While most of the North Coast spent Saturday night debating whether to make Peyton Hillis their 1st or 2nd Round Pick in their Fantasy Draft, the scene on the Reservation was decidedly more hectic as we tended to two sick boys and, while my rank in who the boys want to see when sick ranks well below Big Bird or any other fictitious character, my time wasn't completely wasted as I took the opportunity to explore what paperwork needs to be filed to nominate The DiaBride for sainthood. After realizing that it is not an easy process, I figured that sending her off to the Outlet Mall with carte blanche and an instruction to buy anything that she wants is enough to keep my end up of this matrimonial/parental arrangement.

Nevertheless, with the boys on the mend and with the Indians threatening to…wait for it…pull out of last place thanks to Asdrubal Cabrera and a bunch of pile-jumpers, let's get off on a Lazy One while "Cars" has the undivided attention of four very forlorn eyes that currently occupy my house.

And with that, we're off…
In case you missed it, GM-in-waiting (in name only, as he's been the GM for about a month now) Chris Antonetti sat down with Pat McManaman, formerly of the ABJ and now with AOL Fanhouse , to talk about minimizing the "window of transition" and numerous other bits of rhetoric that we've heard for some time now. The interview definitely has some interesting points and is well-worth the read, although the responses could have come from any number of occupants in the current Tribe Front Office, or the Polo Shirt Mafia (or LaCoste Nostra, if you prefer), where the vocabulary, the diction, and the talking points must come out in some sort of morning memo with afternoon practice to sound alike. If large words and circular explanations annoy you, it might be best to avoid it, although the logic and merit is not lacking in what Antonetti has to say.

Regardless, it is worth reading (even if it will raise your blood pressure), if only to see how Antonetti answers some excellent and very pertinent questions by McManaman, even if the answers are things that we've heard before and lack depth. Contained within the interview, there is one line of questioning that McManaman attempts multiple times that has to do with how quickly the Indians have been torn down as he poses the question multiple times in various forms. Given what 2010 has evolved into, with 3 positions contributing a WAR higher than 1.0 and how far away 2007 seems on certain days, the multiple questions and responses represented the most compelling part of the Q & A, to me at least:
FH: I guess what I'm saying is if you keep some guys longer rather than get rid of them sooner, and that is my phrasing, you could be .500 and in this division you could be within range in September and drawing more people.

CA: *But those guys were free agents at the end of the year. Those guys we wouldn't have been able to retain for the following year. CC Sabathia no matter what ... We made an earnest effort to extend CC at different junctures in the past while he was still under his last contract. We weren't able to align values. I think it became clear to us at that point with the way things were playing that he was going to become a free agent at the end of the year. We aren't going to win bidding wars with the Yankees' or Red Sox' primary target. Or large markets. If it's a primary target for a large market in the free agent period, or candidly even on a trade scenario, that's not the best places for us to compete.*

The one thing that's important to note is we want to be in the position and have the team to warrant acquiring guys that are in the last year (of their contracts). We want to be on the other end of these trades. If we had the team we envisioned in 2008 and we were competitive, we would have played it out with CC and Casey. We would have been perfectly happy. That would have been a great outcome for us.

Same thing had we been competitive this year and a contending team this year, we wouldn't have traded Jake Westbrook even though he was at the end of his contract.

I think that's the same thing we look to going forward. Just because a player is in the last year of his deal it doesn't mean we necessarily have to trade him. If we have a competitive team and that player is a productive player contributing to our competitiveness, it's a great scenario for us to keep him. It's more when we have the years that don't go as we've expected or where we're not as competitive as we want to be, that's where we have to make the difficult decisions. That's where there's a little bit of a difference in our market vs. some other markets.

It is interesting the way that Antonetti references specifically dealing Sabathia and how the team was not in a position to contend when he was dealt (and please let's all remember that the team was 37-51 when CC was traded, so it isn't as if that team was justifying him staying with their play), but specifically mentions only CC and Casey Blake in this explanation of how players were dealt in the FA years, avoiding the fact that Lee and Martinez were dealt the following year with 1 ½ years on their deals. Of course, the performance of that 2009 team (with Lee and Victor on the team) did nothing to justify keeping Clifton Phifer or El Capitan around for the remainder of the 2009 season, while the issue as to why they were dealt, essentially punting on the 2010 season, remains a bit of a mystery. In other words, it is still not known whether the decision to trade Cliff and Vic came about as a result of an ownership mandate or simply from the Front Office asking serious questions about the club, as it existed in July of 2009, and concluding that the team wouldn't contend in 2010, without or without those two players.

