It's never dull when a professional athlete goes off script around beat writers. If anything other than "we played great" or "it was a tough game but we hung in there" gets uttered, it becomes a moment of sublime confusion.

So it is with Cleveland Indians relief pitcher Chris Perez who, in the course of saving a game he looked to be blowing, took some boos and then had the temerity to talk about it a few days later in not so flattering terms, assuming you're one of the fans doing the booing or one of the fans not showing up to the games or, well, generally one of the fans.

Perez is, at the least, an interesting breed of cat. He doesn't seem to take the "athlete" portion of his job description any more seriously then another interesting breed of cat, former major leaguer David Wells. It was Wells who claimed he was misquoted in his own autobiography (and not the first athlete to make that claim, actually) when he said he was hung over when he pitched his perfect game. He also had a lot of other mildly idiotic things to say in that book but mostly it was done to cement a view that he was not your typical baseball player. He needn't have opened his mouth. The belly told that story.

Perez isn't on a Wells trajectory just yet and may never be. But he is an athlete with an opinion, which automatically puts him in the .01% of all athletes who won't say shit even if they have a mouthful of it.

I'm presuming that Perez, who has pitched mostly flawlessly this season and is probably the single biggest reason the Indians find themselves in first place at the moment, was ticked that he got booed for pitching like Bob Wickman the other night. I presume that because Perez said

exactly that.

Perez has a short memory because even though he's been far steadier this year, he's mostly been of the Wickman ilk as a closer, which is to say that every outing tends to be a white knuckler through the ninth inning. That's not to suggest that Perez's record isn't good. Indeed, he gets out of more rough patches than Phil Mickelson. But too often his schtick is a high wire act that causes more consternation than the average fan, right or wrong, thinks is necessary.

Yet Perez took that slight call of boos and turned it into a general statement about the lack of support his team is facing from the fans, which isn't exactly news. Perez, earning plenty of dough for throwing a ball, probably hasn't bought a baseball ticket in years. He knows little about the struggles of those that do. In that sense, then, his remarks were a tad insensitive.

But there's no real reason to pick on Perez for being a clueless boob and I hate the fact that every time an athlete does have an opinion, even one that's misguided, the journalistic genes of the sportswriter kick in at exactly the wrong moment by immediately turning on the source not even realizing that by doing so they are contributing to the rather bland way professional sports gets covered in the first place.

Perez always seems to have plenty to say but let's not confuse him with being the clubhouse intellect. So why attack him for not possessing second level thinking. I'd rather someone, anyone really turn the focus on the underlying point.

Let's face it, fans aren't supporting this team. Perez has it completely wrong when he tries to decipher why, but he doesn't have the underlying facts wrong. Besides, wouldn't time be better spent in this town by the lazy scribes that cover this team engaging in a healthy debate as to why this team lacks support?

And that, my friends, is the nub of the issue. The writers who cover this team aren't going to take on team management over anything more controversial than a failed trade. When Tony Grossi lost his plumb beat reporter job covering the Browns because he had the audacity to publicly, but inadvertently, express what most already think about Browns' owner Randy Lerner, wasn't that a pretty strong message being sent to every other reporter in town? Do you think that the PD's Paul Hoynes wants to lose his place in the buffet line and his access to Mark

Shapiro's pithy insights by taking Shapiro to task for creating a culture that makes the fans feel foolish for supporting this team?

Of course not, so let's at least be honest about it. Perez may be cocooned in a world where everyone but the ball boys earn a million dollars a year so his losing perspective about the problems the fans have with this team isn't a surprise, but at least he spoke out about it. Likewise, Perez doesn't handle the business end of his profession, leaving that to an agent. So it's not a surprise he would see only the periphery of why free agents aren't playing in Cleveland, but let's at least celebrate his willingness to talk about it.

In most circles outside of sports, a participant talking about the process would trigger a substantive debate out their merits. In sports it triggers a debate about the speaker.

If you don't think so, consider the evidence here. Once the "story" broke, the follow on had everything to do with how the Indians would deal with their bullpen philosopher king and nothing to do with learning what the Indians plan to do to address the attendance problem.

We learned, for example, that Perez had to sit down to presumably get lectured by Shapiro and Chris Antonetti about the uselessness in saying anything more controversial then "I just couldn't locate my slider today." We were treated to a handful of questions to Shapiro about whether Perez was disrespecting the fans all dutifully answered in the bland way that Shapiro wishes Perez had kept to. We then had it all wrapped up nicely in a Shapiro press release that speaks to Perez's passion for the game, the town, its fans and his team.

All any of that does is push the problem out of view and the local media is as complacent in it as anyone. Consider the insidious way Shapiro used his press release to expertly deflect attention from the problem he's helped create by keeping the focus on Perez and how he thinks Perez really feels. It really is an attempt to put a nice ribbon on the whole package and, not surprisingly, it's mostly be taken at exactly that level.

It is frustrating, though, that there isn't a stronger willingness to attack the underlying issue while putting Perez to the side. It's the far more important debate for the long term future of the club.

Everyone has their views on why the fans don't feel enough connection with this team to fork over dollars to support it, but let's at least acknowledge the existence of the divide between the club and its fans instead of acting as if it's a weather-related phenomenon. It's not.

On a weekend of perfect weather, the Indians still drew under 30,000 for each game against the Miami Marlins. In context, that's cause for celebration but as Tom Hamilton would say, there will still plenty of good seats available. And before anyone gets giddy about attendance that would have been cause for consternation in the '90s, let's note that each one of those weekend games was a high water mark in attendance this year except for opening day. Want more? Of the 15 games with the most fans watching the Indians this year, 10 were on the road. Of the 15 games with the least fans watching the Indians this year, 13 were at home and in none of those home games were there more than 12,000 fans.

My guess is that Shapiro is concerned about attendance and has found some 5-tool business analyst to break it down for him on an Excel spreadsheet. But if Shapiro is addressing this item, you wouldn't know it. It's not hard to dodge questions that aren't getting asked.

Shapiro is decidedly more clever than the people covering his team so we'll always be left to wonder how deeply Shapiro understands the problem and how strategically he plans on attacking it. We let him focus public attention on the wrong issue by allowing him to purposely deflect the conversation away from him and the job that he's doing. Good for Shapiro, not so much for the fans who won't fill the seats until Shapiro actually does internalize the problem and addresses it meaningfully.