Since the Indians are finishing up their only series in Beantown and with “The Little Injuns That Could” taking aim at the Red Sox, now might be the perfect time to examine an emerging trend in MLB these days. While you’re probably thinking that the obvious “trend” is the dichotomy of the MLB payroll structure (though I think that we’re all aware of the disparity between the “haves” and the “have-nots” and a refresher course is not needed), a new culture is emerging as a trickle-down effect from the way that MLB payrolls exist as it pertains to the people who are supposed to matter (even if they rarely do) in baseball – the fans.

While the obnoxiousness and boorishness of fans of certain teams is both well-known and justified, it would seem that the recent successes of those teams has created an enhanced sense of entitlement (if that enhancement is even possible) when it comes to expectations for a particular fanbase and the manner in which the disparity of baseball economics has pervaded the fan culture to a degree that fans of certain teams simply expect a playoff berth and a look at the World Series, by virtue of simply who they root for. This is brought up in response to a piece that you may or may not have seen by now as it does come via the Worldwide Leader (which is a 4-letter word in Cleveland these days) and from Bill Simmons as he attempts to determine why the Red Sox team in 2010 is so “boring” and why their TV ratings are down 35% (the Indians are down 4.9% from 2009…and be sure to click that fascinating link) in a town that has been historically behind their baseball team, through good and bad.

The entire piece is worth a read as Simmons is a skilled writer, even when he’s working on flawed premises, as he ultimately comes to the conclusion that the Red Sox are “a boring team during a fairly boring season”. He goes into great detail to break down how the Red Sox got to be where they are (3rd place in the AL East with fan interest waning), citing injuries (10% of the problem), Front Office Paralysis/Inadequacies (5%), “The Hangover” (15%), “The Bandwagon Effect” (5%), “The Steroid Era Hangover” (5%), the decline of baseball in general (5%), and the time of games (55%) as the culprits.

First, let’s dismiss the final (and biggest, according to Simmons) factor as the debate over the

length of the games has already played out publicly with Joe West, every Yankee, and every Red Sox player being involved in the lunacy that is the length of particular (umm…Yankee v. Red Sox) games. Interestingly, the time of games were for the first three games of the Indians-Red Sox series have been 3:18, 2:41, and 3:07, with two of those games being interrupted by a horrifying injury and by Josh Beckett's complete lack of worth as a person.

Games go for 3 hours...if the Twitter/TMZ/BlackBerry world that we now live in where a snark in the form of snippet has taken the place of wit and depth in analysis and appreciation, well...yeah, maybe then baseball is ill-suited for the next century. But as a person who enjoys the pace of a game and enjoys the small things that happen within those three hours (and maybe I'm in the minority), I'm going to dismiss Simmons' main culprit outright and get to the lunacy of his complaints about the current incarnation of the Red Sox.

First, let's get it out there that Simmons is complaining about a team that is 61-47 and is currently sitting on the 8th best record in MLB, a team with the second most runs scored in MLB…THIS is the team that Simmons finds nearly unwatchable. Of course, the argument goes that with all of the advantages at their disposal, the Red Sox should be sitting on a record that should be better than the 8th best in MLB, but doesn't that simply provide evidence that Red Sox fans have developed this overwhelming sense of entitlement en route to becoming more overbearing and arrogant than even Yankee fans that we're about to get into?

He cites "injuries" as a major factor in the team being "boring", while ignoring that every team goes through periods of losing their major cogs to the DL. Unquestionably, the Red Sox have been hit hard by injuries this year with Ellsbury, PEDroia, Victor, Cameron, and Beckett (with Youkilis joining that list this week) spending significant time on the shelf. But forgive me if I have trouble finding my violin to play Boston as the Indians' 2010 season has been a veritable MASH unit (with the most recent patient coming at the expense of a Ryan Kalish "slide" into another person's knee) with Sizemore, Choo, and Cabrera spending just as significant amounts of time on the DL on a team that was ill-equipped (unlike the Red Sox) to absorb the loss of any of them, much less all of them. To go further on that, the beginning of the 2008 Tribe season was undone (in some part) by injuries to Victor and Hafner, with the absence of those two players playing a role in the precipitious fall from contention that has happened in Cleveland since 2007. Injuries happen to every team every season and complaining about them is one of the lowest forms of discourse in baseball conversations.