Regardless, McManaman goes back to the well of performance and frames it as it relates to attendance, putting forth the idea that the two are intrinsically related and gets back to the idea that the organization should be concerned about yearly performance, in that it feeds interest, optimism, and attendance,and conversely so...using the "death spiral" idea:
FH: That gets back to the spiral question. It just seems like – and there are reasons why the revenues are what they are and there are reasons why the expenses are what they are – but it seems like one feeds the other and it leads to a spiral.

CA: *In order to reverse the course, we need to first transition and develop a strong nucleus of players to build around. Once we have that nucleus in place, we can then look to strategically add to it through external sources. The Dolans (the Indians' owners) have demonstrated in the past that they are willing to provide the resources necessary to add to the core group of guys and we anticipate we will again be able to do that at the appropriate time.*

Think back to Kerry Wood. We thought going into 2009 that we had a good team and had the nucleus in place to be a competitive team. We went in and invested in Kerry Wood thinking that a strong closer may have been the difference for us. In the end it wasn't, but the Dolans demonstrated that they are willing to invest in the team when the talent has dictated it. I have no reason to think that we will operate any differently moving forward.

This is something that has been discussed ad nauseum on the North Coast, but it is important to frame the discussion in the context of the economics of baseball as teams can be built in various forms, with most teams in markets similar in size to Cleveland not really having the opportunity to simply build through Free Agency and attempting to build through the draft and international signings, with astute trades bringing in more talent, with the complement of veteran talent filling in the gaps once (or if, in some cases) that young talent matures, congeals, and begins to win.

If you think back to the early 90's, the Indians drafted well (Belle, Ramirez, Thome, Nagy, etc.), made astute trades (Alomar, Baerga, Lofton, etc.), and complemented their young talent with veterans (Murray, Hershiser, El Presidente, Williams, Fryman, Robbie, etc.) until the core group had aged and departed, as the Indians were left with the ancillary pieces who could not win on their own, although that transition took the team into the next decade.

In the early 2000's, the Indians acquired young talent through the draft and internationally (CC, Victor, Peralta, etc.) made astute trades (Sizemore, Lee, Westbrook, Cabrera, Choo, etc.) and filled in the gaps with veterans (Millwood, Byrd, Borowski, etc.) until Free Agency, injuries, and regressions reared their ugly head (in short order), prompting the decision of the Front Office to tear it down and attempt to build it all back up once again.

Now, entering a new decade, they've assembled some players via the draft and internationally (Chisenhall, White, Weglarz, Kipnis, etc.), have accumulated young players via trade (Santana, LaPorta, Brantley, Perez, Donald, Carrasco, Knapp, Masterson, Hagadone, Price, etc.) and have yet to see that talent do much of anything by way of maturing and congealing as they certainly haven't started to win.

While this is all fairly rudimentary, the disconnect for most fans, particularly in the context of the last two years, comes from the fact that the success from the mid-1990's was not fleeting and was sustained through the arrival of talent from the Minors, as well as the Indians operating in a different financial reality than the one that exists today. The issue that most fans have is that they look at the team today and wonder how things fell so far so fast as the build-up that took place from 2002 to 2004 was supposed to provide the Indians with the pieces for a contender at the MLB level, but also with the support throughout the system to sustain that success…as sustenance that never took root.

If there is one main failure of this current Indians' regime (and remember, I'm saying "main"), it is that the promise of the Indians maintaining a core and augmenting it from within simply fell apart (for a variety of reasons) and the Indians fell hard and fell fast back to being among the mediocre (and now sub-mediocre) teams in MLB. If you look at the timeline of the attempts by the organization to fill particular holes (and Andrew Humphries and Tyler Chirdon start to do that for 2B over at LGT in the first of two parts), you start to see how the best-laid plans went awry before more best-laid plans went awry before…well, you get the idea.

