During the season in which spending comes under the microscope for all holiday shoppers, the lack of spending at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario has remained in the crosshairs for the faction of Clevelanders more inclined to make a joke about “the cobwebs in the Dolans’ wallet” than to take a logical overview of where the team stands after the tear-down that took place from July of 2008 to the dawn of a new decade. Nevertheless, with every signing by another team drawing snickers and every Minor League signing from the Tribe drawing howls from those that are still paying attention, the Indians continue to let the FA market and trade market evolve without them. None of this was unexpected nor does it represent a foolhardy stance for the off-season, but the scope of their inactivity was in plain view last week as the off-season spending by all MLB teams was compiled and tabulated by MLBTR
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You’re only going to get one guess – and you’re probably not going to be wrong without even looking – as to which team ranks dead last on the list, with only the Kearns’ $1.3M deal on their “added” ledger for the off-season.

Cue the pulling of hair and the resounding harrumphs...right?
To a degree I suppose, as an off-season in which a team almost does literally nothing certainly doesn’t generate a lot of intrigue or excitement among even the most rabid fans, as much as the strategy may make sense. However, taking a deeper look at this, peruse that list again and realize that there is a very clear distinction between “Dollars Spent” and “Dollars Spent Wisely” for any given team in any given off-season, regardless of expectations or market size.

This goes without saying as recent memory has shown us that when the Indians have “Spent” on the FA market, they have had their share of hits (Millwood and Pavano most notably) and more misses (Wood, Dellichaels, Kobayashi, etc.) and there’s no telling from one off-season to

the next which players will fall into which column. Spending in a given off-season (or even being preternaturally pro-active) does not guarantee any level of success the following year (see the Mariners' off-season last Winter and their 2010 record) as Championships are not won on paper in January, but after a long and tenuous path has been followed into the Fall.

That being said, as much as the inactivity of the Indians has infuriated some of the fanbase (enflamed by a local media in need of something to deride…not difficult, given the local sports scene), I would offer the idea that the Tribe sitting on their hands is a preferable course of action if you compare the activity of some of the other teams that ended the 2010 season at the bottom of the league.

To wit, the woebegone Pittsburgh Pirates gave a 2-year deal worth $8M to Kevin Correia, who posted a 5.40 ERA last year including an almost incomprehensible 5.36 ERA IN PETCO PARK, gave $4.25M guaranteed over 2 years to platoon OF Matt Diaz (.633 OPS vs. RHP, .830 OPS vs. LHP in 2010), meted out a 1-year deal to 1B Lyle Overbay (who posted a .762 OPS last year) worth $5M, and handed $500K over to Scott Olsen (who has allowed more runs than tallied strikeouts over the past two years) on the FA market.

In a way, you almost feel bad for a team like the Pirates (I did say "almost") in as much as their mess is of their own doing, they're under the watchful gaze of their local fanbase (and the Revenue Sharing Watchdogs) to spend money…any money, this off-season. Some of those signings might work out as Correia suffered a major tragedy last year when his brother was killed in a car accident and a change of scenery could benefit him, just as a properly-utilized Diaz is a nice complementary piece. If you'll remember, I was on the "add Diaz as a RH 4th OF/complement to Hafner" train and still think that he would have been a better addition than Kearns

However, all of those additions feel like a team spinning their wheels as it either speaks to a developing team that has NO option at a spot like 1B (which simply isn't true in Pittsburgh) where Overbay will play, or a team trying to keep the barking watchdogs at bay and pacify a fanbase by spending money when it may be a mind-numbingly bad idea to do so on the FA market, given how far away the team is from legitimately contending and how none of the players they added this off-season will play a role in whatever incarnation of the Pirates is the next to contend…whenever that may be.

