As another gorgeous Fall weekend is upon us on the North Coast, and with the requisite trip to the apple orchard completed yesterday with the boys (and a day at the Zoo in front of us), let's wade back into the Indians' season, now done for nearly a full week. While you can't help but see former Indians on the TV these days in the playoffs (and at whose feet does the blame of having guys like CC, Lee, Pavano, and Wood…just to name a few, fall in that the Indians were unable to compete WITH those guys on the roster in the past two years), the MLB playoffs for me are fun to watch, if depressing.

The fun comes, obviously from watching baseball being played well, with tremendous starting pitching and with the pressure of postseason baseball being palpable, almost on every pitch. Unfortunately, the competitive balance of the league has devolved to the point that, as Cleveland Frowns puts it in his (albeit late) playoff preview, "the playoffs are for the big boys…the ones with $100,000,000 more to spend on world class baseball players than you have."

Interestingly, the Phillies seem to have realized that they play in the 3rd largest Metropolis area with just one team and the Rangers (and their new owners) have awoken to the fact that they play in the 2nd largest Metropolis area with just one team (that team in New England is 1st, in case you were wondering); so it would seem as if MLB has some new "big boys" at the table as the disparity between the teams with the financial wherewithal (or a healthy and steady revenue stream that a large market can bring in TV revenue, like this deal) grows as the big-market teams continue to figure out how to use their built-in financial advantages…you know, to their advantage in the final standings.

All of which brings us to the topic of the day as the Indians, find themselves with a "new" structure in their Front Office with Mark Shapiro moving into the role of President (where he is suddenly the MORE compelling character in all of this because of his new role as keeper of the purse strings and because his job is to figure out a way to compete with – or at least live in the same zip code – as the aforementioned "big boys) and Chris Antonetti moving up to the position of General Manager.

This “announcement” of the GM baton passing from Mark Shapiro to Chris Antonetti has been one of the worst-kept “secrets” in Cleveland (worse that LeBron’s tipping), dating back to when the Cardinals courted Antonetti, who “re-worked” his contract, never officially saying that the “re-work” included this ascension to the GM spot. Thus, since very little else is happening on The Reservation (unless you want to delve into the “season in reviews” from the beat writers…and I don’t), we’ll keep the focus today on the new “Don” in the “Polo Shirt Mafia” at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario.

If you’re confused by the language of that last sentence, the term of the Polo Shirt Mafia gained traction when Antonetti (and others) started giving interviews and as his picture (along with others) started to appear in the paper and online. As Antonetti (and others) matched Shapiro in dialect, diction, body language, and linguistic filler, even succeeding in evasiveness while answering and specializing in an ability to use many words while actually SAYING very little, it became obvious that this group of executives were all cut from the same cloth.

To that end, in terms of their wardrobe choices, it seemed that they were actually “cut from the same cloth” as all were nearly always pictured donning Polo Shirts and Khakis. While I’ll be the first to admit that I have, from time to time, worn the same garb, the “business casual”-ness of it all was hard to ignore. They ran in groups, spoke the same language (even if it was decipherable to only a few), and always wore something with a collar and usually a crest.

Along the shores of Lake Erie, the Polo Shirt Mafia, or as it later became known in a brilliant off-shoot Lacoste Nostra (coined by Anthony from Willoughby…currently watching baseball in Cincinnati), ruled with Shapiro leading the Family and Antonetti learning the trade at Shapiro’s right hand. Now, Shapiro has stepped aside (or up, depending upon how you want to see it) and the Indians are left with the hand-picked “co-GM” of Shapiro and, as I said before, this was hardly a surprise.

In fact, the title transfer was made official back in February and was hit on in this very space at length. Going back and looking at that piece again, I’ll stand by what I wrote back then (as little has changed) with the high points (relatively speaking) coming in the timing of the change, in terms of Shapiro stepping aside with the tear-down pretty much complete:
Shapiro could have insisting on sticking around until after the 2011 or the 2012 season, when the prospects of the team competing look to be brighter or when he could hand the reins off to Antonetti, with the team contending or at least closer to contention. Instead, the transition will come about half of a season after the second rebuild/reload/whatever began in earnest, with Antonetti coming in more or less after Shapiro will have been the point man on most unpopular decisions.
--snip--
Now, realize that Shapiro will still be the GM (again, at least in terms of public perception) when…not if, when the Indians trade (or at least attempt to trade) Westbrook, Wood, Peralta, and maybe even Branyan this coming season. By the time that Antonetti will assume the GM reins, all of the dirty work will have been done in the rebuild, with the roster purged and the contract situations of Lee, Victor, Wood, Westbrook, and Peralta in the rearview mirror…all completed in the “Shapiro regime”.