Regardless, there are a variety of reasons for that as players headed for FA (namely Sabathia) and SEVERE regressions from supposed "core" players (notably Carmona and Hafner) as well as injuries (a variety to Victor and a complete loss of Westbrook) was exacerbated by the organization's inability to produce their own stable of players, even those who would only be complementary pieces.

That inability is something that is well-known and is quite absurd if you figure that the EVERY SINGLE POSITION next year could very well be filled by a player acquired via trade (Santana, LaPorta, Donald, Fill in a 3B, Choo, Brantley, Sizemore, and Hafner), but let's get back to this line of questioning that McManaman continues to go back to, in terms of keeping the team together in an effort to maintain fan interest and to perhaps get a look at the divisional lead by hanging around the .500 mark for much of the season.

Looking past the fact that neither the 2008 or 2009 teams came close to hanging around .500 into August, it brings up a more pertinent question, one which should be raised to the crowd that feels that the 2007 team was torn apart prematurely. McManaman seems to intimate is the better course of action would be for the Indians to try to ride out the storm year after year if they would (as he says), "keep some guys longer rather than get rid of them sooner, and that is my phrasing, you could be .500 and in this division you could be within range in September and drawing more people."

However, which would you rather see, a team that flirts with .500 every year with an outside shot at making the playoffs (during which they' be bounced in the first round) or a team that is built to compete with the "haves" of MLB when (actually "if") they're able to make it to the playoffs?

Just to go jump into the way back machine, look at the Opening Day lineup for the Indians in 2008 (when they were picked by many to go to the World Series) and tell me which players are truly missed here. Sabathia and Martinez, right?

Factor in what Santana's production figures to be and that Sabathia (and Lee) weren't sticking around, and what was the alternative for the Indians when the die was cast in 2008 and 2009?

Because of their own player development deficiencies, the Indians tore it down and cut it to the bone while attempting to re-stock a farm system that had proven to be wildly overrated and bereft of impact players. Could they have attempted to re-tool on the fly and be "within range"

with the mix of players that were left?

Sure, but what guarantee do the Indians have of success with that group and, given their own player development deficiencies (which is the real issue here, not the trades), should the Indians have attempted to be "within range", so they could win a AL Central pennant only to be bounced in the first round of the playoffs?

Let me put this in tangible terms as the Twins have made the playoffs 5 times since 2002 and yet have not made it to the ALCS since they won the World Series in 1991 while the Indians have made the playoffs once since 2001, but have more playoff series wins than the Twins in that timeframe. Granted, it's merely one playoff series win against zero and given what we've seen this year, it's hard not to dream of a .500 team or a pennant race but isn't chasing mediocrity or that chance to "be within range" what gets small-market teams into trouble in the first place?

For as much as everyone is up in arms regarding the Pirates "pocketing" money, at least they're not spending money any more on what Shawn Hoffman of Baseball Prospectus calls "ridiculous (but media-appeasing, at the time) contracts for Kevin Young, Jason Kendall, Pat Meares, Derek Bell, et al." and are investing in building a team the only way that a team in a market that is their size can be built into a winner – from within.

To that end, here is a marvelous piece from Slate that throws the idea that the Pirates should be spending every last penny (and more) in an effort to win under the bus and offers this conclusion in terms of how baseball economics work for small-market teams.
Before throwing up the quote that I found to be most pertinent, I would encourage you to read it in its entirety…I'll wait…

Got it?
OK, here's where the interest comes in as it relates to other small-market teams:
How can you be so successful while spending so little money? Basically, you have to rely on young, cheap players. The Pirates appear to be moving in this direction; they have a significant minor league player development budget, and they don't appear to be shy about spending money to sign their draft picks.
A little luck helps, too. Statistically, in any given season, one out of every six teams will be lucky enough to exceed its talent level by six wins or more. And one team per season, on average, will exceed its talent by as many as 11 wins. (Admittedly, if you're waiting for that team to be yours … well, it could take a while.)
So if you're a little bit smart, and very, very lucky, you could wind up with a few young, cheap players that could lead you to a playoff berth. But it would seem that for small-market teams like Tampa Bay and Pittsburgh, established stars cost too much to pay for themselves.
It would be nice for the fans if the Pirates were willing to lose millions of dollars in order to bring a competitive team to their loyal supporters. But even superrich owners are looking for some kind of return on their investment. In the end, the Pirates can spend a lot of money on player salaries, or they can turn a profit. They can't do both.

