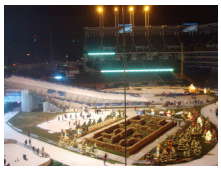
With the Indians in the third row of the Cleveland Sports car or maybe even the car top carrier in the equation (because to say they're in the backseat doesn't paint an accurate enough picture), the off-season rolls on in earnest and there's still plenty to discuss and dissect even if it has little to do with the Indians and player acquisition. Unless you're following this Zach Duke-to-Arizona "situation" as breathlessly as I am – as he could be still non-tendered by the D-Backs if they're not able to reach an agreement with him on a reduced salary – and crossing your fingers so hard that you hope that your circulation isn't affected, things have remained quiet on the North Coast.

In all seriousness (and, yes I'm joking on Zach Duke…sort of), the only thing occurring on the corner of Carnegie and Ontario is the Indians' inaugural Snow Days event, which opened on Friday for "Snopening Day", attended by yours truly with the fam and the in-laws for some winter fun. Since most have read some sort of article on the concept and the execution of it somewhere (as Tribe writers have had little else to write about), from an attendee's standpoint who took two young boys there, Snow Days is a smashing success.

Upon arrival (and signing of a waiver for all attendees), once you determine which attractions you want to get a pass for (the "Batterhorn" is the tubing portion and the "Frozen Mile" is the skating portion that require specific passes and cost more), you enter into a fully transformed Progressive Field, with scenes from "A Christmas Story" and other holiday classics on the JumboTron, right next to a feed showing the tubing (on a 30-second delay so you can watch your "run" when you get to the bottom) and with Christmas music and decorations everywhere.

Since my sons are too small for any of the tubing or skating attractions, we simply purchased the “Entry” pass ($5 a head), which they attach to your zipper on your coat as if you were going skiing. We made our way down to the field level and made our way through the hay maze (in short left field) and climbed around on the man-made snow piles (in deeper left field) as The DiaTot took cleaner routes to his snowball target (his old man) than Trevor Crow did to his glove target (the flying ball) did all season.



It being in the low 30’s, The DiaBride took her parents and The DiaperTribe up to The Terrace Club, which was open for anyone to enjoy and warm up while overlooking the entirety of the festivities…and that is the shot from the TC on Friday night. After the 3-year-old got cold enough, we joined them in The Terrace Club and, from that vantage point, saw that there was access to the Indians’ dugout and (after finishing some hot chocolate) made our way back down to the field level and ran to the home dugout.

Once in the dugout, we did what 3-year-olds and their fathers do unencumbered and unsupervised in an MLB dugout in pretending to grab a bat from the bat rack and a helmet from the helmet cubbies, went out to the “on-deck circle”, then pretended to hit walk-off HR after walk-off HR, complete with head-pounding celebrations when running back into the other side of the dugout. When the faces became redder and the text from The DiaBride arrived from the Terrace Club that we were off to go grab dinner somewhere, we made our way out of the stadium with promises to return.

While the concept of “Snow Days” has been ridiculed in the circles that enjoy ridiculing the Indians and…well, anything that they do, the experience is one that is unique and entertaining for all ages. As downtown Cleveland sits dormant most nights in the Winter, it represents a very real attempt at livening up a sleeping city on non-Cavs nights by enticing people down to embrace their region and their weather. The execution of “Snow Days” is very well-done and, while the fire pit was not yet operational on “Snopening Day”, the prospect of sitting down at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario around a hearth with some friends and family is an appealing option for those who generally go into lock-down mode in November and December (and beyond) once the weather gets cold.

Though the wailers and teeth-gnashers will complain that the Indians should be spending money in the SUMMER and not in the WINTER, I wouldn’t be surprised at all if other

cold-weather stadiums turn into similar winter wonderlands in the coming years, with the trail being blazed by the Indians. What "Snow Days" means to the bottom line of the Indians is not something that I'm even interested in taking a guess at as it represents a fun family environment in a region and at a time in which they aren't easy to come by.

If you're going to ask whether the proceeds from "Snow Days" mean that the Indians are going to be more active on the Free Agent market, you're asking the wrong guy as I'm too busy planning the next trip down there to see if I can get my 3-year-old on the mini-"Batterhorn" (yes, there's a smaller one specifically for kids) with me.

Nevertheless (and with the longest Lazy Sunday intro finally done), it is Sunday and that does mean that we turn our gaze to the Indians in this space. Of course, since nothing is happening with the Indians, perhaps it may be more instructive to (eventually) turn our attention to former Indians and soon-to-be-division-rivals.

As a segue to that and keeping with the "all the news that's fit to link" premise, Baseball America ran an article and player breakdown detailing the devolution of the Tribe in the past 3 years in terms of player movement, specifically mapping out how the 2007 team turned into the 2010 team . As depressing as looking at all of those names is, I'll go back to the little exercise last Sunday that put dollar amounts as to what the team that ostensibly broke 2008 Spring Training will earn this year...and it will be $113.6M that the 2008 Tribe will earn for various teams without a 5th starter, a bullpen, or a bench.

