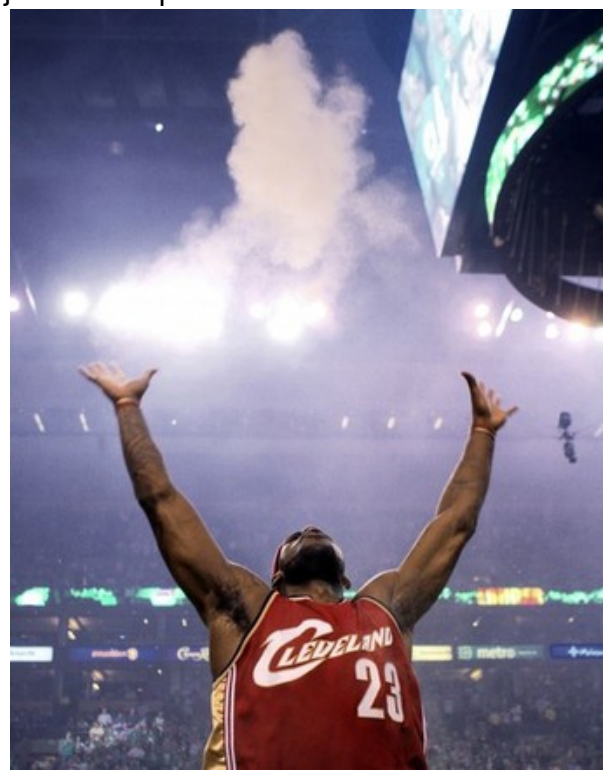
Gary checks into his usual spot with Lingering Items, and tackles a host of interesting topics this Saturday. First, Gary talks about the dominance of LeBron James, who has his game at an all together different level than any one else on the planet right now. Gary then hits on the extreme makeover Mark Shapiro just performed on the struggling Indians and also gives us his thoughts on Manny Ramirez, who just tested positive for a banned substance and now finds himself nearly $7 million poorer.



Watching LeBron James against the Atlanta Hawks on Thursday night reminded me of the statement Bobby Jones once made about Jack Nicklaus, "he plays a game with which I'm not familiar." Jones' regarded in his prime as one of the game's greatest players, could only marvel at Nicklaus.

In heaping one of the greatest accolades one superstar could ever bestow on another, Jones' point was that as good as he was Nicklaus was playing the game at an all together different level than any one else on the planet.

That's exactly where James is at the moment. The NBA is filled with great talents.

But James is different.

He steps on the court and the opposing players already know they're beat.

He's Tiger Woods winning the U.S. Open by 10 strokes.

Everyone else is playing for second place.

At this point there simply are not enough superlatives to describe his play. String together a dozen or so of your favorite adjectives and you still can't adequately describe his artistry and athleticism.

It goes beyond his physical gifts.

Like Tiger Woods and Nicklaus before him, James is mentally stronger than anyone else on the court.

He knows what the opposition is thinking even before they do and they know it. They also know they can't contain him let alone stop him.

If you're going to beat the Cavs, the focus has to be on stopping everyone else.

The question I keep asking myself is whether or not Cleveland fans fully comprehend the player that in their midst is the game's greatest player playing at his best. It's a difficult concept to grasp, especially in a town like this. The closest Cleveland fans have come to a similar circumstance is when Jim Brown played for the Browns.

But he retired 45 years ago.
Those memories have more than faded. Cleveland teams have had their share of great players since but only in that rare case have they had the game's best player in his prime.

James being named MVP recently is just a public confirmation of his current status to the outside world. But as is typical those kinds of awards sometimes trail the actual accomplishments. Just like Woods chasing down Nicklaus' legacy, the focus on James now is on when, not if, he'll chase down Michael Jordan's legacy.

Like Woods, James is off to a great start.

If all of this doesn't translate into a NBA championship this season for the Cavs,

that will be a major disappointment. But it won't diminish what James already has accomplished nor will it impede all that's left for him to do.

James will win a championship, probably several.

The chosen ones always do.

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The Cleveland Indians have barely made it through the first week of May and already they've had two significant makeovers. Whether that is just general manager Mark Shapiro being proactive or whether he's panicking almost doesn't matter. What does is that the Indians team he put together in the lab this past winter isn't gelling as hoped.

And if this latest concoction fares no better it will reverberate long after this season is in the books.

In the offseason, Shapiro said that he had learned some lessons from the previous seasons by acknowledging that his lack of action in the past hurt the Tribe just when it seemed on the cusp of being a real contender. By essentially overestimating the potential of those teams he more or less stood pat in the offseason (last year is a nice example) and assumed that another year of growth by the current crop was all that was needed to move to the next level.

Nice theory. Next.

Though the Indians were at times downright miserable to watch last season, there was growth in the second half that justifiably offered some optimism. That's the reason that Shapiro allegedly went over budget to fortify the bullpen and the bench, the two areas more than any other that cost the team last year.

The early returns haven't been promising.

Given where this team stands, the question all this naturally begs is whether Shapiro just doesn't have what it takes to be a successful general manager. One year he stands pat and gets burned.

The next he spends more money than seems prudent given the economy and still gets burned.

If it's not incompetence then maybe it's just bad luck.

Shapiro certainly has his shortcomings. He's arrogant to a fault. He overemphasizes small gains and minimizes setbacks.

He often buries himself in too much research instead of trusting what he actually sees on the field.

But for all that, Shapiro is not a bad general manager, not by any reasonable measure anyway.

