

With former Indians player and eventual hitting coach Eddie Murray being fired by the Dodgers and former Indians skipper Charlie Manuel in town with the Phillies, Gary Benz uses the opportunity to take a look back at their tenures with the Tribe in his latest effort for us. In Manuel's case, Gary notes that good 'ole Charlie is a forgotten man to Indians fans, most of whom agreed with letting him go.



When Eddie Murray was fired last week as hitting coach of the Los Angeles Dodgers, Indians fans undoubtedly had a “been there, done that” expression on their face. But no sooner did that expression get wiped off then it appeared again, this time spurred on by Charlie Manuel and his return to Jacobs Field as the manager of the Philadelphia Phillies.

Without having to read one Philadelphia newspaper article or one Philly fan blog, Indians fans instinctively know that Manuel and Philadelphia aren't likely in it for the long haul. In fact, it's hard to believe the relationship, however tenuous it might be, is still in tact, if only because it's Philadelphia.

As most will likely recall, Manuel essentially engineered his own firing here by demanding a long-term contract just as General Manager Mark Shapiro was blowing up the team as part of the rebuilding process that was scheduled to come to fruition just about now. It was summer, 2002, and the Indians were struggling, to put it charitably. By early July, they were nine games under .500 and 9.5 back of division-leading Minnesota. Well before that, however, they had officially entered rebuild mode by trading Bartolo Colon after owner Larry Dolan

ordered that the payroll be trimmed dramatically.

Manuel was in his third season as Indians manager after having taken over for Mike Hargrove, whose own relationship with Shapiro was always strained. Manuel's contract was due to expire at season's end and since the Indians were entering a different phase, Manuel demanded that his contract be extended, viewing himself as the best person to aid the development of a new crop of younger players. Whether or not Shapiro agreed with that assessment, he clearly didn't want to be pushed into a quick decision given the major changes taking place on the roster.

According to media accounts at the [time](#) Shapiro and Dolan asked Manuel to stay on through the end of the season but Manuel was adamant—extend the contract or let him go right then. With this demand, Manuel committed one of the great sins any employee can make by painting his employer into a corner. To accede to the request would have been at the expense of their position in the hierarchy. Even in sports, there is a pecking order. Thus, irrespective of how either Shapiro or Dolan felt about Manuel, they really had no choice but to let him go right then.

Though Shapiro has never said, at least publicly, that he wouldn't have eventually extended Manuel's contract, although it's easy to see why Manuel might have been worried. In the first place, he had a front seat to Hargrove/Shapiro cold war. It would be hard to blame him for wanting a repeat of that mess. Moreover, whereas the team Manuel was managing, at least prior to Shapiro tearing it down, had a lot of familiar faces from Manuel's days in the Tribe's minor league system, that was no longer true of the new roster. In fact, in that context, hiring

Eric Wedge, who had been managing in Buffalo, made more sense than retaining Charlie Manuel.

But no matter how the actual firing played out, it seemed pretty safe to assume that Manuel and the Indians weren't in it for the long haul either, whether because of Manuel's recurring health issues or simply because Manuel never fit the mold of what guys like Shapiro and his ilk, i.e. the modern-day GM, envision in selecting the manager. If nothing else, Manuel is certainly "old school" and Shapiro is certainly "new school."

Manuel has now been with the Phillies for two and a half seasons, the same as his tenure with the Indians. Although the record isn't stellar, according to their web site his 173 wins are the most of any Phillies manager in his first two seasons since 1915. That might not be as impressive as it sounds since most new managers take over struggling teams. Right now, the Phillies are playing about the same as they have since Manuel came aboard, not bad not great. They find themselves only two games behind the Mets, having picked up four games on the division leaders in the last week and a half. But they are barely above .500, so it's really a matter of divisional mediocrity more than anything else.

But it's doubtful that Phillies general manager Pat Gillick envisioned a .500 ballclub when he hired Manuel. And irrespective of where the mistakes lie—player acquisition, player motivation or a combination of the two—if the Phillies do find themselves continuing to struggle at

climbing to the upper tier of National League teams, the “fire Charlie” chorus, which has been in place since the day he took over with only the level of active members fluctuating, will get louder.

When that occurs, not if, mainly because it is Philadelphia after all, the real drama that will be interesting to observe is how Manuel handles it. Will he follow in the same footsteps he laid in Cleveland or will he learn from that debacle and play the politics as they demand to be played?

All this probably matters little to Tribe fans except that, like Murray, Manuel was part of something special when he was here in Cleveland, though, like Murray, not necessarily because of the last role he had in the organization. Murray’s presence in 1995 as a player helped sparked the renaissance. Manuel, who joined the Indians as hitting coach for the second time beginning in 1994, schooled that offensive juggernaut. Their contributions to Tribe history can’t be diminished.

But Manuel was always a much more engaging and beloved figure than Murray. He was accessible to the media and fans alike. Though his tenuous grasp of grammar made some question his intelligence, he was sincere at a time when slick played so much better.

Still, in the end, it was hard to get a good read on Manuel’s managerial skills while he was in Cleveland. He was managing under vastly

different circumstances, with a payroll that was \$91 million in his last season. In many ways, the Indians were on auto-pilot then and needed a caretaker, not a manager. When the Indians decided to blow it all up and start again, maybe it wasn't the place for a good ol' boy with health problems.

Perhaps his managerial career with the Phillies is really the better barometer. Hard to say, of course, but if that is the case, letting him get away in favor of making a long-term commitment barely registers a blip on the list of mistakes Shapiro has made during his tenure with the Tribe.

It's likely that Cleveland fans don't think much about Manuel these days, either way. He's been tucked away in the National League for several years now and the Tribe is off in vastly different directions as well. While his presence here this week will never evoke the same sort of emotional response from Tribe fans as does each and every return of Manuel's prized student, Jim Thome, hopefully if it evokes anything at all it won't be so much of a "been there, done that" nod as much as it is even a slight smile for what he did accomplish here. Just like Murray.