Just for another example from a team that occupied the lower echelon of MLB with the Pirates (and the Tribe), the Royals added Melky Cabrera and Jeff Francoeur, and while it was "only" a $3.75M outlay of cash to "add" those two pieces, realize that Francoeur ranked 128th of the 149 qualified players in OPS last year with a .683 OPS and that actually bested the .671 OPS put forth by Melky Cabrera, who came in at #134 on that 149 player list. News that both are likely to be in the everyday lineup in 2011 (perhaps at the expense of playing time to Lorenzo Cain) only crystallizes this idea that adding pieces for addition's sake may pacify some of the frothing mouths in the fanbase, but it actually does more damage to the development of a team that should be building toward the future.

As a quick aside here, both Francoeur and Cabrera posted a higher OPS in 2010 than Franklin

Gutierrez (.666 OPS), who is guaranteed to make $4M in 2011, $5.5M in 2012, and $7M in 2013…but I digress.

What I'm getting at is that the vast majority of teams in MLB do not have the luxury (or the margin for error) to become players on the FA market for difference-making players. That's not to say that there aren't effective ways to augment a small-market club via FA as the Brewers' addition of Takishi Saito on a 1-year deal is exactly the type of deal that will likely go under the radar (and the Brewers have only "spent" $3.18M in FA, despite their noisy off-season), but is likely to produce dividends for the club.

For a team like the Indians, as much as every piece written about them relates to "payroll restrictions" and a "shrinking payroll", they are still a team that just tore down a talented (and vastly underachieving) team over the past two years and – by simple virtue of the MLB pay scale – are going to have players that are young, inexperienced, and cheap. Just as we saw from 2004 to 2009, as those young players develop, they're going to be paid commensurately with their production and their service time. As we're about to see SS Choo get more money because of the structure of MLB salaries, that day is coming down the line for players like Santana, Masterson, Carrasco, etc…it just isn't any time soon.

Lest anyone forget, all of those talented players now in their 30s that have left the Indians over the past two-and-a-half years – CC, Lee, Victor, and others – were all signed to long term deals at one time early in their careers BY THIS OWNERSHIP GROUP and the years in which they proved themselves to be worthy of contract extensions and long-term deals were seasons (namely 2003 and 2004) in which the Indians were not in contention. Remember who's still on the team working off of long-term extensions (again, meted out by the Dolans) in Hafner, Sizemore and Carmona – a trio that you could argue were three of the five most promising players on that 2007 team outside of a certain Hefty Lefty and Martinez, who WAS under contract through last season.

Just to further that thought, realize that after the 2007 season, the Indians had every player under contract until the end of 2010 except for Sabathia and Blake, both of whom were FA after the 2008 season. CC's imminent departure left a sizable void in the future of the team, but it was one that was inexplicably filled by the still-unexplained transformation of Cliff Lee into Clifton Phifer Lee, who replaced CC at the top of the rotation out of nowhere. Given that after the 2008 season, the team added two external pieces in DeRosa (essentially a replacement for Blake) and Wood (to remedy the bullpen ails), the Indians figured that they had 3 seasons AFTER 2007 in which to compete with the same group or a similar group of players that had just come up one game short of the World Series.

While we all know what happened from Opening Day 2008 to where we sit today, the events of the last two-and-a-half years (and most notably the trades of Vic and Cliff) have outrageously overshadowed the fact that the Indians did, in fact, have a group of players under contract that should have been able to stay together until the end of 2010. The underachievement of that group and the lack of winning (for a variety of reasons) in 2008 and 2009 from a talented group of players being the torpedo that would sink the chances that the former "core" would stay together through the end of last season.

Lost in all of the tear-down is the fact that these were deals inked by Indians in the mid-2000s that bought out arbitration and FA years of young players, with their level of advancement and their age listed thusly:

April 2005
CC Sabathia (Age 24) – 4.12 career ERA (107 ERA+) – 2 years, $17.5M
Victor Martinez (Age 26) - .807 career OPS (115 OPS+) – 5 years, $15.5M with club option

March 2006
Grady Sizemore (Age 23) - .816 career OPS (118 OPS+) – 6 years, $23.45M with club option
Jhonny Peralta (Age 24) - .794 career OPS (113 OPS+) – 5 years, $13M with club option

