I think it's pretty safe to say that this week's Winter Meetings figure to be pretty uneventful for the Indians and while the terms "bargain shopping" and "discount bin" figure to be peppered throughout the local coverage of the event in Indianapolis in terms of the Tribe's involvement, haven't we all been expecting all things to be quiet on the North Coast Front this off-season since last July? In today's Lazy Sunday, Paulie C talks about what (not) to expect from the Tribe as the hot stove season begins to heat up.

After a false alarm with a 8 ½ month pregnant DiaBride that made Saturday a little more frantic than usual, how about a nice, quiet Sunday that some would say would even border on...oh, what's that word I'm looking for...Lazy?

That's the one, and with that we're off:

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The trades of Lee and Victor (both with club options for 2010) cemented the fact that the Indians weren't going to be adding payroll in 2010 and since the Winter Meetings usually come down to which team digs deepest into their pocket for players, figuring the Indians to be much more than sideline spectators for the

week's events is simply not plausible. While fans can complain that the Indians should be adding to this team that does have holes, 2010 looks to be the transitional year from the 2005-2009 squads to the team that the organization hopes will contend in 2011 and beyond. Since it represents the beginning of that transition, what the Indians still have on their books for 2010 are the contracts of players that they thought would carry them, or at least contribute mightily, from 2005 to 2009 (or in one or more years in there), with Anthony Castrovince summing that situation up quite nicely:

The Indians opened 2009 with an $81 million payroll. In 2010, that figure figures to be somewhere between $50 million and $60 million. The team already has about $48.5 million tied up into six players -- Travis Hafner ($11.5 million), Jake Westbrook ($11 million), Kerry Wood ($10.5 million), Grady Sizemore ($5.8 million), Fausto Carmona ($5.1 million) and Jhonny Peralta ($4.6 million) -- so there's not much wiggle room here.

Let's look at this math in another way - that's 6 players on the 25-man roster that will eat up $48.5M. Now, let's assume that the other 19 players on the 25-man roster will make the MLB minimum (which is around $400K) or somewhere thereabouts, meaning that the $7.6M (19 x $400K) would be added to the $48.5M number to give the Indians a total payroll to fill out the 25-man of $56.1M...or right between that $50M-$60M figure.

Obviously that's not firm math, but it gives you a pretty good idea of why as AC puts it, "there's not much wiggle room here", particularly if you think that the Indians are more than just one player (and his salary) away from contending. If you're wondering why the Indians can't go out and raise the payroll to come in above that $50M to $60M range, I'll ask this - why SHOULD the Indians spend money in a "rebuilding/reloading/whatever" year, other than in an attempt to spend money for PR purposes?

The Indians made their bed last July and August and basically had an idea of what their 2010 team was going to look like after those trades, so isn't it time to sleep in that bed for a while to see how it feels? Sure there's a wish list this off-season for 2010, but do any of the "needs" look like that one obvious addition that's going to suddenly vault the Indians into contention in 2010?

The Indians would like a RH bat to complement LaPorta at 1B and (though they're not saying it) Hafner at DH...so there's Andy Marte (a RH bat that has played 1B and costs the Indians $400K) still sitting there waiting to resurrect his status as anything other than a prospect bust.

The Indians would like a Utility IF, preferably to be RH, to complement Valbuena at 2B and to serve as some insurance that Donald's injuries linger...so signing Brian Buscher and Luis Rodriguez to Minor League deals is a nice start. No, I'm serious...this belief that the Indians have to find more than a guy like Buscher or Rodriguez (OK, maybe a little bit better than those guys) baffles me. The Indians aren't figuring to contend in 2010, so why shouldn't they wait until everyone else gets signed, bring a bunch of guys in that are Utility IF willing to do Minor-League deals, look at their MLB track record (specifically against LHP if they're supposed to complement Valbuena...and Luis Rodriguez does have a career .745 OPS vs. LHP in 51 MLB at-bats), and let them fight it out for a roster spot with the idea that they're keeping it warm for Donald, assuming he gets healthy?

The Indians would like to add a veteran arm, but as it's already been discussed, does that "right guy" (at a price that's not going to be close to what the team would have owed Lee in 2010) really out there that makes spending money necessary, when it looks like the sheer number of arms available should be able to log the appropriate amount of innings as starters?

Looking at it realistically, is Kevin Millar or Todd Wellemeyer going to make a difference for the 2010 Indians? Rather than making some sort of signing that's not much more than an attempt to mollify a fan base that just HAS to see the Indians spending money (even if it's imprudently), wouldn't it make more sense for the Indians to put any money that they consider spending this off-season in some sort of CD that they can have access to next year when more questions will be answered about club-controlled players and the holes that need to be filled figure to be even more obvious?

If you think about the payroll for 2011, here's what's guaranteed among players currently on the 25-man roster:

Hafner - $13M
Sizemore - $7.667M
Carmona - $6.1M

Yes, there's a $7M option for Peralta in 2011 and that $11M option for Wood that vests if he finishes 55 games this year for the Indians, but neither of those are going to be picked up or vested...so that's it. A couple of guys might be hitting arbitration for the 2011 season (notably Asdrubal and The BLC), so that's a little under $27M that is concretely on the books for 2011 (and spare me the "Trade Hafner" logic unless you have an interested party that would take that contract and could let him be a part-time DH), which means that the time to add dollars to the payroll is not this year, where contention is a hope and a dream, but rather next year, where "wiggle room" does exist and where the available FA (particularly the starters) represent a much deeper pool to dip into.

