As the rhetoric has changed from “will the Indians avoid 100 losses” to “can the Indians really win 70 games” (not that 70 wins is any great shakes) on the strength of their sprint to the finish line over the last week or so, the 2010 will thankfully draw to a close today and the Indians will head into the off-season with a list of hits, misses, and hopes for the future incarnations of this team. While the entire off-season awaits to examine the moves that should and should not be made and the moves that will and will not (and I’m thinking that “will not” will rule the day) be made, perhaps today represents a day as good as any to the 2010 number that has been getting the most attention recently - 1,391,644.

That’s right, as the season winds down and the Indians come off of a 7-game winning streak, a good deal of focus has been placed onto the Indians’ “setting” the attendance record since they arrived in Jacobs Field as they drew the fewest fans since 1992, the year prior to the final season in Municipal Stadium…and remember, that 1993 number was inflated by people who wanted ticket priority for Jacobs Field.

If you don’t think that much attention has been paid to it, realize that the Editorial section of Sunday’s Plain Dealer had a piece about attendance and the economic impact that it has on the city, while taking the requisite swipes at the Dolans and the organization. This is an important topic apparently, despite the fact that elections are about a month away, local corruption has made the area a laughingstock once more, Cuyahoga County is ushering in a brand new regional governmental system with a new county executive and county council, none of whom have been elected, there is a state-wide race for Governor and Senator…and THIS

is what graces the paper for me this morning for a medium that can't figure out why they're struggling to remain relevant.

Regardless of how a dying elephant chooses to draw attention to itself, there's little question tha the attendance issue is an issue nonetheless and much of it has to do with a state of apathy that has settled on the North Coast. That apathy has come mainly from the perception that the Indians are ill-equipped to compete with the "haves" in MLB on a regular basis (which is true) and that the latest "Reloading/Rebuilding/Whatever" is full of empty promises and a place where "hope" is a plan.

How the Indians address, or don't address, this perception this off-season will be fascinating to watch as Joe Posnanski has a great piece (unsurprisingly) questioning whether a team like the Royals (to use his example) should take the same avenue of marketing that Domino's Pizza is currently taking, where they're owning up to their inadequacies, apologizing for it, and promising to get better. The crux of it is that fans are tired of hearing that a team is "three years away" from contending, particularly when that refrain lasts for 15 years.

This is brought up because the most common reasoning that I hear from people who are disgusted with the current state of the Indians (well, second most common…after MLB disparity) is that the Indians constantly try to sell their future to the general public, just as the Royals have done, as Posnanski points out. As a sidebar, while the 2009 and 2010 seasons have been wildly disappointing in terms of end records, I'd put 2008 as inordinately more soul-crushing, given what was at stake.

But that idea of "what was at stake" is where I think the Indians in recent years separate themselves from those aforementioned Royals, or even the Pirates and Orioles, whom the Indians have suddenly been lumped in with as teams built merely on "hope" and "luck". To get to the idea of why the Indians, even in recent years, don't fit into that group of the MLB dregs, peep this:
The last time the Royals won 80 games or more was in 2003, when they won 83
The last time the Pirates won 80 games or more was in 1992, when they won 96
The last time the Orioles won 80 games or more was in 1997, when they won 98

In the last 15 years, here is the number of 80 win seasons for each franchise:
Kansas City 1 (3 in the last 20 years)
Pittsburgh – 0
Baltimore – 2 (1996 & 1997)

For some context, the Indians have 4 seasons in which they've won 80 or more games SINCE BARTOLO COLON WAS TRADED in 2002 (and those 4 have occurred in the last 7 seasons), with two 90 win seasons in that 7-year stretch and while the dissenting voices will say, "great, so we're better off than those three dreadful franchises and we can win 80 games every other year…let's throw a parade", they're missing the point.

