Maybe because it's in Goodyear, Arizona with its attendant time difference, but doesn't this seem like the quietest spring training in Cleveland Indians' history?

There Indians open the regular season on April 5th and it almost seems like there ought to be another three weeks of spring training left, just to build some excitement. As it is, even with a crazy 16-6 record in the Cactus League, the Indians are maybe the second or third story every day.

Certainly the distance from Cleveland to Arizona vs. Cleveland to Florida has something to do with it. In these parts, people tend to take their winter vacations in Florida. It's almost as if everyone around here knew someone who had been to Vero Beach and took in a few spring training games. That alone helped build some buzz.

But of course it's so much more than that. Even with a new manager in Manny Acta, this team has zero buzz around it. If they come out of the gate roaring, meaning they are playing at least .500 ball at the end of April, I get the sense it won't matter much. It just seems like the average fan fully understands that this team isn't equipped to contend for an entire season and even if it were, the Dolans wouldn't be in a position to finance a late season move to put it over the top.

In more ways than I care to count, the Indians of 2010 are like virtually every Indians team of my

youth, which spans the late ‘60s to the late ‘70s. There are a few players scattered about that are intriguing. But there are far too many players mixed in that would have fit in too well on those past teams to get anyone overly excited.

The key difference, though it won’t make much of a difference on the field, has everything to do with the economic realities of baseball in 2010.

The Indians of 2010 are a far better capitalized team than those teams of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, but in other ways they are far worse off financially. The economics of those years were rather quaint. In the last 15-20 years, the economics of baseball have exploded at a pace far greater than at any other time in baseball and in the process it’s created a nearly untenable situation in which far too many teams struggle to put a competitive team on the field.

Maybe a salary cap fixes that or maybe a better distribution of the wealth among the owners does. But until something is done, major league baseball will continue to teeter on the precipice of financial collapse while operating in a construct in which only a handful of teams have a realistic chance of making their fans happy when October rolls around.

The league simply can’t sustain a business model where the median team payroll is just a little over a third of the highest team payroll. Even if you throw out the Yankees for a moment, in 2009 there still were three teams with payrolls that were $100 million less than the league’s second highest payroll team, the Mets. To give you an idea of how out of whack it is when you throw in the Yankees, those same three teams had payrolls that were around $160 million less. In other words, the Florida Marlins, at a league-low payroll of $37 million, could have fielded 5 separate teams with the same payroll and still have had another $16 million or so in walking around money.

Payroll figures for the ‘60s and ‘70s aren’t readily available, but to give you an idea of the kind of scale and change we’re talking about, look at the earliest year in the USA Today database for which total payroll is available, 1988.

In that year, no surprise, the Yankees had the highest payroll at $18 million. Today that barely even buys you CC Sabathia. The White Sox were the laggards in 1988 at around $6 million. It’s a decent gap between them and the Yankees certainly, but isn’t anything close to the gaps that

now exist.

For further comparison, consider that in 2009, 22 teams had less than half the payroll of the Yankees while in 1988 only 7 teams had half the payroll of the Yankees. If you went back 10 years from that, you're likely to see even less disparities. Indeed, even when you go back just 10 years ago, only 8 teams had half the payroll of the Yankees.

Major league baseball has never seen this as much of a problem or at least as enough of a problem to do anything meaningful about it. But the impact on the fans is significant.

The Indians of the '60s and '70s were undercapitalized because they had lousy, undercapitalized owners that had no money to spend on the team. But even in that paradigm, the differences between the haves and have nots and the salaries of players from team to team were not nearly as dramatic meaning that as much as what kept the Indians uncompetitive was simply the fact that the were lousy at developing players and even worse at trading players.

Right now the Indians are undercapitalized because even though the Dolans aren't particularly rich in comparison to other owners there doesn't exist an economic scenario in which it would be profitable for them to keep the Indians competitive with the Yankees anyway. Given that, in one sense you can't blame the Dolans for keeping tight reigns on the purse strings. What would be the point in loosening them up a little? The team won't be appreciably better anyway and all it will end up doing is taking money out of their own pockets.

Ask yourself if you'd do something different if you were in the Dolans' shoes and if you're being completely honest the answer is a resounding "no." A better funded owner could change much of this but it will take someone who is significantly better funded, someone who literally doesn't care to lose hundreds of millions of dollars. There aren't a whole lot of them kicking around at the moment.

It's a depressing thought certainly and has more than an air of inevitability about it when it comes to the club's fortunes on the field. And while that is all the root cause of why there is no buzz around this team, all the fans really bother to internalize is what they see on the field.

The Indians' lone free agent acquisition of note this past off season was Russell Branyan. The only reason it's even of note is not because Branyan has anything approaching a credible major league career but because his signing marks the return of sorts of a prodigal son.

But even that signing has been nothing short of a disaster thus far. Branyan will start the season on the disabled list with a bad back that he's trying to rehab instead of fix through surgery. Even if/when he comes back, his contributions will be minimal at best.

The hiring of Acta wasn't intended to create a buzz, leaving the only other story line as the young, intriguing players on this team, which is the same story line that generally rotates around minor league teams. It's kind of fun to pay cut right prices in Akron to sit up close and watch potential major leaguers. It's a whole other kind of fun to pay major league prices to sit far away and essentially watch the same thing.

The opening of the major league season used to hold so much promise. In a way it still does, except the promise that it now holds isn't one of hope but one of resignation.