As the North Coast is coated in another couple of inches (feet) of snow – although we're actually suited for this stuff and a couple of inches (feet) doesn't generally cause "Lockdown Mode" – and with the Cavaliers coming off of their worst loss in franchise history, the tenor in Northeast Ohio regarding sports (and the city/county/region) is at the lowest point in recent memory. With that being the case, now would be a perfect time for the national sports media to join the local sports media in telling us how terrible things are...at least as they perceive them to be.

That being said (and I won't let that glass go anywhere below half-full), let's get some Tomahawks in the air, if only so I can straighten up to see them instead of being bent over a snow shovel...

_____

By now, you've likely seen the piece on ESPN by Jerry Crasnick that is called "Indians follow the Cleveland Way"
, with it appearing on the sidebar later among "Most Sent Stories on ESPN.com" in the day as "Crasnick: Indians keeping Cleveland Down"...no, seriously
.

The Indians are keeping Cleveland down? The “Cleveland Way”?
Oof...well, you know where this is going…

Obviously, the opening paragraph contain the unbelievably pervasive “Woe is Cleveland” stuff that we can’t escape from the national (and local) media and continues with the trite drivel that’s going to come in one of these pieces as he actually writes “the Indians have also done their share to stoke the city’s reputation as Depression Central” and that “Antonetti must feel like the teenager who got his driver’s license, snagged the keys to the family car and then found out that dad (in this case, the Dolan family) wasn’t willing to spring for the cost of gas and insurance.”

At that point, the body bags are filled with toe tags attached…and he’s not even started any kind of analysis on the Indians.

Ultimately, it’s a cursory look at the lack of off-season activity on the North Coast and an attempt to encapsulate everything going on with the organization in one neat, little package. That may speak to the average fan or the “DOLANZ R CHEEP” crowd, but when Crasnick says that the Royals had a more interesting off-season because they “hastened their long-term rebuild” by trading Greinke, that’s just getting lazy, given that the Indians attempted to do the same in 2008 and 2009 when they moved THEIR Cy Young Award winners and that they’re actually attempting to avoid the “long-term rebuild” that’s been underway in KC for 20 years, with the Tribe now three seasons removed from an ALCS appearance.

As boring and dull as the off-season has been, the past two Julys have been more active than I would ever want to see in my life again, as the Indians almost completely turned over their roster in 30 months, to the point that they fielded the youngest team in MLB and figure to answer more questions about those young players in 2011. In that vein, perhaps the most interesting paragraph in the Crasnick comes when he actually seems to agree with the do-nothing off-season:
While those minor league deals for Adam Everett, Jack Hannahan, Paul Phillips,Travis Buck and Doug Mathis haven’t moved the enthusiasm meter in Cleveland, ***the Indians are probably wise not to overspend on veterans who would simply replicate what they already have*** *. The team’s two big positional question marks are second base and third base. If the alternative is overpaying for a “bridge” guy like Pedro Feliz or Jorge Cantu, the Indians would rather open the season with Jayson Nix or Jason Donald until Chisenhall is ready to make the jump from Triple-A Columbus.*

That sentence is admittedly bolded by me, but let me get this straight...the whole piece is predicated on the Indians doing nothing this off-season in FA while the rest of MLB presumably passes them by, furthering the gnashing of teeth and pulling of hair crowd, when "the Indians are probably wise not to overspend on veterans who would simply replicate what they already have"?
Am I following this?

Crasnick attempts to put a bit of a positive spin in the piece saying that "if you look carefully, there are glimmers of hope" and a look at some of the individual players, but he goes back to the well to close it out, using the "beleaguered" and "financially hamstrung" and "frigid winter" lines that we've all come to know and love from the WWL, among other sources.

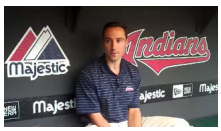
That all being said, the piece is without insight as Crasnick has a couple of quotes that provide insight on particular players and what people around the league are saying about them. To wit, there's this on Hafner:
"He's come back a little more than I thought he might, to be honest," said an American League personnel man. "A lot of people view him as a lesser player because he's making more than he's worth. But he's still a threat. It makes the opposing manager think when the guy comes to the plate."

Hafner is still a topic that needs more examination, but Crasnick has some interesting tidbits relating to another supposed slugger, reporting that LaPorta is working with a nutritionist (which Ozzie Guillen will be sad to hear about as he may not be able to call him "Fat Matt MaTola" for too much longer) and MaTola having a "slider speed bat" according to an AL scout, which is more than a little terrifying, given the fact that it is possible that he is what he is at this point in his development.

Perhaps most interestingly is the tone taken by the Indians' execs quoted in the piece as it departs from the small-market doldrums and actually sounds confident...a change in the public stance from the team, or at least the one that makes it to print. This is from a few months ago, but do you remember the whole "Flipping the Script" idea presented in this space in terms of how the Indians' Public Relations are a complete disaster, made worse every time the team (poorly) attempts to explain themselves?

Here's what I wrote as to what they should be saying...at least as a start:
They should be pointing out that they pulled this off once before and while the end result didn't flesh out the way they thought it would, they'll be damned if they're not going to do it again. They should say that the economics of baseball aren't going to dictate terms to them because they've learned from their mistakes and are creating that model franchise with a full pipeline of young players that was promised back in 2002.
--snip--
Use the bully pulpit from the corner of Carnegie and Ontario again to move away from the talk that "this is a rebuilding year again" and say that young in-house talent are unequivocally the players that are going to lead the Indians to their next appearance in the playoffs. If the Front Office TRULY believes it, come out and declare that the assembled young talent at all levels will prevent the team from going into this valley again.