August 2006
Cliff Lee (Age 27) – 4.39 career ERA (99 ERA+) – 4 years, $15M with club option

April 2007
Jake Westbrook (Age 29) – 4.35 career ERA (101 ERA+) – 3 years, $33M

July 2007
Travis Hafner (Age 30) - .984 career OPS (158 OPS+) – 4 years, $57M with club option

April 2008
Fausto Carmona (Age 24) – 3.67 career ERA (123 ERA+) – 4 years, $15M with 3 club options

Nearly all of those deals look downright cheap (and I did say “nearly”) in hindsight as the Indians meted out multiple years and multiple millions to keep their homegrown “core” together essentially through the 2010 season. While the “best laid plans” certainly went awry, looking at those names and the contracts given out to them, it goes back to the idea that the Indians HAVE developed and signed their young talent in the not-too-distant past…it’s just that said young talent didn’t win enough (particularly as the years wore on) to justify keeping the “core” together.

Just to bring that around to the current situation and the current crop of youngsters, whether the day is going to come for any of young Tribesman when they are approached about a long-term

deal (similar to all of the ones handed out in the early-to-mid-2000s) remains to be seen as Choo likely would have already signed such a deal if he had a different agent and Cabrera's health issues are likely the main detriment in him not getting a long-term contract that locks down his arbitration years. Going past those two, the only way to determine if LaPorta , Brantley , Masterson , etc. (and each name in that sentence links to a must-read analysis of each of those players that Adam Van Arsdale has been putting together in a series over at LGT…and I hope Carrasco is next) is by allowing them to play and while each is going to earn $450K this year.

The concern this off-season shouldn't be whether the Indians are going to be spending money on the FA market, but rather whether all of those players that have been added to the organization in the last three years are going to merit the type of deals that were handed out to those names above, when Sabathia, Martinez, Lee, Sizemore, and others were given long-term, pre-arbitration deals.

Back to the current off-season, given what we saw happen from 2003 to 2009 (the build-up with essentially all of the pieces in place to contend for FOUR years, not the tear-down) and how the Indians did sign a number of their players to contracts once their performance justified them, how does it strike you for the Indians' off-season approach and should they go out and spend money on higher-priced, perhaps lower-talent players because it would show some "willingness to spend" that would translate to the box office?

If you mean doing what the Orioles (who ALWAYS spend about $70M in payroll from year to year) have been doing for the past few years or what the Tigers have done in the past few years, "winning" World Series titles in January (remember when they added Cabrera and Renteria, how it was a "guaranteed" division title) and what the Pirates seem to be doing (likely against their better judgment), I'll take the Indians' current strategy this off-season of looking to add ancillary pieces and parts around the core of players that is going to be most instrumental in their likelihood to contend.

That being said, even those ancillary pieces though don't come cheap in FA and even moderately upgrading the roster at a number of different positions for the Indians would have come with a relatively high price tag and low impact players, similar to what you see from the Pirates. For an illustration of this, going back to the ol' "Roadmap for the Off-Season" , just take a look at what some of the players that I had suggested the Indians add have signed for with their new clubs:

Brandon Webb – 1 year, $3M with incentives to make contract potentially worth $8M to $10M
Zach Duke – 1 year, $4.25M
Matt Diaz – 2 years, $4.25M
Jesse Crain – 3 years, $13M

Don't take this to mean that I don't think that any or all of those guys could have helped the Indians - just not at those numbers. Additionally, realize that the suggestion that any of those guys could have been added represented suggestions for ancillary pieces, which would have totaled $13.5M ($3M for Webb not taking incentives into account, $4M for Crain, $4.25M for Duke, $2.25M for Diaz) for 2011 with future commitments still out there for Crain ($9M after this

year) and Diaz ($2M after 2011) past the coming season.

Realizing that those names were thrown out there by me, does the addition of those 4 players make the Indians a contender in 2011 or make a difference past that, or does it simply make 2011 a little more palatable while making the Indians look “active” in the off-season, even if that activity was akin to spinning wheels?