What fans often forget is how difficult it is to be a general manager in this market in this sport. Baseball doesn't do its business any favors by letting certain teams run amok financially as others struggle. It also doesn't help that the business is entrusted to the absolute worst commissioner in the history of organized sports. So powerless is Bud Selig to bring the gravitas of his position down around its stakeholders to goad them into making the fundamental changes necessary to survive and thrive that the sport would be better off if it simply abolished his office and sent him back to Milwaukee.

In other words, even before the first personnel decision gets made in Cleveland, Shapiro or whoever is in that position, is essentially coming to the plate with a 0-2 count. The next factor is the Indians ownership. Whatever their financial

wherewithal might be, one thing is crystal clear: the Dolans will not dip into their personal fortunes to run this team.

It rises and falls on its various revenues.

That's not a criticism. The Dolans are prudent businessmen in that sense. But owning a professional sports franchise is sometimes about more than just being prudent.

There has to be a little flair to it.

You have to take some risks.

That's where the Dolans have always fallen short.

Some would argue, correctly, that the Indians' current payroll is a risk because there simply is no way that the revenue expected to be generated out of the local economy this year will ever be sufficient to support that payroll. This is true, but payroll isn't a static concept.

If the Indians don't generate some wins and put themselves into contention in the next 30-45 days, they'll have no hope of reaching their projected attendance level.

That means come July they'll be cutting payroll faster than General Motors. Count on it.

With all of these obstacles in front of him, it's a wonder Shapiro can find a way to do much of anything each offseason, at least when it comes to making a meaningful impact. The budget constraints Shapiro faces each season aren't theoretical. They lead him or whoever sits in that chair to a player acquisition strategy that relies heavily on trying to pick the pockets of other teams' general managers through trades and trying to find "value" players from the league's free agent bargain bin.

It's hit or miss and always will be.

Shapiro can talk all he wants about fielding a competitive team each season and he most certainly means it. The reality is that it's simply not possible. Even when the Indians have good young players, Shapiro can't make long-term plans because he knows that sooner rather than later their talent will exceed the Indians' ability to pay them.

It's frustrating that the Indians aren't better. It's frustrating that there aren't any leaders on this team. And while some of this is clearly Shapiro's fault given that he is the one making the personnel decisions, it's also the inevitable outgrowth of a financially constrained team in an economically constrained town playing in a fiscally unmanaged sport.

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The news that L.A. Dodgers outfielder Manny Ramirez tested positive for a banned substance and now finds himself nearly $7 million poorer and sitting out almost a third of the season was just another reminder of how illegal drugs continue to haunt the game of baseball.

This news came on the heels of a recent roundtable Selig and the commissioners of the other major professional sports had with the Wall Street Journal. Selig, by this point so used to the question that he now answers it in rote terms, was asked about steroid use in baseball.

Doing his earnest best he said it wasn't that he didn't want to know or that he was in denial for all those years, he just didn't know.

He then broadened the answer to wistfully remind people how easy it is to look back 10 or 15 years later on almost anything and say "you should have known."

Well, neither the Ramirez issue nor the steroid use of Alex Rodriguez were 10 or 15 years ago but of far more recent vintage, so the usual Bud-speak once again doesn't withstand even surface level scrutiny. All these issues do is remind everyone how Selig and the union under Donald Fehr have essentially conspired to ruin the sport.

Selig's oft-repeated mantra that he didn't know is starting to wear awfully thin as the superstars of the sport continue to crumble around him. Selig's one true talent is his abject ability to convince himself of anything, reality notwithstanding.

Baseball is literally riddled with cheaters and has been for years and Selig can't discern a pattern?

Meanwhile, every time a story like that of Ramirez comes out Fehr goes into full Dick Cheney mode and hides in a bunker until the initial smoke clears. Eventually he comes out to mutter his oft-repeated mantra about how the union doesn't condone the use of banned substances and how his group and the owners have worked together to create a strong anti-drug program.

The difference between Selig and Fehr, though, is that Fehr is hardly in denial. H e knows that the drug program is a joke and simply doesn't care.

His attitude is and always has been one of allowing the players to get away with almost anything if it raises their salaries.

He cares about the good of the game about as much as the Octomom cares about bad publicity.

As for Ramirez, he is now and forevermore branded as a cheater and deservedly so. He was a certain Hall of Famer until this. He may still get there but there always will be a question of the legitimacy of his statistics, just likethose of Barry

Bonds and Mark McGwire. This situation isn't just another episode in the long running series "Manny being Manny."

It is another episode in the equally long but even more sad series "Cheaters Like Us."

Ramirez's official press release reads like something crafted by call center workers in Sri Lanka but makes far less sense. It's possible that Ramirez really wasn't trying to mask steroid use but that his doctor prescribed a female fertility drug for him because he was having trouble ovulating.

I'd hate to think that Ramirez was really a male impersonator all these years, but then again has anyone actually ever seen him naked?

The most telling aspect of Ramirez's half-hearted apology is the simple fact that he isn't appealing his suspension. That speaks volumes about his level of culpability. But then again maybe he's learning the lessons from the well-worn paths of the other superstars before him.

Admit and move on, like Andy Pettite, and you'll get through it sooner.

Protest too loudly, like Roger Clemens, and the story never ends.

When Ramirez had difficulty getting a long-term contract this past off season and the Dodgers were the only team bidding for his services, the economy looked like the culprit. Maybe Selig is so clueless that he couldn't tell, but it certainly looks like a lot of general managers had an idea what was really up.

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This week's question to ponder is probably the same one Bud Selig is probably

asking himself: Who is the next baseball superstar to be linked to steroids?