As most of the North Coast tries to find a shipping address for the flower arrangement that they'd like to send to Jacory Harris while wondering whether the Browns can put any kind of pressure on Josh Freeman, the Indians' season rolls on in earnest…if anonymity, as they attempt to win 5 more games (among their last 20) in the season to avoid the 100-loss mark. If you're surprised that those are the kinds of "goals" being set for the team…well, you haven't been paying attention (and perhaps rightfully so) and have focused on wins and losses instead of what really matters down the stretch here – and that would be gaining momentum into 2011.

To that end, if you'll remember how important Carmona, Masterson, and Carrasco are to the future of the team, here are the recent numbers for each…with the Small Sample Size siren blaring:
Carmona – 0.53 ERA, 0.76 WHIP, .390 OPS against, 13 K, 6 BB in 17 IP over 2 starts
Masterson – 2.95 ERA, 1.34 WHIP, .682 OPS against, 29 K, 20 BB in 42 2/3 IP over 7 starts
Carrasco – 2.18 ERA, 1.11 WHIP, .706 OPS against, 14 K, 6 BB in 20 2/3 IP over 3 starts

That's obviously cherry-picking (which is easy to do this time of year, but it's all we have for guys like Carrasco) and nothing new, if you'll remember the piece from earlier this week (and Terry Pluto hits on it a little bit today
), but we know what we'd like to see out of that trio coming down the stretch and, frankly, recently we've seen it. None of this is "new" news and what's been happening on the field for the Tribe is actually going to take a backseat today in light of what's happening with some former Tribe players whose current contracts (originally signed as Indians) are on the verge of expiring.

And with that (and the promise that I'll compare the countering opinions Paul Hoynes and Joe Posnanski here in a little bit…in the first time those two names appear in the same sentence), we're off on a Lazy One…

By "former Tribe players" with current contracts expiring, obviously this is going to be a bit of a glimpse into what's happening with Victor and Clifton Phifer and, while that topic is akin to taking another couple of swipes at that horse that they're preparing a grave for, the context of what those two players are looking for in FA and the Indians' roster with and without those two

players is where I'd like to put the focus today.

Particularly relevant is the recent news that the Red Sox put in their initial offer to Martinez , which was only a 2-year deal, something that was obviously met with contempt by Victor's agent:
With catcher Victor Martinez' future as a Red Sox up in the air after this season, Martinez' agent, Alan Nero, acknowledged that the offer the team recently made -- a two-year deal - is not what his client is after.
"More than anything else, when a team comes to you and says we'll give you a one year deal or a two year deal, they're not telling you that they see you as a long-term piece of their organization," Nero said.

This is all posturing by an agent and attempting to negotiate in the arena of public opinion, but it is interesting to note how positional value (that is, where Victor is likely to play) is obviously going to play a role in how many years he's going to get, something even more pertinent than how much he'll get in annual salary. To that end, Pete Gammons thinks that the Red Sox brings up that exact topic when commenting on the Victor as a Red Sox topic
:
I do think that the whole Victor Martinez may get dragged out dramatically because I know the Red Sox aren't going to sign him for four years as a catcher. Let's face it, his worth as a DH is a lot less than what it is as a catcher. I think that's going to play out to see if someone is willing to give him four years as a catcher.

This, of course, raises salient points about Victor in Cleveland past 2010, which is when his current contract, signed as an Indian, was going to expire. The question with Martinez (be it in Boston or Cleveland) is where he's going to play and here's what I wrote just prior to Victor being traded last year:
With emotion removed from the equation, the biggest factor in extending Vic past the 2010 season is position and the players that are currently in the organization that would seem to be jockeying for the C or 1B position that Victor would almost certainly play. This is relevant because, inarguably, the Indians' 4 best position player prospects playing at AA or above are:
Carlos Santana - AA Catcher
Matt LaPorta - AAA 1B/LF
Mike Brantley - AAA LF/CF
Nick Weglarz - AA LF/1B

Obviously, these names represent prospects and prospects are just that, but the positions that they play may hold the key as to how prudent it is to extend Victor seeing as how all four of these players figure into 2011 plans at the very latest and each impacts a position that Victor could find himself playing.
--snip--
That being said though, the Indians have to weigh the potential and projectability of these players (taking into account their affordability as young players at the same time) when determining whether committing more years and dollars to Martinez past 2010 is a sound baseball and financial decision.

