Sox, the Astros, the Tigers, the Cubs, the Mets and the Yankees. Of those six, the Red Sox, the Tigers and the Yankees are well on their way to the playoffs -- so even if they've been spending huge wads of money on players, at least their owners (and fans) are getting their money's worth.

Based on the statistics noted in the chart at the end of this article, the most payroll-efficient team in the majors is, not surprisingly, the Florida Marlins. With a payroll of just $37 million

(lowest in MLB), the Marlins are on the way to winning 84 games this season. That calculates out to $440,000 per victory -- about 1/3 less than the Indians.

The chart also provides some proof that you need not have a huge payroll to field a decent baseball team. The Texas Rangers, with a payroll of $14 million less than the Indians, project out to 92 wins this season and a 50-50 chance of making the playoffs. The St. Louis Cardinals, with a payroll of $4 million less than the Indians, project to 88 victories and an even better chance of appearing in the playoffs.

However, it's evident in the bigger picture that there exists an unfortunate tendency for high-payroll teams to dominate the MLB standings (a fact we've all known too long). The Cardinals are the only team with a payroll of less than $100 million to project to the playoffs this season.

It is for this reason that fans and media from all across the middle U.S. have been clamoring for an MLB salary cap for years. Sadly, MLB's decision-making power-brokers reside largely in the East Coast axis of metroplexes. So, as long as the Yankees, Red Sox, Phillies (and, to a lesser extent, the high-profile Los Angeles teams on the West Coast) keep making the playoffs, no changes will ever be considered, much less implemented. You can "take that to the bank," fans.

An Alternative?

Lacking a salary cap, wouldn't it be common sense for MLB to at least try to legislate some kind of parity among teams? Say, for instance, an income-based divisional realignment, so that teams of near-equal payrolls could compete among each other?

Geography wouldn't matter to the high rollers, of course, since their mammoth budgets and profit margins would allow them to travel freely between the two coasts. However, the remaining teams would best be served to be aligned geographically to minimize travel costs. So here's how a realigned divisional set-up might look:

STEINBRENNER (aka "high-roller") DIVISION: New York Yankees, New York Mets, Boston Red Sox, Philadelphia Phillies, Chicago Cubs, Chicago White Sox, Los Angeles Angels, Los Angeles Dodgers.
DOLAN (East) DIVISION: Atlanta Braves, our Cleveland Indians, Toronto Blue Jays, Baltimore Orioles, Washington Nationals, Pittsburgh Pirates, Florida Marlins.
DeWITT (Midwest) DIVISION: Detroit Tigers, Cincinnati Reds, Milwaukee Brewers, St. Louis Cardinals, Houston Astros, Texas Rangers, Minnesota Twins, Tampa Bay Rays.
KAUFFMAN (West) DIVISION: Seattle Mariners, San Francisco Giants, Colorado Rockies, Arizona Diamondbacks, Oakland Athletics, Kansas City Royals, San Diego Padres..

Just spit-balling some ideas here, fans. After all, we can dream, can't we? Anyway, here's the entire "payroll efficiency" chart. Make of it what you will.

PAYROLL EFFICIENCY	PAYROLL (millions)	WINNING PCT.	PROJECTED WINS	$$$ PER WIN (1,000s)
Marlins	$37	51.9	84	$440
Padres	$44	41.0	66	$670
Pirates	$49	43.7	71	$690
Rays	$63	54.8	89	$710
Rangers	$68	56.9	92	$740
Twins	$65	50.0	81	$800
Rockies	$75	54.8	89	$840
Cardinals	$78	54.2	88	$890
Athletics	$62	42.7	69	$900
Giants	$83	54.8	89	$930
Orioles	$67	42.7	69	$970
Dodgers	$100	61.5	100	$1,000
Brewers	$80	49.0	79	$1,010
Blue Jays	$81	48.1	78	$1,040
Reds	$74	43.7	71	$1,040
Diamondbacks	$74	43.3	70	$1,060
Royals	$71	38.8	63	$1,130
Angels	$114	60.8	98	$1,160
White Sox	$96	51.4	83	$1,160
Braves	$97	51.0	83	$1,170
Mariners	$99	51.9	84	$1,180
Phillies	$113	57.8	94	$1,200
Nationals	$60	30.8	50	$1,200
INDIANS	$82	41.3	67	$1,220
Red Sox	$122	59.2	96	$1,270
Astros	$103	49.0	79	$1,300
Tigers	$115	52.9	86	$1,340
Cubs	$135	53.9	87	$1,550
Mets	$149	48.5	79	$1,890
Yankees	$201	59.6	97	$2,070