The popular theory is that the 2007 Indians, particularly the version that stormed its way to the best record in the American League with a late season surge, is a young team on the come with even better days on the horizon. And that the loss to Boston brought merely a sudden end to what looks to be a good two or three year run, at least. Gary Benz remembers fans saying that after the 93 win campaign in 2005, and wonders aloud if Indians fans are taking a little too much for granted.

Cleveland Indians fans, having had a few days now to fully absorb their latest disappointment, have been left to wonder whether the loss to the Boston Red Sox in the American League Championship Series was the end of the beginning or the beginning of the end.

The popular theory is that the 2007 Indians, particularly the version that stormed its way to the best record in the American League with a late season surge, is a young team on the come with even better days on the horizon. There certainly is enough young talent to justify the perception, which only suggests that the loss brought merely a sudden end to what looks to be a good two or three year run, at least.

But whether that ultimately turns out to be the case is far less certain than it might otherwise appear on the surface.

The problem with baseball economics as practiced in markets like Cleveland is that every season is ultimately a crapshoot. You enter with a hundred questions

that only money, properly allocated, can solve. The problem, of course, that major league baseball is not played on a level field. A lack of revenue sharing and a salary cap ensures that's the case. Consequently the Indians are not ever going to be funded in the same way that George Steinbrenner funds the Yankees. In the first place, the Dolans don't have that kind of money. In the second place, they don't have the same inclination toward deficit spending.

Given this double whammy, which is experienced in other cities as well, fans can never be quite sure what kind of team they'll have entering a given season. Whereas the Yankees or the Red Sox, for example, can keep an already good team intact by simply spending, they can also go out and acquire whatever else they need, unconstrained are they by such pedestrian concepts as budgets or prudence. The Red Sox paid over $50 million just for the right to then pay Daisuke Matsuzaka another $50+ million in salary and didn't give up any player in the process. It may be an insane way to run a business, especially when you consider the Red Sox were already deficit spending to the tune of $18.5 million a year before that deal, but it's the reality in which major league baseball operates.

Of course not every investment turns out particularly well, but a bad decision in Cleveland can have tragic consequences. In Boston or New York, it's often a rounding error. That's why teams like the Indians, the Colorado Rockies, the Oakland As, and several others, are forced to rely on young talent far enough from free agency to play for minimal salaries to fill out the bulk of the roster and then spend what limited funds they have left on a few veteran pieces to round out the team.

The problem with this formula is that it can be very volatile for reasons almost completely out of anyone's control. For example, the progression of a young player is not always a straight line. Sometimes there are setbacks, long stretches lasting weeks or months when the player looks overmatched. It takes time and experience to understand and then execute the adjustments that must be made in order to deliver on potential. As for the kinds of free agents that economically-challenged teams end up signing, mostly it's based on hope. In Cleveland, for example, we've seen an endless parade of free agents over the last few years who might as well been inhabitants of the Island of Misfit Toys,

banished there by their former clubs for ineffectiveness, injury histories or both. Some of these signings work, many do not. For every Joe Borowski or Kevin Millwood, there's an Aaron Boone or a Roberto Hernandez.

If you're unconvinced how truly volatile the formula is as practiced in Cleveland, just look at the last three seasons. The 2005 Indians finished 93-69. A final week collapse is all that stood between then and the playoffs. A team on the come? Well, it didn't quite work that way in 2006 when the Indians were worse by a full 14 games! A team on the decline? Well, it didn't work that way either as the Indians of 2007 improved by 18 games!

The pattern that emerges, really, is that which is dictated by the economics of the times, seasons defined by how well the homegrown talent progressed and the fractured free agents performed.

In truth, offensively the 2006 team was far better than the 2007 team. It had a much higher average (.280 to .268), a better on-base percentage (.349 to .343), scored more runs (870 to 811) and had more home runs (196 to 178). The difference, as everyone knows, was pitching and particularly the bullpen and particularly the middle relievers. The 2005 team, on the other hand, was similar offensively as this year's team. Again, where they succeeded and the 2006 failed was pitching and particularly the bullpen and particularly the middle relievers.

When GM Mark Shapiro decided, for example, not to sign Bobby Howry going into the 2006 season, he cut the legs out of the bullpen. The young talent did not perform as hoped and the free agents were a disaster.

On the other hand, the 2007 team was aided immeasurably by relatively homegrown talent such as Rafael Betancourt, Rafael Perez, and later Tom Mastny and Jensen Lewis, performing beyond expectations at the same time that the free agent acquisitions of Joe Borowski and Aaron Fultz were doing likewise.

But in the larger sense, the story of these teams was simply a case of one year the formula working another year, not so much. That's why it's so difficult to project where the Indians really stand on the heels of this past season. All this year's stability does is ensure that the Indians are likely to go into next season relatively intact in the bullpen and hope it works out just as well. The flaky nature of relief pitching, particularly when dominated by such young talent, makes that far from a sure thing.

It's why, ultimately, Shapiro will find himself tinkering. Despite his 45 saves, would anyone be surprised if Shapiro decided he could do without the rollercoaster ride that is Borowski and instead went with Betancourt, particularly when Betancourt seems to be developing into the same kind of lockdown reliever as the Yankees' Mariano Rivera, a pitcher who, when he has to, can come in the game in the eighth inning and still get the save in the ninth. But if Betancourt finds himself in the closer role, can Lewis or Mastny pitch as effectively over an entire season as Betancourt did this year? Will that force Shapiro to sign another middle reliever or hope someone else also emerges from the minors?

The questions, though, are hardly confined to the bullpen. Is Fausto Carmona the real deal or a one-year wonder? Who is the real Cliff Lee anyway? Can Paul Byrd really be counted on for 15 wins next season? Will Jake Westbrook return to the kind of form that earned him that huge contract? And what about C.C. Sabathia? He is entering his free agent year and decisions need to be made. No player has yet given Cleveland the "hometown discount" whatever that means and there's no reason to believe that Sabathia will be the first. Besides, do the Indians even want to keep Sabathia beyond next season? There is talent just waiting its turn in the minors that works much more cheaply. But will they be as effective? What's the right trade-off, 13 wins at minimum wage vs. 20 wins at $1 million per win?

You could spin yourself into knots just thinking of all the questions that are dictated by the Indians economics, despite how relatively tranquil and stable things otherwise seem with this team. And you can be sure, too, that's just what Shapiro's doing. How these turn out, however, are the key to whether or not the Indians are entering into another golden age for the difference between right and

wrong is the difference between the 2006 and 2007 seasons.