We all know how this played out...or at least how it is currently playing out as Santana and Brantley have taken steps to asserting themselves into the future mix during this season while LaPorta and Weglarz remain either unsuccessful or unproven at MLB to this point as Martinez will look for a 4-year deal on the open market at a number that will probably come with a $12M to $13M annual price tag. Given that he's 31 and that Hafner still sits squarely in the DH spot, Victor's role on the Indians (if he hadn't been traded) becomes murkier and (as evidenced that I wrote the piece BEFORE he was traded), it wasn't like that should come as a surprise.

Am I suggesting that the Indians made the right move in moving Victor last year?
Not through my tear-stained Victor jersey I won't...at least not definitively, but the Indians acted last July for a variety of reasons to quickly move towards another "window of contention" (and I'm starting to hate that phrase as much as you are) and Victor's possible role in that is not any clearer now than it was last July.

Who know what Victor will get on the open market and whether he truly wanted to stay in Cleveland (as other past Indians have, then changed their minds when presented with more money), but it is important to contextualize what he's likely to earn and what position he's likely to play while he's earning that money in terms of what the Indians will be doing at the same time.

What's done is done and Victor and Lee were moved last July and when you start to read about Clifton Phifer, you start to wonder if trading El Capitan became a decision prompted somewhat by what Jason Stark has heard on one Mr. CP Lee :
One baseball man who goes back years with Cliff Lee has zero doubt that no matter how upbeat the Rangers may say they are about re-signing Lee, he will be a Yankee this winter once the free-agent fine print is written.
And why is that, you ask? Not because Lee has always wanted to live on the Upper East Side or because he's a big fan of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It's because the Yankees are, obviously, the best bet to outbid the rest of civilization.
"Cliff," our source said, "would go to Siberia if they offered him the biggest contract."

This is coming out a full year after Lee was an Indian, but this shouldn't come as any kind of surprise as the reports that Sabathia and Lee are tight and that Sabathia has been greasing the entry way for Clifton Phifer to the Bronx is no great secret. That being said, if the Indians knew that Lee "would go to Siberia if they offered him the biggest contract" and looked at the assembled "talent" around him last July and saw the likes of Crowe and Brown as the "reinforcements", the decision to move him becomes defensible.

Who they received is the point of contention for most, and it still remains too early to accurately frame the return, but if Lee was going at the end of 2010 and the Indians were in the "talent" shape that they were in (and that is ABSOLUTELY their own fault), the decision to move Lee sooner rather than later does start to hold up.

As a quick aside here and back to Stark's piece, why is it that the Indians had the two top pitching guys who wanted the biggest dollar amounts instead of say, Joe Mauer or Roy Oswalt or any other player who wasn't simply looking to go to whichever team offered (will offer) the

biggest contract. I know that it's well within their right to do so and I'll never begrudge a player for taking more money when it is available to them, but the way that the trades of Sabathia and Lee get framed locally (if I hear "well, whenever these players get good, Dolan will just trade them like he did everyone else), isn't it worth noting the proper timeframe of these decisions?

That is, there was no way that Sabathia or Lee was staying here once they had their Cy Youngs in tow, despite all of the lip service that may present a different story. Sabathia said he wanted to stay in Cleveland, then that he said he wanted to stay in Milwaukee, then he wanted to go to the West Coast to be near his family, then he was rumored to favor the NL so he could bat and he ended up…with the Yankees and a HUGE contract, that he can opt out of next year if he so desires (despite the contract running through 2015 with guaranteed money) if he so desires.