The point is that every team who finishes a year well out of the playoff mix (like the Royals, Pirates, and Orioles...just to further the use those as examples) has bright spots and players

they can point to as building blocks for the future, with the idea that the whole plan will fall into place and the team will become the latest in the list of "surprise" teams (like the Reds and Padres this year) and bear the fruit of their developmental efforts. Year after year ends with those bright spots, and players to build on, and a litany of "could be" statements.

Unlike many other teams, the Indians DID pull themselves out of the "could be" side of the ledger already in the last decade as they built, in short order, a contender from the ground up. Sure, the contender didn't last long enough, but 2002 and 2003 certainly felt like the Indians were about to enter the realm of the bottom of the barrel in MLB and, while that feeling is pervasive to some now, the Indians should have made the playoffs in 2005 and were one win away from the World Series in 2007…this after the trade of Colon that made it feel like the Indians would never sniff the playoffs again.

The talk can go to why the Indians were unable to sustain that success, and that's a legitimate conversation, but the Indians did climb that mountain of MLB competitiveness (something not easy to do) and they did it in the last 5 years, something that few teams can lay claim to that lie in similar financial standing to the Indians.

Would it have been great if the Indians simply transitioned from one group of contending groups to another in terms of players, with a sustained level of contention?

Absolutely, but while the baseball world cries over the fact that the Rays are about to break up (and they are about to break up and their window could be closing), the realities of sustaining success in MLB for small-market teams (solid drafting and development) are evident to anyone who takes even a moment to pay attention to this team and to MLB as a whole. On that side of the ledger, this organization has failed in recent years, but that "draft and develop" our own players thing has been beaten to a pulp in this space.

Regardless, the team is attempting to climb out of the crater again and while the crater may be of their own doing, it brings us back to the attendance issue as fans have stayed away and the question sits like the 800 pound elephant in the room - how does this team attract the fans?

Well, winning is an important component here, something that is not lost on the Indians as here's Acta in a piece from AC that we'll get back to in detail a little more later:
"People pick and choose what they want to support," he said. "I can't tell people what to choose. I am excited about this franchise. It's a fact that we have to do things a certain way. It's tough to tell people that's what we have to do. But this is the way we have to operate. Our best chance is to draft and develop our players and make as few mistakes as we can. That's the reality. All I can do is try to accelerate the process as much as I can to make this an exciting, blue-collar unit that people will want to come watch play."

There is that optimism among the organization and among some fans that the talent to succeed, and perhaps sustain success, lies in wait already within the levels of the team. But will winning truly bring people back on a regular basis to the ballpark?

This is brought up (and I'm sure I've brought this up before) because here are the records and

attendance for the team, starting with the 2005 team. For the sake of context, included is the rank in attendance as well as stadium capacity (which measures more accurately apples to apples because of disparate stadium sizes) for the last five years:

2005: 93-69
2,013,763 - 24th of 30 MLB teams
57.3% Capacity - 23rd of 30 MLB teams

2006: 78-84
1,997,936 - 25th of 30 MLB teams
56.8% Capcity - 22nd of 30 MLB teams

2007: 96-66
2,275,916 - 22nd of 30 MLB teams
65.6% Capacity - 17th of 30 MLB teams

2008: 81-81
2,169,722 - 22nd of 30 MLB teams
62.5% Capacity - 18th of 30 MLB teams

2009: 65-97
1,776,904 - 26th of 30 MLB teams
51.8% Capacity - 24th of 30 MLB teams

2010: 69-92
1,391,644 - 30th of 30 MLB teams
40.1% Capacity - 28th of 30 MLB teams

We all know about the slow starts and the inability of the team to put together two consecutive years of contention, which allowed some to be able to fall back on the “last year was a mirage, when they put a consistent winner on the field, I’ll go back” argument. But look at that number in 2007, where they ranked 22nd in attendance and 17th in stadium capacity filled, for a team that was one win away from the World Series. Even after that year, 2008 saw an attendance DROP, where fans still stayed away despite the Indians being the darling for many media members, who picked them to win the World Series before the season started.