By now you know where this segue is going as one of those "cashed-in chips" is returning to the AL Central as El Capitan has joined the Detroit Tigers, where he will visit the corner of Carnegie and Ontario (with Jhonny Peralta) not only as an opponent, but as a division rival.

Any mention of Victor around these parts immediately conjure up visions of Victor sitting in his locker crying saying that he "was leaving his house" when the trade was consummated in July of 2009 while his son asked him, "are we still an Indian". Wiping away a tear, those two images still pull at the heartstrings around the North Coast as Victor, more than any other player on those late-2000s teams felt like he was different in that he wanted to be an Indian for life…like he understood what it was to be a Clevelander.

With news that Victor will visit Cleveland representing another AL Central team, it evokes the question again that wouldn't it be great if the Indians had kept Martinez and if he represented the bedrock of the organization, regardless of total team payroll or expectations coming into an individual season?

To that end, I'm reminded of a piece debating whether Martinez fit past 2010 that was written two weeks before he was traded in this space. As painful as the conclusion was (and it is worth a read, particularly in hindsight), it detailed how he didn't really fit into the team's long-term plans once Hafner signed his extension and after the CC and Blake trades were made, nor did the idea of extending him make much financial sense.

Could you say that the "mistake" of signing Hafner in 2007 and the slow start in 2008 that led to the trades of CC and Casey that resulted in Santana, LaPorta, and Brantley entering the organization essentially led us to this place, where Victor didn't make sense as an Indian past 2010?

Of course, but we all know how this ended up and please don't take this as a defense of moving Victor, the heart-and-soul of that late-2000s team (and, remember that this is the place that you saw the love letter saying goodbye after his departure) as emotion will continue to play a role with Victor, particularly because he'll be playing in the AL Central.

But baseball is a business (as much as we all abhor that part of it) and to that end, also included in the aforementioned piece is a bit on Martinez's value as a C and his diminished value as a 1B and (though I didn't mention it in the piece) as a DH. Regardless, it appears as if DH will be where he's plying his trade in the Motor City …at least according to them. With his new position change in mind, how about looking at Martinez's offensive production as it relates to the rest of the AL from a positional standpoint, at least in the last two years:
2009
Victor – .861 OPS
Average AL C – .721 OPS
Average AL 1B – .830 OPS
Average AL DH – .779 OPS

2010
Victor – .844 OPS
Average AL C – .684 OPS

Average AL 1B – .786 OPS
Average AL DH – .757 OPS

You see now how Victor's bat is exceptional when he's catching and merely above-average when he's playing 1B or merely the DH?

If you're thinking about Vic the Stick and the Tribe, perhaps you want to make the case that LaPorta and Brantley (or even Weglarz) weren't/aren't promising enough to the point that the Indians shouldn't have been able to find a place for Martinez to remain an Indian. In light of 2010 performance (particularly by LaPorta), that argument is not without merit, nor is the idea that Victor's offensive numbers improve without the wear and tear that comes from donning the tools of ignorance.

However, he will turn 32 next month and the Indians essentially cast their lot with Santana and LaPorta at C and 1B when Blake and Sabathia were dealt and the continued presence of Hafner as DH means that paying $10M to $12M a year to a 1B/DH who will be in his 30s throughout the life of his contract just didn't add up for the Indians.

Certainly, Victor could have been useful to Indians this past year and probably for the next couple of years, but the Red Sox let Victor walk when the years involved became too far out in the future and as the money involved went up.

Yes, THE RED SOX – not your lowly, also-ran Indians – thought that the years and money were too high! Their reasoning was articulated by Alex Speier of WEEI, who wrote :
Multiple Red Sox sources indicated they felt that, even with the strides that Martinez made this year to perform at a respectable level, he is unlikely to remain a viable everyday catcher for more than two more seasons. After that, he would likely be consigned to duty as a designated hitter and first baseman. When that happens, his value will drop precipitously.
--snip--
If he does remain behind the plate, Martinez could face a steep offensive decline. Catchers do not gradually see their performance drop in their mid-30s. Instead, they see it get tied to a Looney Tunes-style anvil tossed into a canyon around the age of 35.
That being the case, the last year of Martinez' deal stands a good chance of fair chance of being a poor investment.

Remember that whole positional value thing up above?
It's the reason that SI.com's Tim Marchman wrote that, "signing a 32-year-old catcher is by definition something you do because you want immediate benefit, and finishing in third place with 84 wins rather than 81 isn't really much of a benefit" and that "the Tigers will either be sitting a talented kid (Alex Avila) or using Martinez as their main designated hitter, which would be a terrible waste, as while he's a strong hitter for a catcher, there are several comparable hitters on the market who would cost nothing close to $50 million."