Just to take another turn from the aside, I just want to point out that Paul Hoynes has a little "rant" on why "Wins" is the most important stat for a pitcher in determination of the Cy Young (something that would favor CC and his 19 wins) and, while I will let you make your own decision on that, let me just point out that Joe Posnanski wrote a piece comparing CC and Felix Hernandez which included this little gem, "the meaning of pitcher victories mostly can be summed up with one wonderful word: Bubkis."

I'm not going to further this debate other than linking the two pieces (and JoePos has written extensively on the subject) and asking you which writer's opinion and analysis you value more and what that means if they stand on opposite sides of the aisle on this one.

But I digress…from my digression…

Back to the matter at hand in terms of the Indians trading Sabathia and, later, Lee and Martinez and wondering whether it was truly is prudent in hindsight, without drawing conclusions on the players received for them because of the lack of a truly fair amount of time to evaluate them.

That is, the Indians could have kept Sabathia through the 2008 season and "gone for it" and kept Lee and Martinez and Lee through this season instead of placing the final sticks of dynamite to the roster last summer instead of doing what they did. Unfortunately, the conversation goes back to revenue (as it always does) and goes back to the mistakes that the Indians made in terms of the dollars committed outside of these players and the lack of a supporting cast developed by the team.

However, on the issue of revenue, and more specifically revenue sharing, there is a tremendous piece from "It's About the Money" (which, in full disclosure is a Yankees' blog) on what has been hit on ad nauseum in this space regarding the success and sustainability of the majority of MLB teams. Truthfully, I could link the whole piece and struggled not to quote it forty times in the Lazy One, but it presents a fantastic look at how the Tampa Bay Rays (used as the "Shining Example" of how small-market teams can thrive) were "built" and how Revenue Sharing had little to do with that (a decade of ineptitude and high draft picks were most "helpful") and calls into question whether other small-market teams can reasonably build through the draft as the Rays have, stating thusly:

For one thing, few teams can afford to play losing baseball as consistently as the Rays did for a ten-year stretch in order to amass the high draft picks that are the heart of the Rays' current team (the Pirates can and do play this badly, but other teams have occasional runs of competence).
--snip--
Even given that the Rays were terrible enough for long enough to have high draft picks for many consecutive years, they still got amazingly lucky to have chosen so many good young players in the draft. The Rays' heavy reliance on the draft (and their apparent lack of interest in signing international players outside of the draft) does not seem like a strategy that's worthy of emulation."

The piece goes further to frame the Rays' ascent in the context of the Revenue Sharing debate , using some of the numbers that are now readily available to assert this about the burgeoning Rays' roster in 2007 and the team's bottom line:
If the 2007 Rays are a "shining example" of anything, it is that a baseball team does not need much money to build a winner. All a team needs to emulate the Rays is the kind of consistent on-the-field failure required to amass a series of high draft picks, plus a dose of the kind of luck required to consistently select championship-level players in the draft. If revenue sharing is required at all in this process, it is required in only a modest amount sufficient to prop up the team during the lean period (10 years in the case of the Rays) while the team loses ballgames and alienates a percentage of its potential fan base.

If you're absolutely engrossed by this stuff and haven't yet gone to the piece to read it in it's entirety, I would encourage you to do so , but I'll keep pulling out some of the relevant snippets and how it relates to the Indians of the 2005-2009 "Era", if not directly:
In baseball, there's a rule of thumb for young teams: time is money. The 2007 Rays proved that it doesn't take much money to assemble a good young team. But the 2008 Rays prove that it can take money to keep a good young team together long enough for the team to start winning.
--snip--
Unfortunately, the 2008 Rays represent the high point of our discussion of what revenue sharing is able to accomplish. Unfortunately, even when a team like the Rays gets lucky enough to break through and achieve success, revenue sharing does not provide what the team needs to sustain success.