So, if winning (albeit inconsistently) isn’t necessarily the panacea that most people think that it is, it goes back to the question of what this organization needs to do to engage a disenfranchised fanbase. While the cleveland.com crowd will howl about spending money on the FA market, remember that the Indians did spend money (imprudently, it turns out) on Kerry Wood prior to the 2009 season and the result at the box office was no different than a continuation of the downward trend. Some of that had to do with the performance on the field and with the trades of CP Lee and El Capitan mid-season, but the precipitous drop continued, despite wading into the FA waters.

Though it flies in the face of everything that sports-talk radio holds dear, spending money on FA for this organization is simply not the manner in which they should be building this team,

particularly at this time in their developmental cycle. Remember when Billy Beane told Pete Gammons this on payroll
:
"The way the system is right now, there really is no difference between a $75 million and $40 million payroll," said Oakland GM Billy Beane. "I think a lot of small-market clubs look at that and ask, 'Why pay $75 million when $40 million will buy me as many wins?'"

In case you don't remember, here's a quick reminder on recent payrolls on the North Coast, along with an absolutely fascinating graphic that compares the payrolls of all 30 teams over the last decade to the amount of wins they've averaged in that timeframe .
2003: $ 48,584,834
2004: $ 34,319,300
2005: $ 41,502,500
2006: $ 56,031,500
2007: $ 61,673,267
2008: $ 78,970,066
2009: $ 81,579,166
2010: $ 61,453,967

But I digress and will try to bring this back into the present tense in terms of what the Indians should be looking to do THIS off-season, in terms of improving their team but also to put out some sort of measure of good faith to the public that they are not content to slip into the dregs of MLB.

With that in mind, here are the payroll commitments for 2011 that have numbers already set – Hafner ($13M), Sizemore ($7.667M) and Carmona ($6.288M), which adds up to $27.455M

There will be bumps in arbitration for Rafael Perez (2nd year of arbitration), but more notably for Choo and Cabrera and perhaps CF Perez. That list finally leads us back to the idea of how this team should be approaching this off-season as most assume the first priority to be locking up The BLC on a long-term deal. While most fans don't realize that Choo is under the Indians' control for three more seasons and are wildly unfamiliar with arbitration and only see Scott Boras looming while the idea that Choo is not long for Cleveland takes off, let's take a step back and analyze this Choo situation.

To get us to where we're going, let's first address this garbage story from Detroit about Choo wanting to join the Tigers , which comes from this particular columnist who has been (inexplicably) banging the drum for the Tigers to pick up Peralta's option because Peralta has experienced a "turnaround" in Detroit when he's really just been hot recently...and when has Peralta ever been hot to close out a season…no, not Jhonny. Additionally, this "turnaround" is largely false as Peralta's OPS+ in Cleveland was 95. His OPS+ in Detroit is 97…so maybe these glowing remarks that Peralta had to say about Motown had to do more with him being "happy" (partly because he's back to playing SS) because it is "so different" playing for the Tigers. And why wouldn't Jhonny feel more comfortable in a place where he's not seen as a profound disappointment, who peaked at age 23 and regressed at the plate and in the field ever since.

Regardless, back to Choo and this intimation that SS Choo told Peralta, "When I'm a free agent, I want to go to Detroit."…um, everyone knows that Scott Boras is The BLC's new agent right?

