Mark Shapiro and Phil Savage. Contrasts in style. Where one is passive, consumed by statistics and paralyzed by analysis, the other has displayed an almost reckless sense of now. Whether it turns out better for one than the other remains to be seen but there is no chance that if the Browns fail it will be because Savage didn't act. In his latest for us, Gary talks about the stark differences between Savage and Shapiro and how they approached seasons of high expectations in 2008.

The race to write off the Cleveland Indians season probably began for most in late April. Let's hope the race to write off the Browns season doesn't begin in late September.

Cleveland fans so conditioned for disappointment, particularly after watching this baseball season crash and burn this year in spectacular fashion, it will be completely understandable if the fans want to storm the Cleveland Stadium gates if the Browns start the season 1-3. There's every chance of course that the Browns could actually start that way, but if they do it won't be because its front office stood pat. In fact and if anything, it will be because they tried too hard.

Standing in stark contrast with Indians general manager Mark Shapiro is Browns general manager Phil Savage. Where one is passive, consumed by statistics and paralyzed by analysis, the other has displayed an almost reckless sense of now. Whether it turns out better for one than the other remains to be seen but there is no chance that if the Browns fail it will be because Savage didn't act.

When a team has a deep talent void, the job of the general manager can be much

easier. Almost any player he chooses is likely to be an upgrade and thus it's easy to miscalculate the real value of the moves that are made.

Shapiro made absolutely the right move when he determined that the Indians of the mid and late 1990s needed to be rebuilt. He hatched a plan to get young and good by trading Bartolo Colon for prospects. He assembled some other young talent as well, signed most of it to above-market contracts based on their years of service, and then has been mostly content to watch its uneven development.

To a certain extent, it seems that Shapiro's inaction the last few season was brought on by a false sense that he had truly built a juggernaut in the making. He wasn't the only one that thought so. There have been budget concerns, of course, but how else really to explain the kind of fringe moves that Shapiro has made the last few years? In retrospect, by failing to stay vigilant to the plan he initially hatched, Shapiro now faces another rebuilding job, even if he doesn't admit it publicly.

Savage, too, made absolutely the right decision in invoking an extreme makeover. The pre-Savage Browns were mostly a yearly embarrassment, nearly barren in legitimate NFL players. Almost any progress would have been appreciated, and there was some early, but unlike some of Shapiro's early moves with the Indians, Savage's early moves didn't show the same kind of visible progress. Savage's steadfast support of head coach Romeo Crennel is a good example.

Though Savage counseled patience, he remained quite active. When things got dicey so committed was Savage to his plan that he almost walked out in protest during a power struggle with then team president John Collins. Having prevailed, Savage has since been even bolder and focused on winning as much as quickly as possible. Savage, like Shapiro, would obviously like to build a machine like the one in New England. But for the time being, and much unlike Shapiro, Savage seems to want at least least one championship season first and then let the chips fall where they may thereafter.

Certainly the trade that brought in quarterback Brady Quinn was firm evidence of a general manager seeking more than gradual progress. But the rebuilding of the defensive line, easily the team's weakest link in 2007, was actually an even bolder move considering the circumstances. Coming off a 10-6 season, which usually is good enough to make the playoffs, it would have been easy to conclude that all this young team needed was another year to gel.

But here is where Savage and Shapiro parted ways. Savage wasn't mesmerized by the lure of having a team on the brink. He well understood its weaknesses and went about trying to fix them quickly. It may have cost the Browns a viable defensive backfield in the process, but you had to applaud the effort. One gets the sense that if Savage had been more like Shapiro he would have found more reasons than not to stand pat than move forward.

There really is no right formula when you have a team on the brink. It's a fair point to suggest that indeed sometimes all a good young team needs is another season together. But if you're going to go down that road, you just as often end up sacrificing greatness in order to be good. Make the gamble too many years in a row and pretty soon good is sacrificed as well.

One of the object lessons of business school is that standing still is rarely an option. With shareholders to please and customers to serve, companies simply can't afford to relax even after a great year. There's always someone trying to knock you off your perch. These competitive pressures mandate a near constant reassessment of every aspect of your operations. Continuous improvement may be consultant-speak, but its underlying message is sound.

So too is it in professional sports, as big a business as most anything else. Fans serve the dual role of shareholder and customer and their expectations never change. They too want a solid return on the time and money invested. They want a championship now and they're tired of waiting. And even if you just won one championship the next loss is so much an issue of what have you done for me lately? If you own or run a professional sports team and really crave success then

you can't just stay static either. With so many moving parts around you, staying still is really moving backward.

The Indians playoff experience last season was in many ways like the Browns playoff near miss. Both raised reasonable expectations that both teams were about success and were just about there. But where Shapiro got complacent, Savage got hungry.

That doesn't mean that all of Shapiro's decisions have been wrong or that Savage's moves have been all right. In fact, both have a healthy dose of hits and misses over the years. But when it was most necessary to begin the really hard work of stepping up or stepping aside, the edge certainly goes to Savage. Whether that will yield different results is up for grabs. But if it doesn't Cleveland fans will be even more apoplectic then usual for there is nothing worse than not knowing where to turn next.