Just to re-iterate, the whole piece is worth a read, if only as it attempts to put the money issue

into perspective while taking the logical angle of wins versus losses against a backdrop of spending. Read that line again above that, “if you’re a little bit smart, and very, very lucky, you could wind up with a few young, cheap players that could lead you to a playoff berth”...and think about 2007. This is not rocket science, but knowing that to be the strategy and employing it effectively are two entirely different things, as every team has that blueprint, but few are able to see it come to fruition with much regularity.

If you don’t think that luck plays a role here, realize that the Nationals (the “feel-good” story of the first half) are about to see Strasburg go in for Tommy John as he will likely miss all of 2011 ($2.5M salary) and could miss part of 2012 ($3M salary) before he enters his arbitration years (2014-2016) as a National while Adam Dunn figures to leave in Free Agency. For as much as the Nationals seemed to have their fortunes turning, the effect of these types of events are simply too much for nearly all of MLB to overcome as they attempt to build a consistent winner…or even an inconsistent winner.

Go back to that piece from Slate piece and realize that the Indians are attempting to once again “rely on young, cheap players” and are attempting to take “luck” out of the equation as much as possible by simply loading as much similarly-aged talent up as possible to factor in attrition and injury and ineffectiveness.

When the Indians realized that the “core” of players that they thought they would rely on into the 2010’s had turned into a bit of a rotting “core”, they moved decisively to turn that page. There’s a lot that can be said about the Indians' Front Office since the end of the 2007, but indecisiveness is not something that remains in question after the past couple of years. Perhaps at times that decisiveness comes at the expense of taking the best path, but this Front Office has (once again) made their bed, so they’re the ones that are going to be lying in it as they attempt to finally augment the talent that they’ve brought in via trades with the talent that they HOPE will come from internal avenues, the recent draft being one of them.

On that most recent draft, MLB Trade Rumors had a piece that identified the Indians as one of the “big spenders” in the draft , with Brad Grant comments to MLBTR explaining the Indians’ draft strategy thusly:
“A year ago we sat down and decided that we wanted to be aggressive in the draft and try to add as much talent as we possibly could,” Indians amateur scouting director Brad Grant said. “Knowing that where we are right now as a major league organization, we need to infuse as much talent into our organization as possible.”
At that point, the Indians didn’t know they’d end up drafting Drew Pomeranz, their eventual first-round selection. They ranked potential picks based on talent, with players’ demands in mind - but only to an extent.
“We were ready to react,” Grant said. “We knew the players that we liked. We had a breakdown solely by ability and we tried to take the player we liked best.”
The Indians are prepared to spend on elite amateurs because they aren’t able to spend on elite pros.
“Especially with our market, we can’t afford to sign some of the higher-end major league free agents,” Grant said. “That gets out of our spectrum, so the best way to infuse talent into our organization is to acquire it, whether that be through the draft, whether that be through

international signings, whether that be through trades, those are routes we have to take in order to acquire top talent."

Again, these words sound like they could have come out of any number of mouths from the Indians' Front Office (while likely wearing a Polo Shirt), but there is no gray area as to how the Indians feel they need to build this team back up again. While some teams attempt to live in that middle ground to "hang around there" and perhaps "get a look" at the division, the Indians are going back to their blueprint of building from within and through trades with the idea that they will eventually supplement that to-be-determined new "core" with veterans (whose usefulness and price tag would be related to how close/far away the team is from contention) and attempt to fortify with re-inforcements from within.

The blueprint has been attempted before and fell apart as quickly as it seemed to take hold as the major factor to sustain that competitiveness (the continued player development) forced the organization to make hard decisions and tear down the team that had just been built. If the first stage of any construction job involves following the blueprint and laying the foundation, the Indians find themselves in that first stage once again.

Hopefully, the blueprint will be followed through to completion this time and won't have a half-finished entity torn down prematurely because of structural deficiencies or because of faulty assumptions made when executing those blueprints.