Perhaps this has nothing to do with Peralta at all when you consider this story last year on MLB.com that listed the Tigers as front-runners for the services of Johnny Damon, who was essentially out of other options, before Detroit swooped in and gave him $8M, likely due to the "relationship" between Boras and the Tigers, which is explained in some detail in the piece:
In 2004, clubs were reluctant to negotiate a multiyear agreement with catcher Ivan Rodriguez, a Boras client, because of concerns that his aging body wouldn't hold up to the grind of catching. The Tigers came through with a four-year, $40 million contract (though only two years and $19 million were guaranteed to Pudge). He played four strong years for the Tigers, batting .298 with 67 home runs and 268 RBIs while playing in at least 129 games each season.
In 2005, Boras client Magglio Ordonez was the last prominent free agent available on the market, due to concerns about his surgically repaired right knee. The Tigers didn't just take a chance on him; they gave him a five-year, $75 million contract. He played just 82 games in 2005 but bounced back to play in an average of 147 games a season over the next four years. Ordonez topped 20 HRs and 100 RBIs each season from 2006-08 before dropping off last year, although he still hit well enough (.310 average) to vest his option for 2010.
Both the Rodriguez and Ordonez contracts came shortly before the opening of Spring Training camp, so the Damon deal, if consummated, would not be without precedent.
In fact, Boras' ties to the Tigers run deep, as he has also represented the likes of Kenny Rogers, Bobby Seay and Rick Porcello. And in Ilitch, Boras seems to have found a successful negotiating partner.
"The thing I like to say," Boras said last week, "is that Mike knows his investments. His businesses are successful."

Starting to see where this comes from now, even if it is just a conversation between two players who may not have had that much to talk about on the field before a game?

This Boras/Tigers thing is actually pretty pervasive and you can throw Jacob Turner on to that list and, if you don't know who that is, he's the Tigers' 2009 1st Round Pick who received the largest signing bonus ever given to a high school player ($4.7M in a MLB deal that could pay him $4M more) and you start to see why the Tigers have been whispered in Choo's ear by Boras, who has been the beneficiary of Mike Ilitch's largesse for quite some time. I wouldn't go so far as to say that Scott Boras has an unusual amount of pull in the Tigers' contract decisions, but don't be surprised if Jayson Werth is suiting up for Detroit next year…and that Werth's new agent (one Scott Boras) is smiling broadly at the press conference.

Back to Choo and this looming contract issue, MLB Trade Rumors had an interesting piece a while back, bringing in some comparable players and what they earned in their first year of arbitration, settling somewhere around a $3M to $4M salary for The BLC next year, then making the case for Choo in terms of an extension:
If Choo is making $3-4MM next year and is set to receive raises in 2012 and 2013, the Indians would likely have to be prepared to spend considerably to sign Choo for the next three

seasons. Antonetti could go year to year, especially if it looks like Choo will have to serve in the South Korean military, but if the Indians do sign their right fielder for the next three years, it probably won't be for less than $20MM.
Nick Markakis, who signed a long-term extension with the Orioles after the 2008 season, then had remarkably similar numbers to the ones Choo has now. Markakis, who also has a strong throwing arm and plays right field, edges Choo in average, runs and homers, but Choo has more RBI and steals and better on base and slugging averages. Markakis' extension could be a model for Cleveland and he will earn $20MM for his three arbitration seasons.

Markakis contract is actually a 6-year deal worth $66M, so the $20M that he earned in the first 3 years (and the breakdown was $3M in the first year, $6.75M in the second year, and $10.25M in the third year) is technically true, but it's also lost in the fact that Markakis has 3 years on that deal worth an additional $46M.

That being said, I could see the Indians using that 3-year, $20M number as a starting point, but I don't see it going much past that, based on Scott Boras' likely plan for Choo past those three years (which could or could not involve Detroit) and Jon Steiner from WFNY summed this up quite well in a piece from some time ago, but that certainly rings true:
While I agree that Boras won't let Choo sign a contract longer than three years, I do think it's likely that Choo will sign rather than going to arbitration. For one thing, I would think that a 29 year old outfielder might want some job security. All it would take is one injury to end Choo's earning potential were he to go to arbitration (arbitration settlements last for one year only). If, on the other hand, he signs a three-year deal with the Indians, he would be protected financially in case he were to get injured, even if he did believe he was leaving some money on the table to do so.

