At least Chris Antonetti is polite. The Cleveland Indians general manager met with the media earlier in the week to give the typical GM mea culpea that usually follows a disaster of a season that resulted in someone other than the GM getting fired. Such is the state of affairs in Cleveland with the Indians where everything changes and yet remains remarkably the same.

There's been no rush by anyone to defend former manager Manny Acta, meaning that no one much is questioning his firing. But as I recall no one much questioned his hiring even though he had flamed out in Washington while trying to guide a talentless roster through turbulent times. Why anyone except Antonetti and Mark Shapiro and The Dolans thought that Acta would be any different trying to guide this talentless roster through turbulent times really tells you pretty much all you need to know about why things do remain remarkably the same with the Indians having just experience ANOTHER 90+ loss season.

The players aren't always the best guide in determining the effectiveness of their boss so taking their word on anything is always risky. Especially risky is giving any weight to anything Chris Perez has to say. I like the fact that he's quotable and media friendly and I hope that as long as he remains in the game he stays exactly that way. But simply because he speaks his mind shouldn't be confused in any sense that his comments are particularly well thought out. Most often they aren't.

The Indians problems didn't walk about the door once Manny Acta was told to gather his personal belongings and exit stage left, as Perez claimed. The Indians are being run by the Mad Magzine equivalent of the Usual Gang of Idiots and their problems really are rooted in incredibly poor decision-making at these higher levels. Acta had just failed in almost identical circumstances and here he was now being told to succeed. Just as Acta, barely breathing, couldn't yell competence into players who weren't, so couldn't the Gang of Idiots running the team suddenly turn Acta into a successful manager.

The chain of command that is the Indians is responsible foremost for the utter disaster of a season. There's nothing wrong with living life on a budget and the Oakland As again proved that good things can come when good decision making is the skill most valued on a team with limited financial resources.

So in that sense let's get past the notion that the Dolans, simply because they lack enough financial wherewithal to be major league owners, are killing this team in and of itself through a small budget. More funds would help, but their far bigger sin given their finances is that they couple it with incredibly poor decision making.

Why, for example, they wouldn't hold either Shapiro or Antonetti or, preferably, both responsible for the way the season went and simply sacrifice Acta is a question that hasn't been answered and probably never will, at least adequately. The Dolans are the ones that promoted Shapiro even though nothing about the way he was running the team as general manager suggested that the promotion was deserved.

You can find individual situations that worked and even a season or two that went OK under Shapiro but the evidence against his overall tenure is far more damning. When Shapiro was promoted to club president the team was in worse shape from a talent perspective then when he became general manager. It wasn't then poised to be competitive and still isn't. Shapiro is respected because he's been around, cleans up nice and is rapid fire with the kind of buzzwords that often mask actual ability, but he isn't respected because he's accomplished great things. Name one, just one.

Shapiro, having kept his job, continued to demonstrate his lack of competence by retaining Antonetti, who was a bad hire from the outset. Antonetti was basically in charge of the Indians' drafting process before taking over as general manager and of all the weak links in the organization, player development has been the weakest.

There have been plenty of excuses for this such as the Indians deliberately avoiding players in the draft who had signed with certain agents because they knew they couldn't meet the agent's financial demands for the player. But those are just excuses. Over time, and under Antonetti's specific direction, the Indians consistently made the wrong choices in the draft to the point that there were no viable players they could plug into this team this season when all the levees around the team failed at the same time. And let's face it, the levees all failing at the same time wasn't an accident but was the result of maintenance done on the cheap for years coalescing

just as August beckoned.

In his role as general manager, Antonetti has shown an amazing level of consistency in perpetuating his bad decisions. I applauded then and still do the idea of the Ubaldo Jimenez trade because it was bold and the timing was right. This team needed some boldness. But big risk comes with either big rewards or big problems. This came with big problems because of massive misjudgments regarding the players involved in that trade. A major part of the reason Antonetti makes so much money is precisely because he is the one that has to take the fall for those decisions.

Then there were the free agent signings, if you can call them that, of this past season. Everyone except Antonetti apparently saw them as wrongheaded, at the very least and that's what they turned out to be. It's as if Antonetti was given $75 and told to buy a enough food to sustain his family for a week and instead spent $70 of it on lottery tickets and the other $5 on soda and potato chips. The lottery tickets were all losers and the soda and potato chips weren't good for anything more than a snack and when it was over the fans, as usual, were starving.

