Toiling as the general manager for an undercapitalized team in a market as hit hard by the economy as any, Mark Shapiro's job has always been a challenge. We've seen the Indians follow this strange pattern where they are real good one year, and bad the next. And their success has been due in large part to whether or not the necessary corner cutting budgetary strategies of Shapiro have worked from year to year. In Gary's latest, he believes Shapiro has cut the right corners this season, and '09 should follow the pattern, with the Indians remerging as a winning team.

Cleveland Indians' general manager Mark Shapiro often comes across as the kind of guy that likes a good inspirational quip. It wouldn't be a surprise if on the wall of his office were frames of pictures of hard working but generic-looking athletes with phrases underneath such as "It's not whether you get knocked down, it's whether you get up" or "The more I practice, the luckier I get."

But the one phrase likely not on that wall but which probably should be is the one that seems to be guiding this year's version of the Indians is "cut enough corners, sooner or later you'll pay the price."

Anyone following the arc of the Indians has seen an interesting, some would say disturbing, pattern in which the team is really good one year and really bad the next. It's as if every time Shapiro gets his team to take one step forward, it rewards him by taking one step back the next. If this is a pattern, then 2009 should be a big year. Whether it will be or not will really depend on how well Shapiro has learned from his corner-cutting ways.

Toiling as the general manager for an undercapitalized team in a market as hit hard by the economy as any, Shapiro's job has always been a challenge. He could continue to field one cheaply built team after another, hope to get lucky

once every decade or so, and then go about making excuses as to why his team again finished at the bottom of the division.

The good thing about Shapiro is that he's always accepted the cards he's been dealt since he was handed the general manager's job.

Rather than complain about always getting a two of spades and a three of clubs as his hole cards, he stays in the game and tries to find a way to draw to an inside straight.

The bad thing about Shapiro, though, is that at times he serves as his biggest fan.

Having drawn to that inside straight a few times, it's almost as if he's come to believe he can do it on command.

Take last season as the prime example. Intellectually, he had to have been worried about two things: Travis Hafner and Joe Borowski.

But at some point between budget meetings and prioritizing the team's needs, he convinced himself that it wasn't a question of "if" with regard to either but "when."

It was a bad play.

Last year's team, attempting to build on the success of the previous season, fell apart for two reasons. First, when it mattered most early in the season the offense was awful. The injury to Victor Martinez was unanticipated and certainly was a factor.

But the far bigger problem was the hole in the lineup that Hafner had become in 2007.

Last season was no better.

Hafner not only didn't regain form he arguably made his situation worse by

apparently trying to play through a shoulder injury that ultimately required extensive surgery.

Second, and at least as important, was the disaster in the bullpen. There were many culprits, of course, but none bigger was Shapiro pinning his hopes on Borowski. Giv
en the teams' economic circumstances, what Shapiro did was understandable.

He was trying to save budget dollars in the bullpen and convinced himself that he could squeeze another magical season out of Borowski's arm.

There were plenty of warning signs that Borowski's 2007 season was more illusion than reality and Shapiro at times had to think the same thing.

But that didn't stop him from seeing if that well still had some crude left in it.

It didn't.

As fans and critics, we often end up focusing too often on the mistakes that get made. But give Shapiro credit. He realized that cutting corners on the bullpen caught up with him and went about doing something about it this season by signing, at a relatively steep price, closer Kerry Wood.

It's a gamble, but it is more in the context of Shapiro holding his two of spades and three of clubs while seeing that the first three cards in the flop are a five of diamonds, a six of hearts and a seven of clubs.

Waiting to see what happens on the turn and the river doesn't seem like a bad play.

The other encouraging piece in all of this is that Shapiro no longer seems to be trying to play an impossible hand when it comes to Hafner. By the time Hafner was shut down last season, he had become a black hole in the lineup.

When Victor Martinez likewise turned up injured, the offense lost its bearings.

But slowly and surely, the offense regained its footing in the second half, thanks, for example, to the emergence of Kelly Shoppach and a better second half by Ryan Garko. Right now, Hafner is well into the category of "didn't he use to be somebody?" The upsides on the "if" questions with Hafner are the same as they were last year, but the key difference is that exhibition baseball has begun and no one seems to have moved Hafner out of the "if" category.

The downside, of course, is that despite the fact that Shapiro enters the season with his eyes wide open on Hafner, his presence in the lineup does alter the mix that was working effectively at the end of last season. When the Indians' offense finally did regain its bearings last year, it did it in a way that was mostly contrary to how it fielded teams in the past. While not reduced to the mode of constantly trying to manufacture runs, the Indians offense also didn't really feature those one or two big bats that had been the hallmark of this team for the last 10-15 years. In stead, it relied then as it does now, on players who can consistently get on base and have some pop.

Hafner is part of that mix, out of necessity only.

While Hafner used to be a feared power hitter who could consistently get on base, he's not that guy right now. This, again, is where corners got cut. That isn't necessarily a criticism, at least of Shapiro. Simply put, Shapiro doesn't have the budget luxury of taking care of every problem every year. By devoting the money to Wood, and already having a lot of money sunk into Hafner Shapiro was forced to forego finding someone to take Hafner's place in the same way that Wood replaced Borowski and the cadre of pretenders that stepped in when Borowski flamed out.

What would be a surprise, though, is if this cut corner comes back to bite Shapiro like the one he made last season with respect to the bullpen. There's always a chance that Shoppach's 2008 will represent his high-water mark and that Garko simply isn't ever going to be consistent enough, but there are enough other track records in the lineup and enough talent in the wings to make this an acceptable risk.

Shapiro may see himself more a risk manager than the professional gambler that he's actually become. In truth there is very little difference between the two. Succ ess in either comes down to the ability to learn from your mistakes just as success this season comes down to whether Shapiro has correctly played the lessons he's learned.

It's very early in the game, but the results thus far are encouraging.