We've heard it all year long from Mark Shapiro. This baseball team cannot continue to hit this poorly. But in Gary's latest, he asks where the upside is when you consider that the teams' best hitter has been rendered pretty much worthless. Gary's says that it's time for Hafner to go. The DL, Buffalo, anywhere but the Indians lineup. And that while such a move is unlikely to solve the team's problems, what it does do is tell the rest of the team that the money may be guaranteed but their spot on the roster isn't.

This time, it wasn't the weather.

There were just over 35,000 in attendance at Sunday's game at Progressive Field between the Cleveland Indians and the Texas Rangers. A decent crowd, certainly, but well short of a sell out on an absolutely perfect day for baseball on a Sunday of a long holiday weekend. For good measure, it was kids' day, meaning that Junior and Squirt could run the bases afterward, assuming Ma and Pa hung around long enough.

If Indians general manager Mark Shapiro needed any more proof that interest in this team is waning quickly, then most certainly his bosses will let him know that the 8,000 or so who didn't bother to buy a ticket Sunday made a far louder noise than anything that could have possibly been generated by those who did bother to show up.

It's a combination of things, to be sure, but ultimately when a team can't score runs it's frustrating, irritating, but above all else, boring. A great pitching

performance like C.C. Sabathia's has a certain beauty that is always underappreciated, but it isn't even close to enough Novocain for the pain this team is inflicting on its fans. At bat after at bat, called third strike after called third strike, the institutional failures hang over this team like a lethal mushroom cloud.

The regression analysts among us, and there are plenty that actually work for the Indians, will tell you that even a team that can't hit can't hit this bad. True. But if the upside isn't all that high, where's the settling point: 4.5 runs a game instead of 4.1?

You could use Sunday's game as a microcosm for the season thus far, but really it's just the latest in the assembly line that's been punching out one bad game after another. Particularly in these last 10 games, any loss but Friday's, an aberration if ever there was one, provides an appropriate snapshot. Sunday's loss was set early, when the Indians loaded the bases with one out in the second inning and couldn't find a way to get even one run in. Ben Francisco topped the ball, creating a force out at the plate. He could be forgiven because, frankly, he's the only player hitting these days.

But up came Travis Hafner and his latest opportunity to disappoint. He met expectations, flying out to center field, sucking the life once again out of the team and its fans. If lack of self-awareness is a disease, Hafner is suffering from a particularly acute form. His post-game quote was a gem: "It seemed like we had a chance to score runs all day. But we couldn't find a way to get runners across the plate." If by "we" he means "I" and by "all day" he means "all season" then it's accurate. Otherwise, it seems a tad unfair to call out the collective.

There was a host of one of post-game call-in shows that suggested that despite the struggles, Hafner has to stay in the number three spot in the order. No need to take the host to task. It's actually a common sentiment, actually, borne out of the school of thought that Hafner will eventually come out of it.

Not to go all negative by throwing around a bunch of facts, but it's been over a year already and nothing about the way he's swinging the bat suggests there is anything to come out of. Still, giving him the dwindling benefit of an ever increasing doubt, if he's going to come out of it, let him do it in Buffalo and let it be for the rest of the season. Assuming there's no collective bargaining restriction, Hafner should be on the next Trailways to Buffalo. If it works half as well for him as it did for Cliff Lee, then he'll surely earn his way back on this team next spring.

The thought of demoting Hafner has to have crossed Shapiro's mind at least once for each of the 600 or so at bats since his spiral began. But there are a number of factors at play from the personal to the practical. Hafner has been in the big leagues since 2002. As recently as the 2006 season, he was the face, the future of the franchise. He has a long-term guaranteed contract worth millions. Psychologically, making that kind of move would probably be perceived as a negative in the clubhouse, perhaps more so than his constant failures at the plate. In short, in the context of sports, it's a difficult decision.

If Shapiro's frustrated, what must be going through manager Eric Wedge's brain? If this were anyone but Hafner, he'd have stapled his backside to the bench, next to Andy Marte's, in late April. But Wedge understands the political ramifications at play and knows that navigating this storm is where a manger really earns his money. Which is why the safe course is to stay the course.

At some point, though, if the Indians as a team keep batting around the Mendoza line and scoring runs like they were the Seattle Pilots this will come to a head unless Shapiro makes a move first. Wedge isn't simply going to put his own job in jeopardy for the sake of Hafner's ego. Shapiro will either have to bail him out or the two will collide. A transcript of that conversation would be an instant bestseller.

The only other option, at least in the near term, is the very convenient disabled list. With a supposedly chronic shoulder and/or elbow problem, Hafner's a candidate for the DL every day he shows up for work. It would hardly be a shock

if he ends up there soon followed by an extended rehab stint in Akron and Buffalo. It's a decent organizational compromise to an obviously thorny issue. If it doesn't work, then the transition to Buffalo for the rest of the season isn't as tricky.

Ridding the team of Hafner, even in the short run, doesn't solve all of the other problems. But it does give them a kick start. Most importantly, what it really does is tell the rest of the team that the money may be guaranteed but their spot on the roster isn't. If you don't think that's a message that needs to be sent, then watch Jhonny Peralta sleepwalk his way through a game some time. The season isn't lost yet, but it will be unless someone's feet actually get held to a fire.