Of course, my prescription called for them to be much bolder than that, but interestingly, here's what Chris Antonetti said to Crasnick:
"We've been in a similar situation before, and we've demonstrated the ability to overcome those challenges and put together a championship-caliber team," Antonetti said. "We feel equally strong about our talent base now and throughout our farm system. The challenge is to have patience and let those guys play."



That's the first quote attributed to Antonetti that takes that slant and, while he could certainly play that angle up a little more so it sounds a little more compelling and urgent than that quote, I suppose it represents a start. There are more from Antonetti in this even-handed MLB.com piece by Jordan Bastian
which, while operating under the same premise as the Crasnick piece (once you get past the "Antonetti resourcefulness" story that we've heard before) that project more of the "we've done this before" and "patience is the best path" rhetoric that the Indians should have been spouting since October.

As for final thoughts on the Crasnick piece, if you were expecting something that went more in-depth or attempted to take more than just a snapshot of the Indians as they stand now…well, then you haven't learned your lesson about getting your sports information from the 4-letter word, the one that ceased being a valuable resource for intelligent sports fan long ago, and is content to appeal to the masses and generate page views and revenue by any means necessary. This is no different and, frankly, probably the reason that you come here…

_____

One of the other interesting nuggets from the piece (remember, I didn't say it was useless) was that Antonetti still didn't rule out adding a starting pitcher, with the obligatory caveats thrown in. Since I've never been all that inclined to even take a flyer on Bart Colon (and this may completely rule him out if…you know, performance matters), let me throw another name out there that may be available and could represent a decent value-option for the rotation – Manny Parra .

Yes, I know that he's been unable to stick in the Brewers' rotation and his struggles led very clearly to the additions of Greinke and Marcum as Milwaukee has decided that Parra is not destined to be part of a potential playoff team's rotation, meaning that Parra's going to get relegated to the role of long man or to the bullpen, but what would it take to pry him out of the Cream City – maybe Crowe (as a 4th OF or to "complement" Carlos Gomez in CF...though neither can hit LHP) and some other ancillary pieces to Milwaukee?

Certainly some of Manny Parra's numbers are downright frightening – a 5.02 ERA, 1.62 WHIP line in 2010 and a 6.36 ERA, 1.83 WHIP line in 2009 – so why would the Indians even be interested in a guy like Parra?

Well, he's LHP and while that may not mean much, let's look past ERA and WHIP to some advanced metrics and how Parra stacks up with pitchers that threw more than 120 innings last year:

xFIP – 3.95 (45th in MLB)

If you're not sure what FIP is, it is Fielding Independent Pitching and since it now exists, here's a great explanation of FIP that is actually easy to understand and actually fairly amusing . Taking it a step further than FIP, a variation of it is xFIP, which "attempts to adjust FIP and 'normalize' the home run component as research has shown that home runs allowed are pretty much a function of flyballs allowed and home park, so xFIP is based on the average number of home runs allowed per outfield fly". As it says here in the link to The Hardball Times , xFIP, "theoretically...should be a better predictor of a pitcher's future ERA."

Back to Parra, you know where his xFIP of 3.95 ranks?
Better than any Indians' pitcher, better than...are you ready for this...David Price, Carl Pavano, Josh Beckett, and I could go on for a while. Just check it out for yourself .

Parra is high on this list because if xFIP attempts to "normalize the HR component" and he does give up a bunch of HR (19th highest HR/9 in 2010, 26th highest HR/9 in 2009 among starters with more than 120 IP), it brings that HR/9 back to the normal numbers and adjusts his FIP (4.50 in 2010, better than Tomlin, Gomez, and certainly Huff) to that lower xFIP.

If that doesn't strike you, how about SIERA:
SIERA – 3.82 (32nd in MLB)
If you're wondering what in the world "SIERA" is, it is a stat from Baseball Prospectus that stands for "Skill-Interactive Earned Run Average"
and it "estimates ERA through walk rate, strikeout rate and ground ball rate, eliminating the effects of park, defense and luck." Essentially, it attempts to take things that pitchers cannot control out of the equation and tries to account "for how run prevention improves as ground ball rate increases and declines as more whiffs are accrued, while grounders are of more materiality for those who allow a surplus of runners". It is not all that different than FIP or xFIP, but it takes into account the fact that ground balls are generally preferable to line drives or fly balls and adjusts the number accordingly.

Back to Parra again, if you're wondering where he sits in the SIERA rankings for 2010, that number bests David Price, Gavin Floyd, Matt Cain, among many others.

In case you're wondering, the best numbers put forth by a Tribe pitcher last year was, for both metrics, Justin Masterson with his 3.98 xFIP and his 3.83 SIERA...both of which Parra bested in 2010.

So, if both of these metrics attempts to measure what a pitcher can control, why is Parra going to be relegated to the bullpen in Milwaukee and why have his ERA and WHIP simply not translated through if his pitching – taking out luck and fielding, among other things – put him in some rarified air among MLB pitchers?

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]