Putting the whole thing in the context of the 2007, 2008, and 2009 Indians, the piece provides a compelling comparative look for the Indians adding payroll every year from 2004 to 2009 and how we're now seeing what could await "shining examples" like the Rays or the Brewers just a few years from now while the upper echelon of teams rides right along the mountain top, poaching players like CC and Clifton Phifer and Carl Crawford and, eventually, the James Shields and David Prices of the MLB landscape.

The piece comes to the big finish on revenue sharing as it is currently constructed by asserting "how the system punishes success" in that it "pays more to the 2010 Pirates than it does the 2010 Rays" when the "current version of the Rays need revenue sharing more now than ever before" and continues on with the money quote (and again, think of this in the context of the Indians of the past 5 years or so) when it hammers it home:

Instead, we have a system of revenue sharing where billions of dollars have been invested in the potential success of teams like the Rays, but no one has thought about how these teams might sustain this success.

Success stories like the Rays don't come around all that often (we'll need another year at least to determine if the Reds and Padres are capable of repeating this year's surprising performances). The Rays got lucky with their draft picks and built a terrific team. ***But baseball will do nothing (or at least, not enough) to help that team stay together.***

And…boom.
Watching CC go for the Yankees (with Lee about to join him) and Martinez about to hit the open market, how does that last line strike you (admittedly bolded by me), in that "baseball will do nothing (or at least, not enough) to help that team stay together" and how does it frame the decisions made by the Indians in the past 2+ years?

The solution for Revenue Sharing is not as easy as Ken Rosenthal saying that "The Pirates and other such teams can start by signing their best homegrown talents instead of trading them the moment their salaries begin to rise" as that represents the "easy" criticism of a team already in the crosshairs. Rather, this "sustainability" idea is the one that needs to be rectified because we've found out all too quickly in Cleveland what happens when some of those "best homegrown talents" that were signed become anchors around the neck of a franchise or how the failures of any kind in player development can deep-six a team that seemed to have such a limitless future BECAUSE of player development.

So, it gets back to a fascinating question, which is – what if the Indians DID have the financial werewithal to keep CC, Lee, Westbrook, and Victor as long as they would have liked to?

Talk all you want about whether the Indians were right to make the trades that they did in the last 2+ years, but take a look at the projected 2011 roster (assuming that this still pretty fluid) and how each player was acquired:
C: Santana – 2008 Trade
1B: LaPorta – 2008 Trade
2B: Donald – 2009 Trade
SS: Cabrera – 2006 Trade
3B: Nix – 2010 Waiver Claim (and I'm just taking a guess here)
LF: Sizemore – 2002 Trade
CF: Brantley – 2008 Trade
RF: Choo – 2006 Trade
DH: Hafner – 2002 Trade

SP: Carmona – International Signee
SP: Masterson – 2009 Trade
SP: Carrasco – 2009 Trade
SP: Talbot – 2009 Trade
SP: Gomez/Tomlin/Huff/etc. - International Signee/Drafted
Closer: Perez – 2009 Trade

Maybe they go the FA route with the rotation, but you get the gist of it as the financial reality of MLB and the way that revenue sharing could not help the Indians, coupled with their own financial mistakes (some of which became mistakes because of injury or regression) and miscalculations were too much for this organization to overcome and leave us sitting here hoping that the team can win 5 of their last 20 games to avoid 100 losses while 2007 feels light-years away.

However, when you figure that nearly ALL of the 2011 team will be populated by players acquired in the latest talent swap-out, you can start to see that the Indians didn't mire in this looming cycle (created both by the organization and MLB) and have already turned that page pretty decisively in the past two years to create the type of "core" that emerged from 2004 to 2007. Whether their decisions bear any success will be determined in the next two years as some of the recent trade acquisitions have been very successful (Prage Perez and The Axe Man, Carlos Santana), with the jury out on others – some leaning positively (Brantley, Masterson and Carrasco…for now, and Donald) and some not so positively (LaPorta and Marson), but the die has been cast for this franchise, as it will be in other small-markets propped up as "shining examples" of how an organization can do things correctly and "beat the system"….just like the Indians were three LONG years ago.