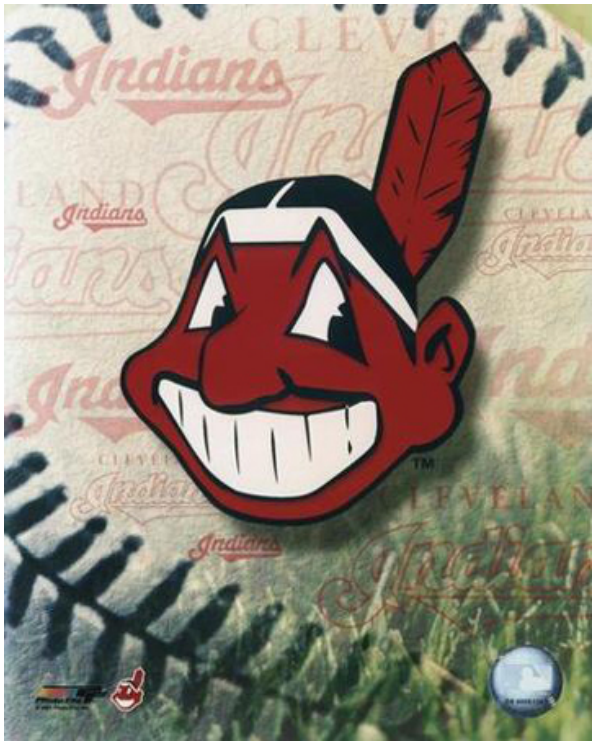

Our beloved Cleveland Indians general managers -- Chris Antonetti and Mark Shapiro before him -- have been saying for the past three years that they expect the team to become contenders in 2012 or 2013. Contenders not just for the playoffs but for an American League pennant.

Taking the GMs at their word, the temptation is to not place too much emphasis on the Tribe's 2011 performance. Yet the season that begins in two short weeks will be pivotal. *Repeat: … will be pivotal!* The youngsters must start seeing themselves as bona fide major leaguers who can win as a team. Not only that, but fans, management and ownership must be given reason to be optimistic heading into next winter.

There is some historical precedence for progressive growth across the span of two or three seasons. In 1993, the Tribe was 76-86. In the strike-shortened 1994 season, they improved to 66-47 and led the Central Division, suggesting a portent of things to come. One year later, they went to the World Series after winning 100 regular-season games -- second-most in team history.

Thus, 2011 will be either a good bellwether or a bad bellwether. A third straight season of fewer

than 70 victories would be a train wreck; but a break-even 81-81 season would give the team some impetus going into the next two make-or-break seasons.

Not to rehash 2010 too much because it's now behind us, but a number of unforeseen factors retarded the team's growth. Key among them? Injuries, compounded by the inconsistency of youth.

With an average age of 26.06, the Tribe finished last season with the youngest roster in the majors. Grady Sizemore played only 33 games because of a knee injury that required season-ending surgery; Asdrubal Cabrera missed two months with a fractured forearm; rookie catcher Carlos Santana's year came to a premature end when he needed knee surgery. Sizemore, Cabrera and Shin-Soo Choo -- the three core position players -- were in the same lineup just 28 times.

So it became a year of roster experimentation for manager Manny Acta. Choo, Travis Hafner, Trevor Crowe, Jayson Nix and Matt LaPorta were the only players who appeared in as many as 100 games.

According to Indians.com, "it was a rebuilding year in every sense, as the Indians evaluated their internal talent to determine what players can help them in 2011 and beyond." Here's what we saw:

>> Choo is the best hitter on the club, capable of hitting .300 with 22 HRs and 90 RBIs.

>> Hafner is a mere shadow of himself. He hit .278 with just 13 HRs and 50 RBIs, and he can't play -- not even DH -- every day.

>> Though Santana was as good as advertised (.868 OPS), Michael Brantley (.623 OPS) and LaPorta (.668 OPS) did not live up to expectations. All three were hurt or nursing injuries at some point.

>> Despite untold potential, the team appears to lack power. When Nix is your team's second-leading HR hitter, you're in trouble.

>> Lou Marson (.195 BA) and Luis Valbuena (.193 BA) don't appear to be major-league hitters.

>> Fausto Carmona (13-14, 3.77 ERA) can be a very good starter, and Chris Perez (23 saves, 1.71 ERA) can be a very good closer.

>> Carlos Carrasco and Mitch Talbot have some potential as starters.

>> Chad Durbin (4-1, 3.81 with Philadelphia last year) is a welcome addition to the bullpen.

What People Are Saying…

Though none of the major sports outlets on the Web have come out with predictions, most lesser-known prognosticators believe that the Indians will again finish fourth in the A.L. Central. Here's a sampling from various Websites and blogs:

>> "The best news for the Cleveland Indians this off-season was Shin Soo Choo avoiding his mandatory military duty for South Korea. Other than that, well ... actually that's it."

>> "The Indians will need to add some veterans. The pickings could be slim when they realize what they have isn't worth very much."

>> "They are nowhere close to sniffing a shot at the World Series. It is going to be another year of the Indians battling the Royals for the A.L. Central cellar."

>> “A team full of young players and rough diamonds that need to be polished. This could be an interesting year for the Indians and their new talents, who will need to prove themselves on the field.”

>> “Cleveland is definitely in rebuilding mode, and 2011 is likely to be very ugly. As Harry Doyle says, ‘There are a lot of new faces in Chief Wahoo’s tribe this year, and we hope to have some of the names that go with those faces before their first at-bat.’”

>> “Only the Kansas City Royals have worse odds to win the A.L. pennant. The Indians appear a lot closer to the Royals than they do to the Tigers, Twins or White Sox.”

Success in the Balance

The success of this year’s team will depend on a number of factors, none of which are predictable in any way, shape or form (listed in order of importance):

1) Development of the second, third, fourth and fifth starters. Two: Justin Masterson (26 years old; 6-13, 4.70 ERA last year). Three: Talbot (27, 10-13, 4.41). Four: Carrasco (24, 2-2, 3.83). Five: David Huff, Jeanmar Gomez or Josh Tomlin.

2) Continued improvement from Brantley and LaPorta. Brantley eventually needs to become a Kenny Lofton clone, and LaPorta has to hit more than one homer every 31.3 at-bats.

3) Carmona. The Opening Day starter for the second consecutive year, he cannot afford too many outings like he had earlier this week.

4) Sizemore’s health. He will still be rehabilitating his knee rather than opening the season with the parent club. He must come back in May as the Sizemore who once appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* (or at least a reasonable facsimile thereof).

5) Finding someone who can field a ground ball and make an accurate 127-foot throw from third base to first base -- consistently.

6) Choo's RBIs. If he can hit the magic number of 100, the Tribe's offense should be good enough to win at least half the games (unless the pitching staff does a complete meltdown).

No Write-Offs Allowed

If you're a true Tribe fan, don't be over-eager to write off this coming season. It's way, way more important than you may think. The operative word is growth.