Maybe if everything breaks right and all of those guys pan out, but wouldn’t the time to add even a moderately significant piece come after the young players have had a chance to assert themselves into what look like gaping organizational holes?

Certainly everyone would like to see the Indians more competitive from Opening Day and there were interesting pieces out there (Xavier Nady, who went to the D-Backs for $1.75M, DJ Carrasco, who the Mets inked for a total of $2.5M) who would have helped the team for nominal amounts and there are still options out there that could make sense for the Indians that elicit more confidence than adding Bartolo Colon (and that picture there is of him last week, so let’s hold off on the “he’s in great shape” talk) to the Goodyear mix, but to what end?

There are LHP that could be added to the rotation like Jeff Francis, whose 5.00 ERA may scare some folks, until you see that his 3.92 FIP (Fielding Independent Pitching) as a starter last year put him 35th among all NL starters with more than 100 IP. He would certainly upgrade the rotation as, for some comparison on that, the only Indians’ starter with more than 100 IP to have a FIP lower was Justin Masterson, whose 3.93 FIP far outpaced his “competition” in the Tribe rotation. Past Francis, they could take a look at a LH arms like Chris Capuano, who missed the 2008 and 2009 seasons due to injuries, but returned in 2010 to post a 3.95 ERA and a 1.30 WHIP in 66 IP for the Brewers last year, or Bruce Chen, who posted his lowest ERA since 2005 and put up the lowest FIP of his career last year with the Royals.

An starter still makes sense to me in that it allows the young pitchers (namely Huff, Gomez, and Tomlin) start the season in Columbus and earn their way onto the parent club instead of falling backwards into the 5th starter spot…it’s just that I’m not interested in giving a pitcher like Kevin Correia a 2-year deal worth $8M to accommodate that competition in AAA.

By the same token, an argument could be made that players like Jon Rauch or Chad Durbin make sense for the Tribe to add a RH veteran arm to their bullpen given their youth and what we’ve seen from bullpens in the past few years, but the designation of Justin Germano (ahead

of Trevor Crowe and Jordan Brown…just to name two) put forth the idea that the Tribe is comfortable going with a lot of promising unknowns in the bullpen for 2011.

However, depending upon what kinds of contracts those players (Capuano or Chen or Rauch) are going to command, it could be argued that throwing guaranteed money at any of these guys is akin to that missing the “Dollars Spent Wisely” column that we started off with.

That being said, I have a suspicion that the Indians will attempt to find some value at the lower end of the FA market as they’ve done successfully in the past, with Pavano two years ago and with Kearns last year. A trade would certainly still be possible as Mark DeRosa was added for three promising young relievers (one of whom, Chris Archer, has developed into a bona-fide prospect) and the Indians are flush with promising young relievers. Maybe they add a guy on a Minor League deal that bears no fruit or maybe they pull another pleasant surprise out of the bargain bin…frankly, I’m not losing sleep over it.

However, it bears repeating again (even though I feel like a broken record in this respect) in that the Indians have been down this path of rebuilding just 6 or 7 years ago. Given that essentially the same Front Office is in place, the off-season between the 2003 and 2004 seasons is instructive as the Indians made no major additions, instead choosing to play their young talent for the 2004 season and for the seasons that followed.

When that in-house young talent blossomed, they locked them up in long-term deals and had the “core” of players signed through the 2010 season, with only one notable exception. Maybe they should have added more than they did after 2005 and after 2007 to take one big run at a World Series trophy, but the seeds of the success of the 2005 and 2007 seasons were sewn in 2003 and 2004.

Whether similar seeds have taken root this past year or in the next few years will eventually produce a garden as it did in the mid-to-late-2000s remains to be seen and time will be a major determining factor. As painful as it was to see the “garden” cultivated from 2002 to 2008 ripped up and sold at market, the Indians have to hope that the newly planted seeds will bear the same fruit and if, this time, they can sustain in a way that they were unable to in the past few years.