Let me say this...I love Choo, I love the fact that he is The BLC and that he came out of nowhere to become the player that he has become. I have a deep appreciation for the fact that he truly is a 5-tool player whose worth is likely understated by the fact that he's currently playing with a group of prospects. However, the question is whether the Indians should be looking to give a long-term deal to Choo as he's still under club control for three years and he's going to get his money, whether it's in a series of three one-year deals (arbitration or not) or some other amalgamation that combines to give him three years under contract with the Indians.

Should the Indians be looking to lock up Choo past those three years, given his recent performance and given what we've seen at the box office at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario?

The fact is that Choo's going to be 30 when his contract expires and 31 in his first year of FA and if you don't remember, there was another slugger who signed an extension when he was 30 and whose performance has dipped considerably since he signed that deal. For teams like the Indians, long term deals for 30+ year old players generally aren't a good idea and, as unpopular as this may be to say on the heels of Choo's 2010 season, the Indians always have to be paying for future production, not past results.

Perhaps Choo is an exception and his recent play certainly looks as if he's among the best players in the AL (or at least in the conversation), but the Indians need to balance what's right for the organization today against what's best for the organization tomorrow. That may not be a popular opinion, but signing Westbrook and Hafner certainly looked like great deals for the Indians of 2007, but turned out to be poor decisions in hindsight.

Ultimately, the Indians should let other teams fight over a six or seven year deal for Choo and if they want to take a logical approach to Choo this off-season, I like the idea of going after that 4th year as an option year, even if it means front-loading some of this deal which is to say that if they use, say a 3-year deal worth $24M to buy out his arbitration years, they work the numbers so he's getting paid $8M annually and not on some sort of escalating scale, where he would get paid $3M, then $7M, then $10M in the next three years.

Would that be enough to entice Boras into agreeing to a $12M (which is what Markakis' contract includes for the first year that he gave up FA) or thereabouts club option?
Not bloody likely, but it gets back to the idea of what this organization is going to do to "prove" to the fanbase that they're above the likes of Pittsburgh and Kansas City this off-season to entice the folks back to the ballpark.

Regardless of the fact that they may not even care and may simply keep their heads down as they attempt to carry through with an existing plan, I'm hoping that the Indians don't make a foolish foray into the world of FA to pacify the fanbase by throwing bad money at a mediocre player. Reason being that the way that teams like the Indians are built isn't through Free Agency. Generally, that avenue should only be taken when drafts and trades have left a crater at a particular position, with no immediate or coming help being apparent.

For this current Indians' team, the question becomes whether adding a FA turn this team into an immediate contender?

Sure, there were bright spots in the second half, as the team was 34-38 after the All-Star Break and the pitching, specifically the turnaround for Carmona and the September starting pitching, along with the performance of the bullpen, specifically CF Perez (who is currently 3rd in ERA+ for pitchers with more than 60 IP in all of MLB with an ERA+ of 229, which ranks behind only Billy Wagner and Joakim Soria, in front of Rafael Soriano and Brian Wilson) are undoubtedly signs of life.

But if you've been following the recent history of the team, the Indians are probably better served staying the course that they've already laid out and while most think that the Indians are going to get that starter for the rotation, Acta's comment that they go after "not a veteran, but a good pitcher…you can't just bring in a 40-year-old guy to say you brought in a veteran" brought this from Castrovince , who waded waded through the post-mortem press conference as only Castrovince can:
Because good pitchers cost good money, I would say it's somewhat safe to assume the Indians will stick with the arms they have in place. But I've been wrong before.

Since most assume that the "good pitcher" essentially boils down to a return from Jake

Westbrook, with him accepting less money to come back to Cleveland, this is fairly interesting from St. Louis :
Cardinals' starter Jake Westbrook, nearing the eve of his first shot at free agency, said he shares the club's interest in his return and wouldn't be resistant to discussing a deal before hitting the open market.
"I'm definitely going to be open-minded about pretty much everything," Westbrook said. "If they had interest, I've definitely enjoyed my time here. I've gotten to know the guys well. The organization is definitely one that everybody knows about, that I've certainly heard a lot about, and now, firsthand, I've gotten to see that everybody was right."

