Now at the quarter pole, the Indians have ascended into first place in the American League Central. And despite their mediocre hitting, Gary Benz says that this team isn't going anywhere ... they're going to be in the hunt this season. Assuming that is true, Gary says that the talk amongst fans of potentially dealing C.C. Sabathia in order to "not let him walk away for nothing" is sheer madness. And Gary also reminds us ... even if C.C. does walk, it won't be for nothing.

It's easy to think of players as transient commodities. And as the years go by, free agency and salaries caps only emphasize the point. But every once in awhile, a player actually has a point.

I believe it was philosopher/pitcher Jim Kern, formerly of the Cleveland Indians vintage mid to late 1970s, who said that in Cleveland the first thing they do when they have a guy with talent is trade him for three guys who don't. In Kern's era, that was true and if you want chapter and verse, drop me a line. In those days, the Indians were a shoestring franchise swimming in debt and housed in a dank cavernous ballpark that kept people away in droves. The only positive is that the bleacher seats were 50 cents and they gave away tickets if you had straight As in school.

But that was then. At least since the early 1990s, the Indians have actually resembled a franchise with a coherent strategic plan that has only veered off course intermittently. Yet hardly a day goes by when some Rick from Brunswick

isn't proposing trading an established star for three prospects. Indeed, there is no shortage of fans imploring general manager Mark Shapiro to trade C.C. Sabathia before he skips town in free agency after the season. Better to get something than nothing, the thought goes.

Whether or not that really is true depends in large measure in perspective and a healthy amount of speculation and flat out guess work. The tipping point, though, is clear. The Indians status as contender or pretender as the trading deadline approaches is the key. And given how the Central Division has played out thus far, the only things likely to be certain by July 31 is that the Kansas City Royals will be mathematically eliminated and that Indians manager Eric Wedge will have moved Travis Hafner to eighth in the lineup and increased his off-days to three times a week.

That means that despite the fact that this team is mediocre offensively, it likely still will be in the hunt as the trading deadline nears. If that is the case, any issues regarding Sabathia's free agency should rightly be put on the back burner. The far more immediate goal has to be to get into the playoffs and make a run at that elusive World Series title. The baseball playoffs in particular are not necessarily about the best overall team, but the best team at that moment. A weaker team can and often does prevail, underscoring the importance of getting in. Making the playoffs is never a sure thing, but a team with Sabathia stands a far better chance than a team without him. And a playoff team with Sabathia has a far better chance of winning it all than a playoff team without him, last season's Red Sox series notwithstanding.

Demanding that Shapiro trade Sabathia under that scenario isn't like buying one less Grande 2% Latté from Starbucks so you can add a few pennies to junior's college fund. It's one thing to plan for the future; it's another thing to do it at the complete expense of the present. Why be stuck in an endless loop of almost? Here's a novel approach: win a World Series first before you start worrying about how to win the one after that.

The one trait of the modern ballplayer well worth emulating is the uncanny ability to live in the present. So much of a player's future is out of his control that the only way to deal with it is to not deal with it. That same philosophy holds forth in the discussion surrounding Sabathia. Any fan that seriously believes that foregoing an attempt this year to win in order to consummate a trade for prospects that may or may not help the team win at some indeterminate time down the road is the kind of person I'd like to play poker against. So busy would he be figuring out how to minimize his losses so he can go all-in on the royal straight flush he'll never draw, he'll never know he's being robbed blind in the interim.

On the other hand, if the Indians are out of the playoffs by July, the discussion changes but not necessarily the conclusion. Sabathia, perhaps at the union's urging, has decided not to engage in any contract discussions during the season. If he does hold to that, any team looking to trade for Sabathia knows at best they're securing that final available fractional interest in a time-share and not buying the whole beach house. The cost for that interest will depend on a number of factors, the most important of which will be the number of other teams looking to secure that same unit with so little time left in the season.

But other factors are likewise at play. A team renting Sabathia essentially faces the same fate the Indians would by not trading him at all. Under baseball's draft rules, Sabathia would be considered a Type A free agent. The team that ultimately loses Sabathia to free agency receives a sandwich pick between the first and second round of the draft along with the highest available pick of the team with which he signs. If that pick is one of the first 15 in the draft, then the compensatory pick is that team's second round pick. Figuring the actual value of this compensation falls much closer to wild than educated guess.

Put yourself in the shoes of Shapiro for a moment. When deciding whether or not to pull a trigger on a trade he has to weigh the prospects being dangled against the value of the compensatory picks. Not easy. Put yourself in the shoes of the general manager from the team interested in trading for Sabathia knowing that they may not be able to sign him at season's end. Not only do you need to feel pretty certain that he'll get your team into the playoffs, but you also must feel like whatever you're giving up is worth the potential short-term gain. The added

dimension is that you also have to consider what kind of compensation you'll receive if Sabathia signs with another team. Again, not easy.

From a fan's perspective, these internal machinations aren't likely to get much notice. Baseball, under its long term strategic plan to alienate every last fan, makes sure that its draft is far more mysterious and far less understood by the average fan than the NFL draft. Of course, college baseball has a tiny fraction of the following that college football has and thus its top players are much less known. But Major League Baseball could do more to educate the fans but it doesn't in large part to marginalize the influence of agents. Far better, I suppose, to keep agents at bay than cultivate the fans.

This lack of transparency is really what fosters the misperception that holding on to a player like Sabathia and losing him to free agency is equivalent to receiving nothing in return. On the other hand, fans understand trades even if they have to be educated on the value received since it is generally in the form of prospects.

Consider two quick examples, Jim Thome and Bartolo Colon. When Thome left in 2003, the Indians received two compensatory picks that turned into Brad Snyder and Adam Miller. Currently, Miller is the Indians top pitching prospect while Snyder is still considered a viable outfield prospect, though 2008 is probably his make or break year. But in each case, neither player has yet to contribute at the big league level and it's been five years since Thome left town. In the case of Colon, who was more a salary dump trade than anything else, the Indians received Brandon Phillips, Grady Sizemore and Cliff Lee in return, all three of which are at the major league level.

What both examples do reveal is that while making a trade seems like the surer course, it depends on the circumstances. In most cases, it's often years before the verdict is actually rendered and even then it's likely to be inconclusive. All this does then is take you back to the place we started: live for the moment. The opportunity for the immediate gratification of the playoffs is the horse to ride in on. Besides, given its history, betting on the future is always the sucker's play in

Cleveland.