In Gary Benz's latest column, he examines the question many Indians fans have posed in our message forums this year: can a team be successful shopping only in the cut-out bin or does in need to buy from the designer racks once in awhile? Gary says that Mark Shapiro has been employing "Carl Logic" throughout his tenure here. And whether or not that approach can be successful is yet to be seen.

There was an interesting letter to Sheldon Ocker, Indians beat writer for the Akron Beacon Journal, published on Sunday. Given how cranky and dismissive Ocker usually is, it's a wonder why anyone bothers writing to him in the first place. But write on they do and this one asked:

After the news of Roberto Hernandez's release, I realized, ``Wow, Mark Shapiro is terrible at signing free agents." This past year, Mark brought in David Dellucci, Trot Nixon, Hernandez, Aaron Fultz, Joe Borowski and Keith Foulke.

In years past, his free agent signings were Aaron Boone, Todd Hollandsworth, Brady Anderson, Ramon Vazquez, Eduardo Perez, Jason Johnson, Brian Sikorski, Lou Merloni, Alex Cora, Jose Hernandez, Chris Magruder, Bill Selby, Chad Paronto, Shane Spencer, Jeff D'Amico, Jose Jimenez, Chad Durbin, Rick White, Scott Stewart, Ricky Gutierrez, Matt Lawton, Jason Bere (twice!), Jeff Liefer and finally Scott Sauerbeck.

Outside of Millwood, Borowski and probably Fultz and Scott Elarton, Shapiro has done awful at signing free agents.

I am not completely bashing the guy because I do realize that he has pulled off some great trades involving minor-leaguers, but that is not enough. This team has a very limited budget and, basically, money is getting thrown away to a collection of stiffs.

In answering the question, Ocker made the legitimate point that the writer was mixing in major league free agents, minor league free agents and trades. But he also pointed out what is also more or less obvious: when you're only shopping for bargains don't be surprised when it doesn't work out.

What Ocker should have done but didn't was expand on this answer by addressing the writer's real point: that Shapiro repeatedly throws money away with little or nothing to show for it.

This raises a more interesting question, which is the flip side of that same proposition: can a team be successful shopping only in the cut-out bin or does in need to buy from the designer racks once in awhile?

This kind of debate reminds me of a guy named Carl that I used to work with at a local factory. I was earning money for college and Carl was earning money for, I guess, booze. Carl used to tell me that he'd rather buy 10 cars for $100 each than one car for $1000. His logic was that occasionally one of those 10 cars would run just as well as $1000 car and he'd still have nine other cars to tinker with. Of course, Carl had trouble showing up for work on time due mostly to the unreliability of his fleet of vehicles and eventually he got fired for it but he was passionate about his theory nonetheless.

As theories go, it's fine for Shapiro to essentially utilize Carl Logic in stacking the Indians every off-season, but at some point someone in the Dolan household is going to wake up to all the money that's been frittered away and realize that maybe, just maybe, Shapiro might have been better off buying one or two quality free agents instead.

There is no dispute over why Shapiro is forced to employ Carl Logic, year after year. He simply hasn't been given the budget space within which to do anything else. But the flameouts of most of the free agent crop that Shapiro bought this last off-season just emphasizes that the Indians success to date is at least as much smoke and mirrors as anything else.

Right now, the Tribe is blessed with strong starting pitching with enough depth to withstand a fair amount of ineffectiveness at the bottom of the rotation. This is a tribute to Shapiro's ability to find quality arms through the draft and trades and a farm system geared toward developing them. The concern though, once again, is in the bullpen. Two of Shapiro's 2007 crew of free agents, Roberto Hernandez and Keith Foulke, aren't with the club anymore, Foulke having given up the ghost before the first nerve was pinched in spring training. Joe Borowski, another free agent pickup, has been a pleasant surprise to date with 21 saves. But he's basically Bob Wickman, albeit at a lower salary. The only thing Shapiro really accomplished in foolishly trading Wickman last season is that in Borowksi he saved some money to get similar results. This isn't necessarily a bad formula for success, but the few million saved in this arbitrage just got wasted anyway, along with an extra million, with the signing and release of Hernandez. One step forward, two steps back.

What's truly puzzling about all of this in terms of the bullpen is given how critical it is to a team's success, why do the Indians constantly take such risks? It's not as if their history just this decade hasn't demonstrated two or three times now that good starting pitching, good hitting and a weak bullpen is a recipe for mediocrity not the playoffs.

The other truly puzzling aspect of Shapiro's approach to free agency is the over reliance on the so-called "veteran presence." Trot Nixon certainly embodies that approach. Nixon is a really decent guy who had a great career in Boston. You can't always measure someone like Nixon's effectiveness by pointing at the statistics. But on the other hand, he is taking up $3 million in salary on a team that simply cannot afford that luxury. Put it this way, if Boston couldn't afford that luxury, and their payroll is about $82 million more than the Indians, how can Cleveland?

All Nixon does is take up salary space and retard the growth of what look to be legitimate prospects just hankering for a legitimate chance: Shin-Soo Choo, Ben Francisco, and Franklin Gutierrez for instance. Thus, if you're keeping track, utilizing Carl Logic, Shapiro bought two agents for over $6 million, which is nearly 10% of the payroll of the Indians 40-man roster, instead of one quality free agent for $6.3 million. Of course, Shapiro would say that spending that much on a middle reliever is foolish and perhaps he is right. But a reliable closer that would have allowed Borowski to assume the set-up role would have been a decent alternative, too. In short, there is any number of ways that Shapiro could have done better than simply giving away such a substantial portion of his limited budget.

This really highlights another flaw in the thinking of both Shapiro and manager Eric Wedge. Despite the chances that both of them were given at relatively young ages, they are extremely reluctant to take similar chances on young players. It's exactly why this team has Dellucci, Nixon and Jason Michaels on the roster.

But combined, those three make over $8 million. Maybe having one of the three was necessary, but all three seem excessive, particularly since that is money that easily could have been better spent on the bullpen.

One can play this game all day with the Indians roster and salary data for this year or, really, any year of the Shapiro regime, but the overarching point is that

Shapiro keeps doing the same things in the same way each year hoping for a different result. Whether that makes him insane or simply stubborn is of little consequence given the fine line between the two.

But what it does do is highlight perhaps the major flaw in Shapiro's continued quest to build a team that consistently contends: his dogged adherence to Carl Logic isn't working any better for him than it did for Carl. Not only does it makes it a guessing game from season to season and within each season what kind of team the Indians ultimately might have, it is also robbing this team of a fair amount of what little money the Dolans are actually willing to spend in the first place.