All the pop psychologists are coming out of the woodwork to assess C.C. Sabathia's poor start. Some blame it on the toll of last season when he threw over 250 innings. Some blame it on his ever expanding waistline. But by far the most popular theory making the rounds these days is that Sabathia's rather dismal start is related to distractions surrounding his contract status. In Gary's latest, he says C.C. is just in a funk, and people are reading too far into things.

Ah, the life of the pop psychologist.

Turn on any sports radio talk show, local, national, in China, doesn't matter. Eventually the conversation will get around to the Cleveland Indians 2008 season and its horrible beginnings, in general, and then to pitcher C. C. Sabathia, in particular. Every person practicing medicine without a license, and probably just as many with licenses, all have a theory on why Sabathia is struggling so mightily.

Some blame it on the toll of last season when he threw over 250 innings. Some blame it on his ever expanding waistline. Possibilities, certainly. But by far the most popular theory making the rounds these days is that Sabathia's rather dismal start (and by dismal, I mean truly, madly, deeply, awful) is related to distractions surrounding his contract status. Anything's possible, including the idea that manager Eric Wedge floated the other day that if/when Joe Borowski gets healthy

he'll come back as closer. But the idea that instead of concentrating on where to locate his fastball Sabathia instead is spending his time on the mound focusing on where he'll be playing next year and where he'll put all those millions doesn't hold much water.

Short of an injury, there really isn't much Sabathia can do to materially hurt his status as a premier free agent and he knows it. Professional sports has never followed the usual laws of economics, other than maybe supply and demand. And since the demand is always great for pitchers, particularly those with the foresight to throw from the left side like Sabathia, the market will always open it's ever-loving arms wide. In baseball, like every other pro sport, the only thing a bad year gets you is a little less of a raise. You have to be seriously bad for several seasons before the market starts to dry up on you.

The reason Sabathia cut off negotiations with the Indians without even responding to their initial proposal was because he could. Whatever was on the table will still be there, plus a good size more, whenever this season ends. And while the Indians will eventually reach a level beyond which they're budget just won't stretch, others won't be so constrained. Sabathia knows that, too.

Thus, whether he gets his brains bashed in start after start or whether he eventually finds the out pitch that he probably misplaced in his pantry, Sabathia doesn't really have much to worry about when it comes to his next contract. In fact, the only thing that's even arguably distracting to him is how many times he has to answer the question on whether his contract status is distracting.

As for his teammates, that's a whole other matter. Sabathia is a distraction and not just because he's pitching like Travis Hafner is hitting. He's a distraction because he's supposed to be one of the old guard, the leaders that Wedge and general manager Mark Shapiro were counting on to help the younger players

through just these kinds of stretches. Instead, he deliberately made himself a lame duck all but guaranteeing that no one would be much interested in what he might have to say—about pitching or anything else.

Though games are played nearly every night, there really is a lot of downtime in the life of a professional baseball player. Those hours get filled up in any number of ways, one of which is surfing the Internet. They can read, or at least most of them can, and even those who can't understand that baseball is a business. They know full well what each other makes just as much as they know what the owner of their team can and cannot afford.

Translate that over to Sabathia's bench mates and you can see how the pieces start to fall in place. They know, just like the average fan does, that the Indians have positioned themselves as a mid-market team with a mid-market budget. They know the Indians history with their own free agents. And most importantly, they know full well that Sabathia sent the Indians a strong signal when he didn't respond to their contract proposal. To them, that's code for “who's got dibs on his locker for next season?”

That's not to suggest that Sabathia's teammates have abandoned him. But unless or until he sends a strong signal that he will sign with the Indians next season, they aren't going to be jumping in any foxholes with him either.

If you want to know why it was so important for Shapiro to open negotiations with Sabathia before the season started, it was just for that reason. He wasn't so much worried about Sabathia's mindset, but rather the reaction of his teammates. Had he waited to address the situation until after the season, it would have created speculation, but that's about it. Instead Shapiro took a calculated risk that right now looks like one of the biggest mistakes he made all of the last off season. By not getting a deal done with Sabathia, Shapiro all but guaranteed that the situation

would linger, fester and distract. It's a pall hanging over this franchise that is making its presence felt on the field, particularly when Sabathia is on the mound and even more particularly when he struggles like he's been.

So if it's not the contract, not the weight and not the innings, how else to explain Sabathia's start? I may be working well out of my classification here, but to me, Sabathia looks like he's in a funk, nothing more. It looks worse because it's the opening of the season. Bury this stretch somewhere in late July and it wouldn't get anywhere near the play it's getting right now. He's just unable right now to finish off hitters like he and the rest of us are used to. Rarely are these things the result of any one factor. The chance that there is something mechanically wrong is just as likely as the chance that he's just run into a rash of very patient hitters and right now they are winning the battle. In baseball speak, he's giving in to the hitters. If the All Star break rolls around and he's 0-9 with a 22.87 ERA, then it may be time to sit him down for a heart to heart.

As for the rest of this team, the explanations are harder to figure, but one more game like they had against Detroit on Wednesday night and it will be time to shed payroll and play the kids, as the fans like to say. The main advantage (or disadvantage, depending on your perspective) of having the games broadcast in high definition is that you can actually look into the faces of the players. They looked beat well before that momentous fifth inning. That's the most important issue Wedge has to confront. Nothing is worse than a team that's quit.

Sabathia will come around and if Cleveland's luck holds, that means that he'll throw a no-hitter early next season wearing a White Sox uniform. But if Wedge can't get some life back into his players quickly, the season will truly be lost and all the curbside analysis isn't going to matter or change a thing. Like way too many seasons in Indians' history, come mid-May all the fans will be thinking about is how many days before Browns training camp opens.