In Gary's latest, he says more than anything else, what this season is revealing, particularly placed in context with the previous four, is that the Indians remain in perpetual rebuilding mode. At times, that yields a team good enough to compete with the best in the league. At other times, like now, it finds itself looking up at the Kansas City Royals. And that being fine, no matter how much fans are told otherwise, is not the new better.

It was pretty clear early in the season that Indians pitcher Cliff Lee was having a big year. For everything that went wrong last season, that much and more went right early and often this season. But who knew that in the process Lee would be the one more than anyone to help General Manager Mark Shapiro withstand the coming storm?

That coming storm would be, of course, the loss of Indians ace C.C. Sabathia. Lee was an afterthought going into the season, barely holding on to the fifth spot in the rotation. He's emerged as the most effective starting pitcher in the American League, pushing his record to 11-1 and giving up well under three earned runs a game. And as he's done so, he's also becoming a key stake holding the safety net that Shapiro hauls out to blunt the impending loss of Sabathia.

Though Lee has a firm grasp on one corner of that net, he's also being assisted by Jeremy Sowers and Aaron Laffey. When Fausto Carmona comes back in a few weeks, he'll be able to grab another corner of that net as well. In other words, as Shapiro will tell you, even without Sabathia the Indians starting pitching will be

just fine.

As far as that goes, it's true. It just won't be better and that's the distinction Shapiro will coolly avoid. Be it at the trading deadline or when this miserable season closes, whenever Sabathia does leave the Indians won't be immediately better and for a fan base that grows more exasperated by the day with what they see on the field that safety net offers very little solace.

More than anything else, what this season is revealing, particularly placed in context with the previous four, is that the Indians remain in perpetual rebuilding mode under a general manager prone to occasional delusions. At times, that yields a team good enough to compete with the best in the league. At other times, like now, it finds itself looking up at the Kansas City Royals. Being fine, no matter how much fans are told otherwise, is not the new better.

What this season also has revealed is Shapiro's growing tendency to sacrifice action at the expense of analysis. Time and again, Shapiro has expressed his disappointment with this team's performance in terms of the inability of several players to meet internal expectations. The reality is that these were hopeful projections masquerading as foregone conclusions. The further reality is that by turning these hopeful projections into the expected reality, Shapiro was really providing himself cover for why he stood pat with a roster that begged for further manipulation.

To illustrate the point, as last year's trading deadline approached, the Indians were struggling mightily to score runs. Designated hitter Travis Hafner was a big part of the problem, but hardly the only reason. I noted at that time :

... the Indians may be second in the league in runs scored, they also are second in the league in runners left on base. ... But where the real difference starts showing up is the simple act of putting the ball in play. If you have the sense that the Indians strike out a lot, it's because they do. Only Tampa Bay and Texas have

struck out more than the Tribe....Digging deeper one can see why that lingering feeling about the offense is well justified. Not only is Hafner, for example, struggling with the bases loaded, so too is the rest of the team. Overall the Indians have had 104 at bats this season with the bases loaded and have just 24 hits for a .230 average....If that doesn't tell enough of the story, consider the averages with runners in scoring position. The Indians have had 879 at bats with runners in scoring position. They have 230 hits for an average of .261. That's a full 14 points under the overall team average.

Given these flaws, which were on full display for weeks at a time, it was reasonable to expect Shapiro to attack the problem in the offseason. Instead, he was seduced into thinking that any offensive woes were magically solved by the temporary spark provided by rookie Asdrubal Cabrera. When Cabrera became just another struggling sophomore and no one else stepped into to fill the breach, the Indians offensive woes returned with a vengeance. To date, the Indians have scored two or fewer runs in 27 games. The resulting record is hardly a surprise.

Listening to Indians' broadcaster, Tom Hamilton, try his best to put lipstick on this pig of a season as the team was losing to San Francisco 4-1 on Wednesday evening, what struck me was how he touted the recent signings of Tony Graffanino and Juan Rincon as evidence that Shapiro is trying to improve the team. Hamilton's a team employee and it's hard to begrudge him the occasional suck-up to his employer. But seriously, if signing these two is evidence of a team working hard to improve, then it's not hard to figure why things have gone wrong: management is nuts.

What those signings really signal is that Shapiro's never-ending quest to find chicken salad among the chicken droppings continues unabated by prior failures. Shapiro has become Fred Sanford, always looking for gold among the junk because once or twice he spotted something shiny under a pile of discarded jock straps. Soon enough though Graffinino and Rincon are poised to join the likes of Trot Nixon, Roberto Hernandez, Aaron Fultz, Keith Foulke, Aaron Boone, Todd Hollandsworth, Brady Anderson, Jason Johnson, Lou Merloni, Alex Cora, Chris Magruder, Chad Paronto, Shane Spencer, Jeff D'Amico, Jose Jimenez, Rick White, Scott Stewart, Ricky Gutierrez, Jason Bere and Scott Sauerbeck on the

island of misfit toys. And those are just the charter members. There are several other potential members on the current roster and others still to be signed by Shapiro.

If Shapiro is really hell-bent on improving this team, he must lose his fascination with reclamation projects and utility players. He also must lose his fascination with building a team for a just-out-of-reach future and focus much more intensely on the presence. But first and foremost, Shapiro needs to lose his fascination with the rose-colored glasses he wears in the off-season. They're giving the fans a migraine headache.