Pieces like this come out at the end of every season for every veteran, but if "the Cardinals coveted Westbrook for several years, and pitching coach Dave Duncan is among those advocating Westbrook's return" as the piece asserts, Jake may be squarely in the crosshairs of the Cardinals and may not be making a return to the North Coast

If Jake does stay in St. Louis, is the idea of getting a "good pitcher" even feasible or prudent? When you look at other players that are out there, you start to wonder. Just to use an example, always-alert reader John Mast points out that Joel Sherman of The New York Post sees Javy Vazquez getting a "one-year, $4 million gamble with incentives"
(and, truth be told, the guess is at the end of a piece that questions whether Vazquez is the WORST YANKEES PITCHER EVER...oh, the humanity), so is that the way that you'd like to see the Indians go in "adding" to their rotation?

Interestingly, since 2003 Vazquez has inexplicably operated on this bad year followed by a good year cycle and if you look at the pattern (to which there's probably nothing), he's "in line" for a good year:
2003 – 139 ERA+
2004 – 92 ERA+
2005 – 101 ERA+
2006 – 98 ERA+
2007 – 126 ERA+
2008 – 98 ERA+
2009 – 143 ERA+
2010 – 81 ERA+
It is worth noting that, except for 2007 with the White Sox, all of the years with ERA+ above 100 occurred in the NL, while all of the years with ERA+ under 100 occurred in the AL...so, perhaps there's something to that. Additionally, I'm scared off a little by the fact that he can't seem to stick anywhere and I think I remember Ozzie Guillen calling him a "loser" or thereabouts questioning his heart and I'm not sure we need that (if there's even a kernel of truth to it) rubbing off on young, impressionable pitchers.

To that end, serial poster Cy Slapnicka sent me an interesting proposition as he doesn't see Westbrook taking the Indians' discounted offer and wonders whether a better tact to take in terms of adding a veteran presence to the pitching staff to serve as "an assistant pitching coach, basically a recently retired veteran, with a good idea how to approach the game from the pitchers perspective – not a pitching coach fixing mechanics – but a Millwood-type player,

to help the young staff mature, as Millwood did in 2005 or even as Byrd did later".

The idea is not without merit if you remember what CC and Westbrook said they learned from Millwood that one year in terms of pitching and maybe the Indians already have a person like that in Charles Nagy, who did an effective job with Carlos Carrasco in Columbus.

Regardless of what they do, it comes down to the question of what the best use of money is and whether the Indians are better served taking a chance on a reclamation project, like the aforementioned Javy Vazquez or someone of similar ilk, or if the Indians should simply keep going on this track that they've laid out. It should be noted that the off-season between 2003 and 2004 saw the Indians add Jeff D'Amico to their rotation and traded for Jeriome Robertson, so if the past provides any clues as to what they're going to do…it's not a lot.

But that brings it all back to this idea about how this off-season is important to the Indians in terms of public perception. If they generally stand pat on the FA front (which is probably the right move) or simply sign Choo to a one-year deal, how will that affect how they are seen by most fans?

Perhaps them staying out of the FA market and going year-to-year with Choo is the most prudent way to approach both situations. But neither of those actions (or non-actions) is going to bring the droves back to the corner of Carnegie and Ontario. Ultimately, winning will…or at least it should, and the Indians have to hope that the players that they've put into place for 2011 and beyond are able to return the team to its winning ways.

While those "winning ways" in recent years were all too brief and bittersweet in terms of where we sit now, they find themselves (again) at a place in which they need to separate themselves (again) from organizations that constantly sell the idea of "next year" or "three years from now" because the Indians are dealing with a fanbase that has been sold "next year" or "three years from now" from all of its teams for the last 40 years and the Indians' ability or inability to come through on providing "next year" in short order (as they did in 2005 and 2007) will ultimately determine the future of the franchise in Cleveland.