Remember, that was written back in February…but that was pretty much the script for the season, was it not?

Going further from the old piece (and I don't mean to just re-use this stuff, but it is wildly relevant again), the question of whether Antonetti was merely a Shapiro clone was examined:
If you'll remember, Shapiro was (a long time ago) the protégé of John Hart and Hart's hand-picked successor, and while there is a difference here as Shapiro will stay in the organization (which Hart did not), time will tell what kind of GM Antonetti will be.

That is to say, as much as these guys sound like they could finish the trains of thought for one another, much less sentences, anyone who has ever worked in a business realizes that even the closest of allies do not see eye-to-eye on EVERY single issue. When a decision has been made, as much back-room complaining can be done about it, a good business (or organization) has the soldiers fall in line, toe that company line and articulate it clearly, as if they believe every bit of it.

While Shapiro and Antonetti always seem to be reading from the same script, the truth (with any situation involving human beings) is that if you're not in charge, you generally have your own ideas about doing things. That doesn't mean that Antonetti is going to stray wildly from what is already in place with the Indians' organization (as he had a hand in building the structure), but does anyone truly believe that this is simply an extension of Shapiro's reign, with Antonetti playing the role of marionette and Shapiro pulling the strings from a higher office?

Perhaps the most cynical and pessimistic among us believe that, but I'm more inclined to see how Antonetti acts as a GM and HOW he arrives to those actions as well as WHY he ends up there. Perhaps it will reveal itself to be a continuation of Shapiro's beliefs and maneuverings, but seeing as how Antonetti is, in fact, a different person (though it is difficult to discern between the two at times), I'll see what he brings to the table and decide from those actions and not simply from what everyone "thinks" will happen.

By the way, just to jump back to the February piece, please note that I did nail the Mike Chernoff promotion
(exciting for everyone…I know) to his new position:
As for a best guess as to who plays the role of Assistant GM (formerly occupied, to some critical acclaim, by Antonetti) in the new arrangement, a name to remember would be Mike Chernoff, the current Director of Baseball Operations.

Additionally, I will point out (as I did in February) that Chernoff was listed #6 on a list of potential future GM's that Will Carroll put together back in June of 2008
.

But back to Antonetti and wondering what, exactly, the Indians are getting as a GM, what I wonder about (not that I'll ever get this answer) is what moves of the past 5 years were the ones that Antonetti was the dissenting voice in the room…again, assuming that the Front Office isn't so completely on the same page that they agree about everything. For whatever reason, I remember the story told about Mark Shapiro (then Farm Director) banging his fist against the

table, protesting the Brian Giles-for-Ricky Rincon deal and (again, while this would NEVER become public knowledge, given the CIA-level of secrecy of the Indians) I wonder at which points Antonetti reluctantly went along with a decision, or saw a move happen that he wasn't all too fond of.

While one would hope that this kind of insight could have been gleaned by the current beat writers (and I don't count Castrovince as one of these anymore, given his promotion at MLB.com…so, read him here now), nearly every interview is so narrow-minded in terms of asking specifically about the team as it exists right now, instead of where the team has been and where it SHOULD be going. If you haven't been reading the sit-downs with Antonetti recently, you haven't missed much:
Beat Writer - "So…um, what are you going to do at 3B?"
Antonetti - "We're going to look for a 3B, probably one who is a good defender."

Beat Writer - "What are you going to do with Choo?"
Antonetti - "We're going to approach him about a multi-year deal and, if that doesn't happen, we'll sign him to a one-year deal."

Seriously, at a certain point, I could create a faux Q & A anticipating the mind-numbing questions from the local media and the evasive, non-committal answers from the Front Office that has taken place for far too long, with the enlightened opinions of Castrovince no longer at our disposal to wade through the muck. After reading everything about Antonetti in the last week, I actually think that I know less about him or what he's going to do and, while some of that is by design, all of this brings us to the entrée of today's brunch.

In case nobody remembers (and this feels like much longer ago than it really is), before the 2009 season, I contributed on an Indians' Preview book with some of the guys at LGT , as well as some other terrific writers…including Joe Posnanski. Regardless, one of the meatiest pieces in the I ndians Annual 2009
(or IA2K9, as it was lovingly called) was an extended interview that Jay Levin of Let's Go Tribe conducted with then-Assistant GM Chris Antonetti.