What is so interesting about Simmons citing those injuries however leads to some of his other points as the Red Sox lost Ellsbury, PEDroia, Victor, Cameron, and Beckett...but currently employ a roster that makes $168M. Simmons counts "Front Office Paralysis/Inadequacies" as a major factor and one of the reasons that the team hasn't been able to overcome injuries, but let's look at the salaries for Red Sox players signed or acquired THIS off-season only:
Lackey - $18M
Beltre - $9M
Cameron - $7.25M
Scutaro - $5M
Wakefield - $3.5M (extension)
That doesn't include the Beckett extension (4-years, $68M that kicks in next year), Papelbon's

$9.35M salary to avoid arbitration nor does it do justice to the fact that the Red Sox will pay Beckett, Lackey, Lester, Wakefield, and Dice-K a COMBINED $45.5M for 2010, while the Indians' 2010 total payroll to start the year was $61M.

Certainly, there is some flotsam and jetsam among that $168M (with Rob Neyer suggesting that the Red Sox cut ties with Dice-K), but all that you need to know about the Red Sox finances is that they are paying Julio Lugo $9.25M this year to NOT play for the Red Sox this year and still "found" $5M to pay Scutaro to play where Lugo was supposed to.

Has the Red Sox Front Office made mistakes?
Sure as no team is flawless, but unlike the situation in 26 or so other markets, those mistakes can be made up by essentially throwing money at the problem. Additionally, Simmons takes this argument further saying that the Red Sox farm system has been a disappointment as of late, not realizing that the farm system netted them Jason Bay and Victor Martinez (most notably) by turning the currency of young, under-club-control talent that is so valuable to teams that are not in a similar financial situation to the Red Sox into those veteran assets. He complains about a disappointing farm system, going so far as to say that:
ESPN's Keith Law had Boston ranked as his No. 2 farm system in February. When I e-mailed him for a July update, he wrote back that many of its top guys were underperforming and added, "They're not No. 2 anymore. Definitely still top-10." I'm not pumping my fist.

61-47 with their two top pitchers being 24 years old and 25 years old with nearly all of their young talent tied in through the 2013 season (more on that in a minute) AND a top-10 farm system...that merits a "yeah, I'm not pumping my fist"?

Excuse us down here, but small-market teams dream of a top-10 farm system that Keith Law rated as the #2 farm system in February because it gives the allure of what could be. At this point, Simmons and Red Sox fans like him not only want immediate gratification, but also the swagger from knowing that they have the best young talent BELOW the MLB level. Perhaps Simmons doesn't speak for the fabricated entity that is "Red Sox Nation", but it sounds as if he wants to have his cake and eat it too...all while the smell of more cake cooking in the oven fills his senses with more comfort.

As for the talent already at the MLB level, Simmons makes this statement to back up his theory that the team lacks star power, that the team (on pace for 91 wins with the second most runs in baseball to date) has been lacking that "must-see" feel to it:
…You can't expect a nine-figure baseball team to capture the daily imagination of a big market without a player who passes the Remote Control Test (when you don't flip channels because you know Player X is coming up) or the We Can't Go Get Food Yet Test (when you don't make a food/drink run at a game because Player X is coming up) or even the Every Five Nights, I Know What I'm Doing Test (when you have a transcendent pitcher who keeps you in front of the television every five days).
I like Pedroia. I like Kevin Youkilis. Clay Buchholz has been a revelation this year. I really, really like Lester, my favorite current player (and someone quietly enjoying a monster season) mainly for everything he's been through. But none of them passes the above tests.

