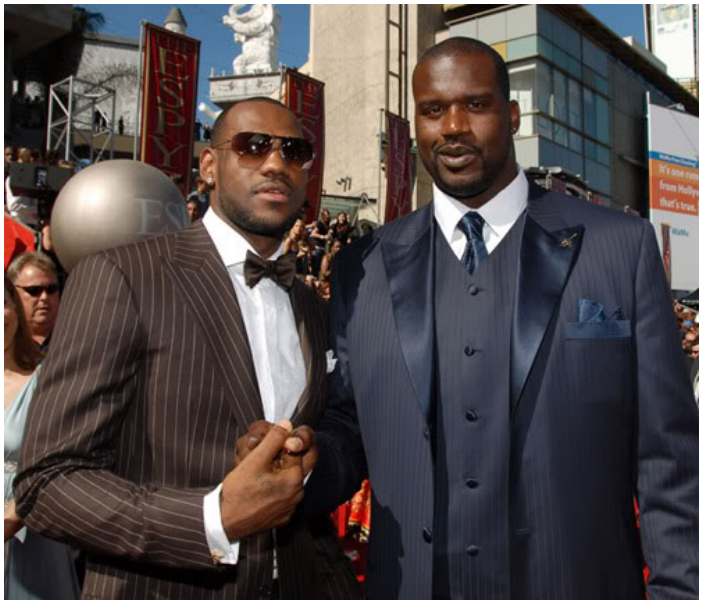
I always love seeing what topics Gary Benz sets his sights on each Saturday morning in Lingering Items, and this week, he's chosen three compelling stories. First he talks about the retirement of MLB Players Union Chief Don Fehr, who Gary is glad to see go. GB then turns his attention the vultures circling around the head of Indians skipper Eric Wedge and the growing displeasure with Indians GM Mark Shapiro. Finally, Gary talks about Danny Ferry, who he felt showed both courage and bravado in acquring Shaquille O'Neal.



I've written several times about my disdain for the now-retiring Donald Fehr, the head of the major league baseball players' union. That stems from his myopic view of his charge and the fact that he sold out the long-term health effects that steroids have for the near term riches demanded by the players he led.

I stand by all of it, and more. But I do owe Fehr an apology. I have said many times that he doesn't give a damn about the good of the game, but I was wrong. How else to explain his retirement but that it is the ultimate gift to the good of the game?

Unquestionably, Fehr had a job to do and heading a union, any union, is one of the nation's most thankless jobs. Most of your members are decent, hard working sorts who want nothing more than to do their jobs, get their paychecks and then go home to their families. It's the subversive element, unfortunately, to whom guys like Fehr had to dedicate an inordinate amount of time. That can be draining.

But trying to keep the Milton Bradleys of the world in line is only part of the job. He, like Commissioner Bud Selig, is charged with being a caretaker of the game. Any union leader who doesn't recognize that the health of the employer is the lynchpin to the riches the employees enjoy is part of the problem, not the solution. Not to get all political with anyone on this topic, but all the years of union greed in, pick the industry, coupled with weak and indifferent management just worried about today eventually comes back to haunt. Look at the auto industry.

It's true, of course, that a greedy union leader needs a weak and compliant company executive on the other side to foster that greed. In Selig, Fehr had just the right stooge. It allowed Fehr to grow his power base and enhance his own status and that of the union. But it came at the price of the game's soul. The steroids era of baseball is the blood on the hands of Fehr (and Selig) that he can never wash off.

Over the course of the next 20 or 30 years all of Fehr's evil and cynical view of baseball will no longer permeate the game on a day-to-day basis. It will be relegated to the history books, written about in the same way the Black Sox scandal already is. But that won't diminish the damage that could have been avoided by a more conscientious leader. Fehr, truthfully, was neither.

So here's to Fehr, who can't retire quickly enough. And with his departure some of the good of the game is on its way to being restored. The rest will have to wait Selig's inevitable retirement.

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The vultures are certainly circling around Cleveland Indians manager Eric Wedge these days. You'd be hard pressed to find anyone who can make a compelling case to keep him. Considering that Wedge really isn't a polarizing figure, surely someone should be coming to his defense.

It hasn't happened.

The depth of the disappointment with the Indians' season to date is one of the reasons. So too is the manner in which this team loses each night. Usually, it's the bullpen. Usually it's a blown save. And this was a reputed strength going into the season?

And that, folks, is the nub of the issue. Indians fans are disappointed precisely because they thought the team was more a slightly used but very useful luxury car than a clunker with the odometer rolled back. There are many culprits to blame for the misguided mindset of the fans entering into the season, but the usual suspects are again the usual suspects.

