If anyone associated with the Cleveland Indians at the moment is a little irritated with fan reaction to their relatively decent play of late, he should know that the team has only itself to blame. Indians fans, or at least a healthy majority of them, at this moment are so disillusioned with the leadership and direction of the franchise that nothing short of major, dramatic changes is going to change their indifference. Gary talks about the dilemma this franchise has right now in his latest piece.

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They've heard Indians president and co-owner Paul Dolan candidly admit that the best this team can ever hope for is to be in the playoffs rarely and be competitive occasionally. They've seen player after player after player after player bump up against a contract expiration date only to be traded as a result. They've seen a general manager spin and wring dry every available cliché about the young, cheap talent he's acquired, knowing full well that not one of these players will reach his prime in Cleveland unless he's abjectly mediocre.

The reasons to be cynical are as compelling as they are overwhelming. The

reasons to be optimistic are as few as they are underwhelming. So what if the Indians take two of three from the White Sox? They still remain one of the worst teams in the league.

In truth, the fate of the Indians is gut wrenching to the true fan, and by true fan I mean anyone that's been following the team closely at least since Cory Snyder was a rookie. They don't want to see their team fail. It's far more fun when every pitch thrown in September or October has meaning. Give these fans even the sliver of a reason to believe and they'll excuse the years of mistreatment faster than Red Sox fans are forgiving David Ortiz.

Right now, however, the Indians represent the death of hope. And lest you see this as the misguided thoughts of a bitter writer consider no better source than Indians shortstop, third baseman, designated hitter Jhonny Peralta.

Peralta has had a modest second-half resurgence that in large measure reflects the modest second-half resurgence of the team. There's probably a connection there worth exploring but for now let's let that pass. Instead, focus solely on what Peralta told the media. No, not the "I'm not going to change my approach results notwithstanding" stubbornness but his discussion about his contract status.

Peralta is signed through 2010 with a club option that will never get picked up in 2011 unless Peralta continues to undermine his monetary value with his David Delluci-like consistency. Acknowledging that the players can see exactly the same things as fans, Peralta said, as reported by Paul Hoynes in the Plain Dealer, "I don't know what's going to happen next year. I don't know if I'm going to be next or not. I have an option for 2011, but they don't keep anybody. You never know."

Though Peralta spent the most critical part of his season locked inside his man-cave in sweet slumber, blissfully ignorant of his responsibilities, at least he

was awake long enough to understand full well the Indians' business model and his place in it. "They don't keep anybody" can now take its rightful place alongside of "building for a tomorrow that never comes" as the team's recurring theme/mission statement. By the way, since the Dolans haven't yet taken up my office for a royalty-free license for those statements, I hereby put the world on notice of my copyright. If the Indians don't need the money, I do.

All this does is underscore what ultimately has the potential to lead to this franchise's demise: the lack of an identity. Baseball fans, like those of any sport really, certainly appreciate the game itself. But the reason fans purchase the product associated with it is because they identify with it in a meaningful way. It's why fans won't go out of their way to buy tickets to a Chris Perez bobblehead day but might for a Grady Sizemore.

As Shapiro continues to respond to the economic forces that envelop him by tearing down the foundation of what he's built even before he finishes furnishing it, he strips away from their fans their day-to-day reason to care about the team. Right now fans are about as emotionally invested in this team as someone watching a network TV show that's about to be cancelled.

It's certainly nice that the Indians can play better baseball late in a lost season, but nothing about Sunday's win against the White Sox was particularly meaningful mainly because the front office long ago told them there was nothing particularly meaningful about any win. Ok, let me refine that. It's meaningful for manager Eric Wedge. He can once again make the case that Shapiro's already bought that he's good with younger talent.

More damming though is the fact that the "they don't keep anybody" approach works as a disincentive for any fan to find meaning in the team. If you were prone to be a Peralta fan (and if you are, let's discuss off line as I have a phone number to a crisis center to send you), you're actually far better off rooting for his failures than his successes. If he plays great, he will fulfill Shapiro's prophecy. If he fails just enough, he'll be around for years to come, kind of a

baseball version of Dick Cheney.

The same holds true for Grady Sizemore. Why bother getting all wrapped up in his career when its success will only hasten his departure? Indeed, what Shapiro really has accomplished, perhaps without intending to, is to make the concept of core players irrelevant to not just the ardent but also the average fans.

Once upon a time a general manager had a goofy notion that good young players should be used as building blocks not trade bait. He had a dream that these building blocks would sustain a mid-market franchise for years to come. And he was right. The Indians of the 1990s were his signature and that general manager's name was Moe Green. Sorry, I mean, John Hart. Now there's not even a statute to commemorate his dream.

Shapiro, his protégé, tried to follow that pattern but could never quite replicate it. At this point it's been all but abandoned in favor of a system whereby the Indians act as the feeder pool for the league's sharks. Maybe once in awhile that feeder pool will have enough teeth to scare the sharks for a bit, but never for long.

Of course what Shapiro can't admit is that the previous approach wasn't nearly as flawed as his own execution of it was. If you put your trust and money in the wrong core it's going to come back and bite hard, which is really what this season has proven.

It could be, I suppose, that Shapiro has become convinced that the risk-reward approach of the Hart philosophy is too much of a gamble with a franchise so financially fragile. If so, that's worthy of a healthy debate. Hart wasn't a genius but only a man with a plan that happened to work. That doesn't mean another approach can't. The problem is that when Shapiro deliberately lit the platform the team was standing on, he did so without another, less risky one to jump to that has the similar chance of paying off.