Just to put that in perspective, let's just take a look at the 4 players (while omitting the bias that some of them project to be largely detestable as personalities) that Simmons specifically references as essentially being non-compelling baseball players:
Pedroia is a 26-year-old former MVP (though any BBWAA award is largely ceremonial and widely ridiculed) who plays a middle infield position and has posted a cumulative OPS of .843 since 2007. To this point in his career, he has the 6th highest OPS (.831) among players who played primarily 2B with more than 2,000 plate appearances
and he's under contract through 2015 (when he'll be 32) for a total of $48M, with the final year of his deal being a club option.

Youkilis is a 31-year-old (yeah, really) hitter who plays wherever the Red Sox ask him to play on the field and is currently 5th in MLB in OPS (.975) after finishing 5th in OPS in 2009 (.981) and 12th in OPS in 2008 (.958). While he may not be that "must-see" player that Simmons talks about, only Joey Votto currently ranks ahead of Youkilis in OPS this year AND also outpaced him last year in OPS. Oh, and he's signed through the 2013 season for a total of $37M.

Buchholz is a 24-year-old RHP with a 2.59 ERA (2nd in the AL behind CP Lee) and a 1.23 WHIP in this season (his first full one in which he's remained in the Red Sox rotation) and is under club control through the 2014 season, not even being eligible for arbitration until after next season.

Lester is a 25-year-old LHP with an ERA of 3.07, a WHIP of 1.16, and who has struck out more than a batter an inning this year, his 3rd full season in MLB, and is signed through the 2014 season for a total cost of $38M.

This isn't to point out how MARVELOUS the Red Sox are (trust me, I'd avoid that proclamation at all cost if I could), but rather to point out that the four players that Simmons specifically mentions are essentially two of the best (and most consistent) position players in the game (as much as I have to choke down bile to admit that) and two of the youngest, most accomplished pitchers currently plying their craft in MLB.

And these are the players that he's lukewarm enough on to say that he "likes" them...but that they're really not all that exciting.

Maybe Simmons speaks for the majority of the fans in New England…but if he does, the sense of entitlement is jarring and makes me wonder if we're we all waiting for Youkilis to pull a Maximus and glare around Fenway Park screaming "are you not entertained?"

The Red Sox Front Office does a lot of things correctly with more than a few "hits" in the past 5 years or so, with the benefit of a large margin of error to make up for the "misses". In constructing the team, they have one of the better cores of young talent as some could argue that Lester, Buchholz, Youkilis, and PEDroia (all grown by the organization) are the Red Sox equivalent of the Yankees' core of four that has received so much press this year, but because they don't have that "look at me" talent, the team is not compelling. Or at least that's how this rationale seems to go...

Here's the first problem with all of this (and there are a few), in that that it's a widely accepted belief among fans of these teams that they SHOULD contend, simply because of who they are and where they feel they sit in the pecking order of MLB. The idea that making the playoffs is a birthright is already pervasive in the Bronx...and is actually becoming widely accepted as such around the country, and the sentiment is not far off in Philadelphia. So at what point do the large market teams evolve to such a point where the assumption is universal that they're supposed to be in the playoffs year after year, leaving the scraps of the Wild Card or the "lesser divsions" to teams with lower payrolls and expectations?

You can talk you like about success begetting success or about how expectations have been rightfully raised, but the impetus for this piece is to explore why the ratings for the Red Sox are down 35% and, while I'm not sure that Simmons speaks for the deplorable entity that is (trademarked) Red Sox Nation, is there any doubt that the Red Sox Front Office and owners are aware of this type of sentiment is out there and is reflected?

If you don't believe that the owners of the Red Sox are wildly aware of this, watch how hard they go after Adrian Gonzalez or Prince Fielder with their prospects or Carlos Pena, Carl Crawford, Adam Dunn, or even (dare I say) Cliff Lee with their pocketbook. Or how they attempt to stack their bullpen (and they apparently inquired about Justin Masterson's availability last week) via FA and trade in an attempt to improve their standing in the AL East as well as in the eyes of their fans.

