You're welcome, Cleveland.

When Indians' general manager and president-in-waiting Mark Shapiro re-re-signed Russell Branyan this past off season, it never made sense and I wasn't shy about saying so. Maybe he cost "only" $2 million, but he had a bad back and about one good half-season in an otherwise strangely long but predictably mediocre career. On a team perpetually rebuilding Branyan wasn't a fit for about as many reasons as there are stars in the night time sky.

No question that most people following the Indians scratched their head at Shapiro's latest experiment as well. But few went after it hammer and tong as I did. In late June it paid dividends as Shapiro was able to trade Branyan back to Seattle for living, breathing players of very minor importance.

Which gets me back to why you're welcome, Cleveland. Since the Branyan trade (and as you say those words, put air quotes around the word "trade") the Indians are 14-7 and are riding a season high 6-game win streak. Do the math yourself but just know that if you win twice as many games as you lose, in any league, you'll be clearing space for some post-season hardware, unless you're the Cavs.

Call it a coincidence if you want but in the same time frame Seattle has gone 5-14, which is roughly the torrid pace the Indians were setting with Branyan.

What all this proves, of course, is that Branyan is that gigantic sucking sound emanating from any franchise that employs him. His one skill is to seduce general managers into thinking that his occasional home runs more than compensate for truly, deeply, madly bad defense and more strike outs than the kid on your pony league team whose dad forced him to play. They never do.

One dimensional players like Branyan fill one niche in baseball. They serve as a spare part in a pennant race for a contender. That's why it made no sense for the Indians to sign him and it made even less sense for Seattle to trade for him.

Now that he's gone from Cleveland, it's as if the Indians suddenly have a sense of purpose about them. No one expects them to much win but instead to develop, like the crop of new hires in accounting, so that one day they will be in a position to lead, to win.

It's a great theory and in some major league cities it may actually play out that way. But for all the talk of Moneyball and new-found statistics that are supposed to help teams find those diamonds in the rough, it still takes money and plenty of it to compete year in and year out for championships. It's as true in baseball as any other sport and it's as true in Cleveland as any other city.

Unfortunately, as much as the Branyan trade freed this team, there isn't more excitement because in Cleveland, the fans are completely clued in to how this all turns out.

At some point one or two of these young players will develop into very viable major leaguers that will be coveted by other teams with more brash and more cash than the Indians. Like vultures over a dead raccoon on the highway, they'll just hover around the Indians until said players reach the final 18 months before they can be free agents then they'll try to pick the Indians' bones clean.

In the meantime, hands will wring and teeth will gnash. In that run up to their free agent year the naïve among us will hold out hope that the Indians will find a way to sign them. The realists will talk about trading them so that the team can get something for them. The team will comply

and they'll be gone. And the circle will begin. Again

That's the full back story of why the Branyan signing didn't make sense. It disrupted, however briefly, the narrative. But with Branyan gone, the Indians and Shapiro have finally, thankfully, stripped any pretense away from this team.

If you buy a ticket these days, you know exactly what you're getting into. There are some veterans scattered about but mostly you're going to see players who are still in the "prospect" category trying to play up to their potential. It can be an interesting ride if you're a baseball purist.

The problem for the Indians, though, is that these days there are less and less purists. Most of those willing to plunk down their money to support this team are willing to go to one or two games a year just out of habit but to get them to more games the team will have to offer something more compelling than an all you can eat buffet and a very occasional win streak. Even fireworks aren't the draw they used to be.

As much as fans talk about "letting the kids play" it's a myth, at least here. Fans really just want a winning team and they know in a perverse way that the end result of letting the kids play is heartbreak anew. In this operating paradigm, winning will always dangle just out of reach.

I doubt that the Indians owners and management are in denial about their troubles because they know the basic facts better than anyone. The Indians have been bleeding fans for years as a result of their operating mode.

They are dead last in the major leagues in attendance with an average of 16,636 fans per game. For comparison purposes the Houston Astros are 15th in the league and they're averaging a little more than 11,000 more fans per game. Before you start rationalizing this as a big market/small market thing, just know that the Milwaukee Brewers are 11th in the league in attendance and are averaging more than double the amount of fans per game than the Indians.

There aren't any publicly available ratings for the Indians' games on Sportstime Ohio so it's hard to know if people are even watching on cable. But if the Arbitron ratings for radio are any indicator, the Indians aren't exactly a huge draw at the moment for their flagship station WTAM-1100. Since April, the station's share of the listening audience is actually down, which coincides with the baseball season. As a result, WTAM-1100 has gone from a tie for first place among local stations to 7th at the end of June.

I'd say that baseball in Cleveland is at a crossroads but it's been at this crossroad many, many times in the past. For most of its existence, the Indians have been owned by good but cash-strapped citizens. It's not a surprise, then, that its franchise record is so dismal. When there was finally someone able to spend some money, the team got good quickly. There is a correlation.

As much as dumping Branyan finally turned this season into an exercise in letting the kids play, at its core that's never really been the issue. The compact between the fans and this team is broken and instead of trying to rope-a-dope the fans into thinking that somehow all this child's play and revolving rosters will eventually result in consistent winners, it would do Indians fans a far better service if Shapiro and company actually found a way to build a better mousetrap. And if they can't, then it's time to give someone else a try.