In dealing C.C. Sabathia and Casey Blake, Mark Shapiro has effectively replenished an Indians farm system that was starting to look weak at the top. And throughout his career here as Indians GM, Shapiro has proven to be very capable at judging prospects from other teams systems. But will Mark ever be able to deliver a final product capable of winning a World Series? Or will the team be stuck in a perpetual rebuild? This is the topic of Gary's latest piece.

Though the Indians' season has been effectively over for more than a few months now, there are still games to play and things to do. There are also fans to please, professional sports being part of the entertainment industry and all. The problem is that the Indians don't appear to be doing much pleasing of late, the lousy record being only one factor.

If attendance figures are a barometer, then one truism is that the Indians will be further mired in its "mid-market" mentality for the foreseeable future. Last season, the team averaged 28,448 fans per game. That was with a rather odd and cold start to the season and a thrilling and hot finish. It also was only good enough to put the Indians 21st among all major league clubs. This season, the Indians average attendance is down by about 1,200 fans per game. With no hope for a spectacular turnaround, expect it to plunge further. The Indians still are 21st in the league and probably will stay right about there. Attendance being critical to revenues, the Indians' balance sheet is

like the broader economy-gloomy, no quick fix on the horizon.

For the Nate Beckstroms of the world, this is not good news. Beckstrom is a fan from Salt Lake City who took the time to write a rather impassioned email to me about his favorite team. He's frustrated with the current and projected future state of the Indians. He isn't alone. What got Nate all excited at the moment was the trade of Casey Blake. With due respect, Nate, that's about the only thing that has made sense with this team since last season ended. Everything else, your point is well taken.

What Nate wants most of all is for someone to explain to him exactly what the Indians' game plan really is. He sees a team that was on the verge of making it to the World Series suddenly morph into a team undergoing another rebuilding. Mostly, though he wants Indians' general manager Mark Shapiro to offer an explanation that makes sense.

That's a tall order. Shapiro, for all his accessibility and sincerity, makes himself so because of the one skill he has mastered above all others: the ability to say nothing when he's otherwise making perfect sense. Shapiro can carefully and succinctly explain why anyone would want to acquire Matt LaPorta, Zach Jackson and Rob Bryson and you're ready to buy into the rationale behind the C.C. Sabathia trade. But as you walk away, you realize that at that very same moment, Shapiro was essentially picking your pocket with his free hand, failing to offer any real insight into how this trade fits into any short, mid or long-term plans of the Indians. It's a pattern.

In February, for example, Shapiro said this about Sabathia : "I can't present you with a scenario where it's acceptable to us or to our relationship with our fans that involves trading C.C. or examining trading him." Reasonable, but what did it really mean? Almost anything you want it to mean.

Then there was this right after the Sabathia trade : "We all headed into this season with what we feel are well-founded expectations for a championship-contending season. Four core players on the DL -- tough for almost any franchise to overcome -- as well as disappointing performances from many components of our team, most noticeably in the bullpen, leave us at the juncture we're at. There wasn't much doubt or question in our mind that it was nearly impossible for us to become a contending club this year." Obvious, but so what? So nothing, that's the point.

Then there was that whole rather ugly episode where Shapiro essentially misled everyone about the status of catcher Victor Martinez. Just prior to the June 11 game that Martinez exited early with the previously undisclosed elbow injury, Shapiro explained the reluctance to take him out of the lineup previously this way: "I feel like we don't have a combination of players who are going to give us a lot more than Victor's giving us, particularly in light of what he brings to our team." At that time, Martinez's average had dropped to .278 and he was hitting .208 in the last 21 games. Given this, what was Shapiro really trying to say, that Kelly Shoppach, for example, was incapable of hitting .208 with no home runs? Probably not, but maybe.

Even now, fans like Nate are left to speculate exactly what the rest of this season really holds for the Indians. Was the Casey Blake trade

really about the players received or opening up a legitimate opportunity for Andy Marte? It's this kind of puzzle that causes the Nates of the world to wonder whether the Indians are just becoming a farm club for the rest of major league baseball.

At this juncture most fans are well beyond having Shapiro own up to his dreadful offseason miscalculations. He screwed up, fans get that. No one is looking for his head on a stick, they're just looking for answers. They won't be coming anytime soon.

Here's a theory, and until Shapiro comes up and publicly puts a stake in the ground about what he's trying to accomplish and then sticks to it, there's no reason to believe it's not true: the Indians don't really know what they're going to do, for the rest of this season, for next year or for the foreseeable future for that matter. The team is about collecting pieces and parts that might be useful but no one, from the Dolans to Shapiro, have any idea just how.

Again, until Shapiro actually proves otherwise, there's no reason but for Nate to believe that the Indians under Shapiro will forever remain in a state of rebuilding. It's what Shapiro does best. He's shown some affinity for judging young talent and in understanding the concepts of what it takes for a team to be successful. He's had success in gathering all or at least most of the right pieces. Where he fails miserably is in delivering a final product. In other words, he can't close, which, by no small coincidence, is one of the key problems plaguing his team this year.