Great column this morning from Gary Benz, who has been an excellent new addition for us here at The Blurbs. In it, he takes a closer look at Mark Shapiro's radio telling radio interview earlier this week. He says it was classic Shapiro. In-depth and substantive in a way no other team official would dare allow and yet so full of spin as to make one question, upon reflection, whether he said anything at all.

It's always been apparent that Indians GM Mark Shapiro rubs some people the wrong way. Some find him arrogant and others find him to be just so much the spin master. In that regard, such folks equate Shapiro with former Browns president and part-owner, Carmen Policy. That seems unfair.

Policy, in his short time here, went from beloved to bemoaned. When the Browns first came back to the league, a guy like Policy almost seemed necessary because, like Kevin Bacon's character in the movie "Animal House", we needed to be told to remain calm and that all was well while the train was careening unabated off the tracks. But after the sheen of the Browns return began to wear off through one colossal personnel screw-up after another by the Policy-led Browns, most grew tired of his act. In short, he lacked credibility. But Policy at least had the moxy and insight to know that he was wearing out his welcome and thus jumped shipped before he was pushed.

Shapiro, on the other hand, is a much more substantive guy. He may come across like Policy at times, but Shapiro at least knows from where he speaks. He can talk in depth about the 38th best prospect in the Indians farm system, for example. And while he tries to put the best face on most things, you often can tell between the lines that he's really doing the best he can with the cards being dealt by the Dolans.

The radio “interview” WTAM sports troll Mike Trivisonno “conducted” with Shapiro earlier this week was classic Shapiro. (When referencing any on-air exchange between the buffoonish Trivisonno and a team official, it is difficult to use the words “interview” and “conducted” unless it is well understood by all that such activities consist alternatively of offering up fawning praise and softball questions.) It was in-depth and substantive in a way no other team official would dare allow and yet so full of spin as to make one question, upon reflection, whether he said anything at all.

Not to continue to beat a dead horse, but the exchange regarding traded closer Bob Wickman was particularly frustrating. It satisfied our urge for more information about this failed trade in the way that cotton candy satisfies a person’s hunger for food. Shapiro said, as he has said previously, that even with Wickman the Indians would only have won 5-7 more games. The tone is dismissive in the sense that a mere 5-7 more victories this last season would hardly have mattered. While a few more wins would not have gotten the Indians into the playoffs by a long shot, it may have given the fans a bit more optimism about this season, particularly if someone with the track record of Wickman was still closing games.

But the bigger problem with Shapiro’s dismissal of this fiasco is that it only tells part of the story. The truth of the matter is that this past year’s Indians team gave the closer shockingly few closing opportunities. If anyone was underutilized it was Wickman. The Tribe was either getting blown out or blowing someone out and save opportunities were generally few and far between. We tend to think of last year in that regard as an anomaly. In a more typical year, the closer would have been called on much more often. Consider, for example, that Wickman was traded with a little over a third left in the season and yet appeared in only one less game with Atlanta than he had with Cleveland. The point is that each time Shapiro tries to massage the facts to minimize Wickman’s impact, the facts get in the way. Wickman created a hole that is just not being plugged with lesser talents.

But the more entertaining portion of the “interview” was reserved for Shapiro’s plan undertaken in 2002 to make the Indians a long-term competitive team capable of winning 88-90 games a year. According to Shapiro, what he didn’t fully factor into the equation was how good the Central Division would be and how good the American League as a whole would be. It’s as if he is shocked that the rest of the Division and the League didn’t just lay down for the next four

or five years and let the Indians play catch-up.

But, as we said, this is where you have to read between the lines with Shapiro. A sharp guy like Shapiro obviously knows that every other team is trying to get better. Likewise he knows that many other teams, like Detroit, Chicago and Minnesota, were spending more money than the Tribe to get and remain competitive. He can read the same statistics that we do and probably has them broken down in more ways than anyone in their right mind should. So what Shapiro is really saying is that he's doing the best he can with the budget dollars available. And as has been well chronicled, the Indians continue to fall well short on that scale.

In the end, Shapiro basically confirmed what even the casual fan can observe: the Tribe is never likely to be that perennial competitor capable of winning 90 games every year. Because the budget dollars will always be less than optimal, the team will be in constant flux. Holes filled one year will re-open the next, only to be filled with second and third tier free agents with spotty track records and likely health problems. In other words, given how he is forced to operate, it's almost inevitable that a year like 2005 will be followed up with a year like 2006.

But to channel our best Shapiro, to all of that we'd say that while this modus operandi may play havoc on the mental and physical health of the fans, at least it gives us all something to complain about.