Given the recent events regarding Antonetti's promotion, Jay convinced the publisher, Maple Street Press, to make the story available online for reading. In the article, you will find the most insight that you likely ever will read into the inner workings of the Indians' Front Office and their decision-making process. Despite the fact that, as Jay says in the opener, "the Indians are notoriously tightlipped about the proprietary statistics they've developed to evaluate hitting, defense, and pitching" but continues that the team "emphasizes strong, candid communication, and Antonetti seemed to be fighting his own natural cordiality in order to protect the team's trade secrets", the interview is insightful and probing.

Although it does, at times, devolve into vagaries because Antonetti is coy about tipping his hand on much more than generalities, Levin was able to glean information from him on topics that are fascinating to examine, particularly with the benefit of hindsight…remember, these interviews too place in December of 2008 and January of 2009. Among the many topics hit on

in the now-published piece were Kerry Wood and medical issues, the value of a player on the trade market versus the value to the team (in this case, with Kelly Shoppach as the example), how they approach Free Agency, and their due diligence before making a deal.

If you're waiting for the snippets from the piece, they're not coming as the complete interview is worth a read so again, here's the link …I'll wait until you finish it…

Not to simply let sleeping dogs lie, Jay posted the unpublished portions of the interview over the course of the 2009 season and just recently posted the final part of the interview that had not yet been published in any space. The topics hit in the portions of the interview that did not make IA2K9 are a fascinating look at the value of closers (made more interesting by the fact that Chris F. Perez would not become an Indian for another 6 months or so),
an unbelievably insightful piece on the contract given to Travis Hafner
and whether there was any buyers' remorse that existed in the Winter of 2008 (there didn't seem to be and sheds some light as to how the Indians approached the extension from all angles),
the ongoing issue at 3B
(one that remains unresolved), and finally
a bit on Antonetti on a personal level
(a topic he was obviously not interested in discussing or pulling back the curtain on) and on the perception that he is among the "new age" baseball executives, separate from the "old school" scouts and traditionalists.

Again, there are links embedded in each of those that will give you about 15,000 of Chris Antonetti's words, perhaps more insightful in hindsight (when everyone's glass was still half-full) than anything that will pass through his lips these days, which will be even more measured and evasive than that…if that is possible.

In terms of the "transition of power" to Antonetti, much has been made about the Indians essentially having everyone move up one step with Shapiro "graduating" to role of Team President. In fact, when you see it all broken down in one place (as Stephanie Storm does), it is jarring to see how the structure essentially remains the same, with new titles being the main change.

To that end, as for the rest of the Front Office promotion looking like a continuation of the status quo (when the status quo has looked woefully underprepared and unprepared in the 2008 and 2009 seasons), perhaps the rumors that former Diamondbacks GM Josh Byrnes could be joining the Indians in a Front Office role (first reported by Ken Rosenthal) can find some favor on the corner of Carnegie and Ontario, if only to bring in that "fresh set of eyes" who has been in other organizations and is not simply resigned to accept the process because "that's how it's done around here" and could instead bring a discerning (and perhaps dissenting) voice to an organization that could be stuck in a rut because of tunnel-vision.

If you don't remember, back when Byrnes was fired from Arizona, I advocated a return to his "roots" back in July , in the hopes that he would return (yes, return…and

you should read this
) to the Tribe Front Office. If you want a prudent use of money this off-season, use it to acquire a talented executive who will question why the Indians do what they do and provide some fresh perspective (or at least an outside perspective) on the road they've already laid out in front of them for the past 2 ½ years.

If Josh Byrnes does make his way to Cleveland, would his relationship with Brandon Webb put the Indians in the running for a rehabbing Webb, who is probably going to receive a contract that would be "very heavy on incentives and very light on guaranteed money"
?

Nobody knows, but it gets back to the question of what can really be expected from Antonetti this off-season. That's hard to say as their "shopping list" (SP, 3B, RH bat, 4th OF, RH reliever) is pretty well known…assuming that is their "shopping list". Again, most of the "dirty work" (clearing off contracts, unpopular trades) has already occurred and if, as it has been stated, Antonetti's fingerprints can be found on specific deals, starting with the Cliff Lee deal, it bears mentioning again what they have targeted since July of 2009 – big, strong pitchers who have the potential to miss bats.
Take a look at the list of acquired arms, just from the CP Lee and Victor deals:
Masterson – 6'6", 250 lbs.
Carrasco – 6'3", 220 lbs.
Knapp – 6'5', 235 lbs.
Hagadone – 6'5", 230 lbs.
Price – 6'4", 210 lbs.