If you don't think that will happen quickly, remember that the Yankees have finished below 2nd in the AL East once since 1993(!), when they finished 3rd in 2008. Not sure if you remember the next off-season when the Yankees ostensibly bought themselves the 2009 World Series title...but that may be in line for a Red Sox team that is on pace for a 91-71 season, which (it should be noted) would be a win total that they bested ONCE from 1980 to 1997.

Yet times have changed in Boston and (getting back to Simmons' culprits) since I don't really care about "The Bandwagon Effect" in Boston (as the Tribe's Bandwagon has remained largely empty since 2001…yes, even in 2007) or the steroid factor, let's get into the most absurd aspect of Simmons' argument – that the Red Sox aren't compelling to the citizens of New England because the 2004 and 2007 World Series banner for Boston has affected the fan base's thirst for a title, with Simmons asking himself, "Do I care as much as I did? I think about this question constantly. The short answer? No. It can't mean as much. It will never mean as much."
He goes through this rationale in a section of the piece under the heading of "The Hangover".

Um…you want a hangover?
How about a painful, constant pit-in-the-stomach that makes your teeth hurt type of hangover caused by a stretch of watching your baseball team devolve from the best young team in MLB with a seemingly limitless future to seeing a roster completely pared down because of the economic realities within MLB, the personal agendas of certain players, and a team taken down by...wait for it...injuries and Front Office Paralysis/Inadequacies, the very things that have apparently "felled" the 2010 Sawx.

Sorry Red Sox fans, you don't get to complain about a "hangover" because the cause of your

hangover was actually a celebration while the hungover that's felt in Cleveland is akin to the day after somebody stealthily slips shots of vodka into your beer at the bar while nobody's looking. As a net result, you feel awful and there's no great memory of much of anything, much less of a good time.
Yeah, that's what it has felt like since the beginning of 2008 for Tribe fans, getting vodka-beered...

If you want to talk "hangover" since 2007, the Red Sox are 251-181 (.581 winning percentage) since the beginning of the 2008 season with two playoff berths and have lost nary a player that they wanted to keep (they didn't want to keep Bay), while their 2007 ALCS opponent Indians are 192-240 (.444 winning percentage) over that same timeframe, with 80% of their 2007 rotation gone, all but two of their 2007 relievers gone, and the only position players from that 2007 Tribe team remaining being Cabrera, Sizemore (injured), and Hafner (injured). Sure, Choo was around (but not on the roster) and Rafael Perez, Jensen Lewis, and Aaron Laffey (injured) were able contributors to that 2007 playoff push, but pardon me if I scoff at the notion that the Red Sox are feeling the same level of "hangover" that we've been subjected to in Cleveland over the last 2+ years.

In his section, he asserts the notion that Red Sox fans are no longer equating the success or failure of their team to life-and-death, leading to the decrease in interest and, ultimately, TV ratings. If we're going with this life-and-death analogy to a fanbase, but how about the life-and-death of a franchise and of an organization, dropped to its knees once again by baseball's dichotomy, attempting to open that window of contention after feeling it slam on the neck of an organization and a city that thought that it was crawling through?

While the interest is apparently waning in Boston because of this growing sense of entitlement and because the Red Sox are "underachieving" on their way to another 90-win season – but a 3rd place finish in the AL East – the majority of teams in baseball dream of a 90-win season or of putting together a stretch of even 3 to 5 competitive seasons together.

Not in Boston though, where the cries of "I'm not watching a 3rd place team" and "there are no interesting players to watch" echo through the city. As a result, the differences from the "haves" and the "have nots" in MLB trickle down to their fanbases in an era in which the deepening chasm between teams (and fans) that feel that they will win because of who they are and teams (and fans) who feel that they MAY win every so often if everything falls into place is only getting deeper.

While the crying from the top of the mountain only figures to get louder in places like Boston, it will fall on deaf ears in places like Cleveland, where the cries are real...and justified.