One of general manager Mark Shapiro's strength is his unbridled optimism. He can convince himself that the sun shines at midnight and the smell emanating from the septic tank is roses. He wears easily with the local and national media, precisely because he's so specific when he's so upbeat. The national media in turn, which means those that follow baseball from the comfort of a desk in New York, buy into the hook and conclude, without much further review, that much was accomplished and thus much should be achieved. Most of the local media is just as compliant. Well, much wasn't accomplished and less has been achieved.

Those who follow this team with their heads and not their hearts weren't impressed with Shapiro's offseason. Sure, he didn't stand pat with a team that appeared to be on the upswing, itself a major improvement over previous seasons. But the kinds of moves he made were the same kinds of moves he always makes: fliers. Shapiro is Fred Sanford without the beard. Always with an eye on a bargain, Shapiro has unrelenting faith that in every junk pile lays an unpolished gem. This is how he fills out the roster each season while waiting for Wedge to develop the talent that's been drafted.

Wherever you come out on the Wedge issue in a vacuum, just know that

Shapiro's acquisition model is either seriously flawed or poorly executed, maybe a little of both. For it to really work, you have to have a really good eye for bargains and you have to have someone who can develop the talent he's been handed.

Developing talent is far more art than science and finding unpolished gems happens about as often as you find a Van Gogh at a flea market. Shapiro has more than proven that his trips to the bargain bin usually yield junk. And in Wedge, Shapiro has one of the worst gem polishers in the league. As I sit here and write this I can't think of one piece of raw talent that's realized his potential under Wedge.

As the Dolans contemplate what to do about Wedge, it's time for them, too, to better hold Shapiro accountable for the mess he helps create each season. Wedge is seriously flawed as a manager and his days are surely numbered. Shapiro, on the other hand, is a more complex issue. He's like a lot of the young players he drafts, talented but unfocused. Without some serious re-tooling in his thinking and approach, however, the firing Wedge won't accomplish much by itself. If this season has proven anything, it's that the problems with this team aren't surface level.

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It's nice to know that Shaquille O'Neal is excited to be coming to Cleveland. It demonstrates more than anything else that it isn't the city that's the problem, it's the teams. But the fact that fans were worried about how O'Neal would react speaks volumes about this town's collective inferiority complex.

It is helpful that O'Neal is excited about being here. He's one of the bigger ass pains in the league when he isn't happy. A pouting O'Neal is a worthless O'Neal.

Overall, though, the reaction to the trade has been somewhat mixed. No one

seems to have come out and panned it but there are many that are indifferent to it, mainly because of O'Neal's age. There are some that find the pairing of O'Neal with LeBron James as unusual if only because the Cavs are working hard to retain James and O'Neal is one of the league's great vagabonds. Early in his career O'Neil opted out of his contract in Orlando as soon as he could and, by doing so, arguably became more of a global icon for all the years he spent in Los Angeles. The fear is that he'll take James down that same path.

I'm not sure I see that as much of a risk. James follows his own path. Whether O'Neal is on the same team with him or not, James is well aware of his history. The chance that James will be influenced by O'Neal in that regard seems remote.

General Manager Danny Ferry, in his press conference announcing the trade, acted as if he was Phil Ivey at the World Poker Championships going all in because he had just been dealt two aces. To some I'm sure Ferry came across somewhat as a person trying to make a big splash one final time before James leaves town with O'Neal after next season.

My read on it was a little different, but perhaps it's just my version of Shapiro-think. I see Ferry as sending a message, like John Hart in the early ‘90s, that when this team is finally ready he's going to go out and get those final pieces. This next season, it's O'Neal. In subsequent years, it will be the O'Neal equivalent. More than anything else, Ferry is trying to position himself as the kind of general manager that isn't afraid to make a leap.

Professional golfer and NBC golf commentator Johnny Miller is fond of saying that it takes great courage to shoot a low score. Too many golfers, once they get a few under par, spend the rest of the round protecting that score rather than risking it all to get even lower. That's where Ferry finds himself at the moment. He's assembled a very good team. Tweaking around the edges is probably the way to protect what he has. It will certainly guarantee him a good score. But it takes real courage to make bold strokes to get the team from good to great and win the whole damn thing.

It's been a long time since any team in Cleveland has had someone willing to think big. Credit Ferry and, while you're at it, credit owner Dan Gilbert, a bold thinker in his own right.

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With the death of Michael Jackson, you can't help but think how much great music didn't get made once he became totally unhinged. Which leads to this week's question to ponder: How many inquiries do you think former Browns receiver Michael Jackson's family got yesterday asking whether it was he who died?