It seems pretty apparent what the Indians need, but the irresponsibility of paying a player too much in a season during which the Indians aren't thought to contend doesn't make financial sense, particularly considering that there are multiple options on the 40-man (albeit somewhat unappealing in some cases) to fill those "holes" of a RH 1B, a Utility IF, and filling out a rotation going 8 deep into Columbus. Sure, it would be great to add pieces and parts where they're needed, but filling any of those "holes" from outside the organization represent luxuries, not necessities, for the current club.

And that brings it back to the Shoppach deal, in terms of paying too much in a season that the Indians aren't likely to contend for a player that doesn't figure into the team's long-term plans past 2010. In Cleveland, the trade was covered as a bit of a salary dump (which wasn't completely inaccurate) while the move was viewed nationally in an interesting manner, even if you just look at Dave Cameron's thoughts on the deal at Fangraphs.com, as he thinks that Shoppach is a legitimate everyday C whose ideal place in 2010 simply wasn't going to be Cleveland:

"As an arbitration-eligible 30-year-old coming off a mediocre season, and with hot catching prospect Carlos Santana nearly major league ready, the Indians weren't overly attached to Shoppach, so the price in talent was right for the Rays...Catchers who can hit at a league average rate are pretty valuable... The Rays picked up a nice player at something of a discount, as they have been known to do."

There must have been other suitors for Shoppach, even if you're just looking at the fact that the 38-year-old Gregg Zaun signed a 1-year deal with the Brewers

for $2.25M with a club option for 2011 . While we won't know what salary number will be attached to Shoppach's 2010 season for a little bit of time, realize that the Rays had Zaun on their roster at the end of 2009. Rather than bringing Zaun back for 2010, they forfeited a player to acquire Shoppach (8 years younger and possibly just in need of everyday AB again) as they attempt to contend in the brutal AL East. If that's the sequence of events in Tampa, doesn't it make sense to think that there must have been other interested parties in Shoppach, perhaps even the Brewers who signed Zaun to that deal, among others who were listed as possible landing spots for the now-deposed Dionner Navarro
, assuming he's non-tendered?

What does a likely active trade market for Shoppach mean for the PTBNL? It probably means a minor-league arm, but likely someone who represents more than just organizational fodder or a reclamation project. Of course, the logical question after asserting that there was a likely trade market for Shoppach this off-season is to ask if that trade market was diminished for Shoppach after his 2009 season and does the trade come a year too late?

Unquestionably, though kind of a moot point, as this was written before the Winter Meetings last year as one of my items on a Christmas Wish List for the 2009 team :

3) Trade Kelly Shoppach, one other 40-man player (perhaps an OF or an LHP), and two prospects (one from AAA or AA, one from A) for a young, somewhat-established starting pitcher either just entering arbitration or already in arbitration years (Ricky Nolasco, Shawn Marcum, Paul Maholm, Zack Greinke, Josh Johnson, Andy Sonnanstine, and Wandy Rodriguez are the types of pitchers I'm talking about here) and a middle infielder who projects as a Futility Infielder with the idea that he could spend 2009 manning SS in Columbus and move up to Cleveland in 2010 so the Indians aren't forced to spend $3M on the FA for a Utility IF.

Never mind that I grouped Grienke, Johnson, and Rodriguez with Andy Sonnanstine and Paul Maholm (not to mention an injured Shawn Marcum), the idea that the Indians waited too long to deal Shoppach is certainly valid. Just as valid is the opinion that the team mismanaged the consistency of his playing time entering 2009 when he could have played everyday at C (with Victor at 1B) and DH (when Hafner needed a day off with Victor playing C and Garko playing 1B);

but the notion that the Indians "held onto Shoppach" one year too long and traded him AFTER the point of his peak value gets to a difficult situation that the Indians have faced for the past few years.

That situation is holding onto a player past his point of peak value because the Indians have had to strike a delicate balance in the past few years as they attempted to contend (or leap through that window of opportunity) while attempting to manage their assets prudently and trade players at the peak of their value, like Shoppach after his 2008 season or Rocky Betancourt after his 2007 season. After those seasons (just using those two as examples), the Indians should have likely moved both as each season represented what looked to be career years for each and duplication of that success seemed unlikely.

In 2008 and in 2009 however, the Indians thought they were contending for the AL Central, and a reliever like Betancourt and a RH power bat (particularly at C) were luxuries that the Indians felt they could afford in an attempt to contend with the best players they had. When those best-laid plans went awry (both times), the Indians were left holding players with diminished value and with salaries that did not equate to their contributions. Certainly the argument can be made that opportunities were missed to flip a piece that was seen as valuable before that value was diminished, but to ignore the situation in terms of the team attempting to contend is akin to putting blinders on in the analysis of the situation.

That all being said, while the "attempting to contend" idea forced the Indians to perhaps miss opportunities or overpay for the services of players that did not contribute to the success of the 2008 team (in the case of Betancourt) and the 2009 team (in the case of Shoppach), no such pretense should exist this off-season. The Indians are rebuilding (or reloading...I don't really care what you call it) with an eye towards contention in 2011 and beyond. Attempting to fast-track that timeframe is not something that the Indians' Front Office excels in (see Lawton, Matt) and the idea of contending and rebuilding is not something that should be entertained this week in Indianapolis.

Indianapolis is a lovely city with a great downtown and there's no reason that the Indians' brass shouldn't enjoy their time there this week, just as long as they keep their Holiday shopping to the gift stores around Monument Circle and not in their hotel suite for the Winter Meetings.