This culture of decision making at the Indians is what is killing this franchise. Whoever the Indians hire as the next manager, be it Sandy Alomar or Terry Francona, will be fine in and of itself. Both are qualified, one more so than the other. But let's not anyone pretend that it will make a difference. Antonetti will be making player acquisition and roster decisions and Shapiro will be doing whatever it is he does and the Dolans will do whatever it is they do. Until the top of this pyramid becomes better decision makers this team will continue to the same path as the Pittsburgh Pirates and the Kansas City Royals.

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Speaking of decision making, new Cleveland Browns owner in waiting, Jimmy Haslam III, has

let it be known that no major decisions will get made until after the year is over. That's as it should be, of course.

It doesn't mean that Mike Holmgren will stick around. He very well could leave of his own accord. But for those worried that Tom Heckert might leave mid year or those begging for Pat Shurmur to leave mid year, neither appears likely, except that I don't know how even a new owner holds on to Shurmur if this team doesn't win a game soon.

I wonder, though, whether Haslam has seen or will see NFL Films' latest installment of A Football Life entitled "Cleveland '95." It's a terrific history lesson on decision making, taking the long view and making sure an owner understands his place in the grand scheme of things.

The documentary on the Browns' 1995 season was fascinating, at the very least. The narrator made the point early on that if you were there then you can't forget. Actually, you can. The overall injustice lingers and should. The details though got lost to time.

The Browns were 11-5 in 1994 and won a playoff game under Bill Belichick. The 1994 season had been 3 years in the making. Art Modell, to his credit, gave Belichick enough freedom to overhaul the franchise the way he saw fit and Belichick, to his credit, work tirelessly toward that goal even if he acted like an asshole publicly while doing so.

The success wasn't immediate though in context to Browns 2.0 wasn't so bad. The team went 6-10 then 7-9 and 7-9 in Belichick's first three seasons. But anyone remembering those seasons remembers them mostly for all of the competitive losses the team piled up, similar to how this current Browns team piles up competitive losses.

Then it all came together in 1994 and the Browns really did seem on the precipice. Indeed, the team was picked as a Super Bowl contender in 1995. After starting off 3-1, Modell then sabotaged the season by striking a deal with Baltimore to move the team. The players were every bit as dispirited as the fans. So were the coaches. And as Belichick says now, with every bit of sarcasm that only a Browns fan could love, he kept looking around for help from Modell but he wasn't to be found. Modell was off in Baltimore, hiding.

When the wreckage of that season was completed, the Browns stood at 5-11. And everything that Belichick had built, and it was formidable, had been mostly wasted when Modell stupidly fired him.

Modell and his apologists can reinvent history all they want, but Modell was a terrible decision maker. He twice fired Hall of Fame coaches and though he ended up with one Super Bowl it was more the product of a system that Belichick built in Cleveland that, as Ozzie Newsome admitted in the documentary, he simply continued in Baltimore. Newsome has been successful in keeping the Ravens consistently in the contenders conversation but the team hasn't nearly reached the heights that Belichick has with the New England Patriots, a team he rebuilt much like he was rebuilding the Browns.

The larger point though for Haslam is that these are lessons in decision making in the context of professional sports he needs to learn mostly from the way decisions turn out for those whose processes are flawed. Modell was emotional and impetuous. He lacked a both a moral center (obviously) and a fully developed business sense. On the one hand he would give Belichick the freedom to rebuild which shows a level of understanding on how it all works but on the other hand even though he could see the tangible results fired him anyway because Belichick couldn't pump air into the balloon that Modell deliberately and irresponsibly deflated during that '95 season. Then there's a revealing moment in the Cleveland '95 documentary where Newsome recalls that Modell preferred the Ravens draft a quarterback instead of Jonathan Ogden. Maybe Modell finally got too tired for the fight but he let Newsome make the pick the team needed instead of the one Modell wanted and as a result Ogden stabilized the offensive line like only few others of that ilk can. Ogden's arrival made a Super Bowl quarterback out of Trent Dilfer.

Haslam could also learn plenty from how the Dolans dither over their team. Trust, when the only goal is stability, isn't any better formula for success than constantly changing directions while the game is still being played. I don't think that Holmgren and Heckert sink to the level of Shapiro and Antonetti, but if Haslam stays with them merely for stability and not for vision, then the mindless, endless wandering through the desert will continue.

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