Bartolo Colon and Tim Drew to the Expos for Grady Sizemore, Cliff Lee, Lee Stevens, and Brandon Phillips. The signature trade thus far of the Mark Shapiro era. As unpopular as that trade was at the time, Shapiro sold it by staking out his part in the bargain: the team needed to take a step back in order to re-capture the past and re-build back into a team that would consistently contend. That hasn't happened. And now, with C.C. Sabathia approaching free agency, Shapiro faces another crossroads with this franchise.

As the Cleveland Indians' slide deeper and deeper into mediocrity this season you can see the fan base breaking into three distinct camps. The first advocates trading C.C. Sabathia. The second advocates trading C.C. Sabathia RIGHT NOW. The third has lost interest in the whole damn thing and just wants Browns season to start.

The fact that virtually no one believes that Sabathia will be re-signed speaks volumes to how effective general manager Mark Shapiro has been over the years in slyly lowering fans expectations after initially promising something that seems impossible in retrospect, a consistent contender.

Shapiro blew up the team in 2002 when he traded Bartolo Colon. It was a bold and audacious move. Recall that when the Colon trade was consummated, Shapiro was candid about his intentions
: "This very clearly and very definitively demonstrates that we are moving into a formal rebuilding process with players that we all feel are going to be here in the ‘04 and ‘05 seasons which are when we feel we can start to emerge as a contender again. From the start of the offseason, we stated that if the difficult goal

of transitioning and contending was not successful, we would have to enter into a more dramatic and profound rebuilding process. That is the juncture we find ourselves today."

As unpopular as that trade was at the time, Shapiro sold it by staking out his part in the bargain: the team needed to take a step back in order to re-capture the past and re-build back into a team that would consistently contend. It sounded difficult but reasonable. In practice, it was naïve.

Exactly when the storyline changed is a little harder to peg, but clearly Shapiro realized his mistake and changed course by embarking on a different sort of sell job the last several years, one aimed at convincing the fans that Cleveland is a second-tier city, at least when it comes to major league baseball. Fans have been told so often that the economic realities of this market make it difficult to invest in Sabathia or any other premier free agent, it's now accepted fact.

The frustrating part of this story line is that there's a healthy amount of truth to it. Slightly below the surface, Shapiro is really saying that it's not the near term money a free agent gets that's the problem. It's the millions on the back end of the contract that will still get paid even when the free agent has long outlived his usefulness either because of an injury or ineffectiveness or both. Backing up Shapiro are reams of examples, particularly of pitchers. No team likes paying out dead money, but some teams are in a better position than others to withstand the hit. The Indians aren't one of them.

For as much truth as the story line holds, it's not complete. It's hard to begrudge the business model of owners Larry and Paul Dolan that bases the team's budget on its revenues. But there is a point at which this mentality can overtake another accepted business maxim: you have to spend money to make money.

To this point, Shapiro has been the person most responsible for balancing these two sometimes conflicting principles. To be incredibly generous, the results have

been decidedly mixed and the trends disturbing.

What really started the Indians down this path was Shapiro's signature trade of Colon in 2002. Shapiro became convinced that a team that had averaged over 90 wins a season for seven consecutive years was on the decline. He was right. He acted with a forcefulness and sense of purpose not seen since, parting with the team's pitching ace for three very young prospects, Brandon Phillips, Cliff Lee and Grady Sizemore. To make the long term plan work, however, he needed to remain ever vigilant, ever bold. Instead he's been a passive and often ineffective tinkerer.

Dolan has shown some willingness on occasion to spend a little extra to foster Shapiro's original blueprint though he and now his son Paul don't make a habit of it. Shapiro has made some good decisions in pursuit of his quest but he's not been making a habit of that either. As a result, you get these radically inconsistent on-field performances. A team that won 96 games last year is on a pace to win 74 this year. Of course, that 96-win team only won 78 games the year before. But then again that 78-win team had won 94 games the previous season. Whatever the merits that the Dolans and Shapiro find in their approach, one thing is clear. It's not yielding the consistent, competitive team they envisioned when they blew up the team in 2002 by trading that team's Sabathia, Bartolo Colon. Maybe it never could.

Whether you're in trade Sabathia camp that wants to still wait another 15 or so games to really see if this team can turn it around, or you're in the trade him yesterday camp, keep in mind that either way you're throwing your faith in a system that hasn't necessarily served you well.

Here again is where Shapiro is doing another effective job of lowering expectations, this time on his own ability to perform. Consider how many times fans have heard Shapiro caution not to expect another Colon-type trade. According to Shapiro, teams are no longer making those trades in order to rent a pitcher, even one of Sabathia's caliber, for a few months.

The frustrating part of this story line is that there's a healthy amount of truth to it as well. Even the New York Yankees, with general manager Brian Cashman tentatively in control, is seeing the prudence in holding on to low-priced high potential prospects. With the Yankees exercising a degree of responsibility, substantial trades will always be more difficult.

Another related factor is that teams are taking a much more serious-minded approach toward the draft. Knowing that trading Sabathia means that he's giving up the two compensatory draft picks that he'd otherwise get if Sabathia leaves after the season is reason enough to give Shapiro pause to pull the trigger. A team trading for Sabathia now better feel like whatever they give up will be worth it either because they can sign Sabathia for the long-term or because the compensatory picks they'll get if Sabathia signs elsewhere will make up for what they traded to the Indians.

But, too, for as much truth as it holds, it's also not the complete story. The Indians of 2008 are far different than their 2002 counterparts. It's not a formerly good team on the decline, but an occasionally middling team with potential. Fixing it doesn't necessarily require the bold strokes of 2002 but a kind of courage and finesse that Shapiro now seems to lack. The need to blow the team up with a Colon-style trade isn't there now. But the need for boldness remains. If the Indians are to ultimately succeed under Shapiro, indeed if Shapiro can ever going to deliver on the audacious promises of 2002, he's going to rekindle a little audacity himself. Right now, Indians fans have a right to wonder whether that's the most naïve thought of them all.