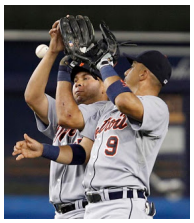
At some point, his production will drop and the drop is palatable from a catcher (somewhat), it becomes much more pronounced when he's going to be the 1B or DH. Yes, it's true that drop may not come this year or next, but when Rob Neyer writes things like "If Martinez can't (or won't be allowed to) catch, he's not worth the money the Tigers gave him. He's not really worth what the Red Sox supposedly offered him, either (three years, $36 million, or four and $40 million)" as well as asserting that "If you make a list of the 100 worst moves in the last 30 years, you're going to find a few trades and a bumper crop of contracts given to free agents in their 30s", something the Red Sox have figured out and are now avoiding, you start to realize that the Tigers are taking a big risk with Martinez, one that they'll have to allow to play out.

If you want to make the argument that Victor possessed a value that goes beyond numbers to Cleveland and that the Indians should have be taking an inordinate amount of risk by extending him, that's fine as long as you acknowledge that the feeling is coming from your heart and not your head because of the positional value concept and that you're ignoring that Santana is likely to put up better offensive numbers than Victor this year. Trust me, nobody's questioning that it will be difficult to see him stride to the plate at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario with that Old English "D" on his hat, just as it was difficult to see him wear the polyester of that team from New England.

Victor conjures up many emotions and those emotions will continue to come as a member of the Tigers, regardless of whether his contract looks like a bargain or a bust in hindsight. What is troubling however, is the way that Victor's signing by the Tigers and Detroit's largesse thus far in the off-season is being presented as some sort of referendum on the Indians' off-season.

While Terry Pluto is unsurprisingly a dissenting voice of reason in the media when he says that the Tigers are "the one team in the Central that continually spends beyond the bottom line and is not afraid to rack up financial losses", most of the local reaction has been to frame the Victor signing as a simple math problem in that the Tigers are spending money to catch the Twins while the Indians sit on their hands.

But looking at the money that they've spent, would you be comfortable with the signings that they've made, regardless of big-market/small-market distinction?



The Victor deal, which has been largely questioned on a national level because of the committed years and dollars to a player that looks to be either their 1B or DH for the next five years...

Peralta, who will receive $11.25M in the next two years from the Tigers (and let's all repeat this slowly) to...play...shortstop...

Joaquin Benoit, who will receive $16.5M over the course of 3 years despite the fact that he missed the entire 2009 season and posted a 1.67 WHIP and a 5.00 ERA in 2008, walking nearly as many hitters (35) as he struck out (43) in 2008...

The fact is that Detroit has been a one-team-wrecking crew on the FA market, if you simply take a look at the FA signings that are on the books so far this off-season. If it's too early for you to do the math yourself from that link, here is the breakdown:
Detroit FA spending - $77,750,000
THE REST OF MLB FA spending - $79,700,000

Yeah, seriously…
And, we all know that Lee and Crawford and Werth and Beltre are going to add to that second total, but realize that the Tigers are probably not done yet and could add an OF (perhaps Werth) or maybe a reliever, so their spending spree may not yet be over.

Realizing that the relevance of money spent and victories is a…let's say, sore subject around these parts, how about examining how the Tigers have fared since their WS loss in 2006, in

terms of their win totals and their payrolls?
2007: 88-74 (2nd in Central) - $95,180,369 payroll

2008: 74-88 (last in Central) - $137,685,196 payroll

2009: 86-77 (2nd in Central) - $115,085,145 payroll

2010: 81-81 (3rd in Central) - $133,995,400 payroll

That's an average of a $120,486,527 payroll and all of 82 wins a season, never hitting the 90-win mark since that 2006 season. With the addition of Victor, they're now looking at about a $100.9M payroll as it stands right now
and, as mentioned before, they may be adding Jayson Werth (Scott Boras client alert) or retaining the services of Mags Ordonez while still looking to upgrade their bullpen.

This is not all pointed out to guffaw from afar at the strategy of the Tigers and their inability to spend money wisely or even that these additions of Victor and Jhonny and Benoit aren't going to catapult the Tigers into obvious contention for the AL Central. Rather, it's to point out the difference in the manner by which the Tigers and the Indians attempt to go about building a winner.

Sure, the Tigers have spent more money and are certainly more aggressive (and more successful) in trading their young players and prospects, but since the 2005 season both teams have made the playoffs once. Without being catty and pointing out that the Tigers' 2006 playoff appearance is the organization's only since 1987, how about this:
The Tigers have won 495 games since the start of the 2005 season
The Indians have won 482 since the start of the 2005 season

In that time, the Tigers have spent $633.65M on payroll, with their best teams in 2006 and 2007 coming with the lower payrolls. Meanwhile, the Tribe has spent $339.7M on payroll, with (say it with me) their best teams in 2005 and 2007 again coming in at some of the lowest payroll numbers.

Does FA spending equal victories?
Of course not, as titles are won at the beginning of November (now)…not at the end of November.

While "titles" are not likely to be in the offing in Cleveland (or Detroit) next season, the fact that the swirling snow – and not any swirling rumors – is the most newsworthy happening at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario make this Indians' off-season one that make it hard to enjoy for Tribe fans…unless, of course, you're blazing down the "Batterhorn".