You can mention the likes of Corey Kluber, Zach McCallister, Scott Barnes, Connor Graham and others, but those names listed above (with heights and weights…ding) get to the point as to what the Indians are attempting to do with these arms. Given the astonishing attrition rate and injury rate for pitchers, the Indians have been targeting high-upside arms, capable of being dominant starters (assuming health and projection) or, at worst, relievers at the Big League level. Throw guys like White, Gardner, and Pomeranz on this list if you'd like, but the Indians (after years of going for the "polished" product or the player "close to contributing") have gone after the potential difference makers in terms of pitchers.

Whether or not those arms pan out remains to be seen, but as we're seeing this off-season, the importance of pitching, and more importantly DOMINANT starting pitching, rules the day in the post-season. From Halladay to Hamels to Lincecum to Cain to Hughes to…yes, even Sabathia and Lee, the team with the better starting pitchers (and the bigger studs at the front end of their rotation) are generally going to have an advantage in the playoffs.

Don't think that the reason for the success of the 2007 team (CC and Fausto at the top end) was lost on the Front Office and, while it could be said that every team is attempting to find those front-of-the-rotation studs, the moves that the Indians have made since the Lee deal show that they have some concrete plans to resort back to that reliance on superb starting pitching.

If you don't think that the Indians had that stable in place (albeit with poor timing) in the mid-to-late-90s, consider what SI.com's Jon Heymann wrote about CP Lee's off-season value rising because of his postseason performance , with that value reaching some dizzying heights:

Before Halladay took a $60-million, three-year extension with Philly, Lee turned down a similar offer, believed to be for three years and somewhere in the mid-$50-millions from Philadelphia, who eventually traded him to Seattle. Word was, he was thinking about more than double that, maybe something close to Johan Santana's $138-million, six-year Mets contract.

Now, word going around the game is that Lee might seek three times what Philly offered. In other words, Lee might try to match his old Indians teammate CC Sabathia's deal, which is for seven years and $161 million. "Why not?" one club executive said. "He's as good as Sabathia."

Look at that second quoted paragraph again and realize that, when we enter the 2011 season, the two biggest contracts ever handed out to starting pitchers in baseball history may come in the course of two off-seasons for players that made their MLB debuts with the Tribe and who were teammates for four full seasons (2004 to 2007) and who resided in the 2008 rotation together for a team that was 37-51 when CC was dealt.

There's plenty of blame to go around in those circular arguments (and I've laid more that my share of blame here), but the Indians (as they were constructed from 2003 to 2009) were designed to be reliant on strong starting pitching (CC, Lee, Carmona, Westbrook, etc.) and the blueprint doesn't seem to be all that different now.

Granted, there's no way to know now how all of these arms shake out, but the Indians have started to stockpile young, big, swing-and-miss pitchers (some from Brad Grant's drafts, that have looked to potentially bear some immediate fruit) and how those arms project to MLB is going to determine where the Indians go, just as the maturation of those young, undeveloped arms in the early-to-mid-2000s dictated the franchise's trajectory.

If the Indians get production from Carrasco (or even Masterson) and the likes of White, Pomeranz, and Knapp develop in a manner in which the Indians hope, the Indians will find themselves in a position rivaling (and probably exceeding, because of the positional talent) where they were only five years ago, when their potential seemed limitless.

However, if that situation were to play out, which GM takes the "credit/blame" for that as most of the names listed above were technically acquired under Shapiro's watch. Regardless of whether Antonetti played a major role in that decision, those players will be identified as "Shapiro's guys", just as the drafting of CC coming under John Hart's watch remains another blemish on the draft record of Shapiro's tenure.

To that end, it gets to what Chris Antonetti should be doing this off-season, in that he should be looking to not simply continue the status quo for the sake of status quo. He should be attempting to separate himself from Shapiro, if at all possible, to debunk the notion that he is simply "Shapiro, Jr." or is in his new office to continue to do Shapiro's bidding. While I'm not

suggesting that Antonetti should suddenly start exploring how to get Jeff Francouer on the roster or see if Oliver Perez can be had (as I'm not suggesting stupidity for stupidity's sake), he's coming into a situation that he can put his stamp on over the course of the next couple of years. His ability (or inability) to do so will go a long way towards coloring public perception of him (fair or not) and whether he is simply an extension of the status quo in the name of stability or if he brings a different opinion and approach to the position…his own.