

The Indians season to this point is a matter of perspective. The stay-the-course, glass-half-full camp says the Indians are just five and a half back in what has shaped up to be a very mediocre division this year. The abandon-ship, glass-half-empty crowd says the Indians are five games under .500 and lack the pop in the lineup to fight their way back into the playoffs, especially amid piling injuries. Barring a major shift in the standings either way, Mark Shapiro has a very interesting decision on his hands with C.C. Sabathia. Erik talks about it in his latest.



The Indians' season to this point is a matter of perspective.

Heading into play on Thursday night, the Indians were 27-32 and five and a half games back in the AL Central. You can look at that one of two ways:

The stay-the-course, glass-half-full camp says the Indians are five games under .500 and five and a half back in what has shaped up to be a very mediocre division this year. The White Sox and Twins are the two teams ahead of the Indians, and they're noticeably flawed themselves. To boot, it's still only early June. One hot month could propel the Indians back to the top of the division.

The abandon-ship, glass-half-empty crowd says the Indians are indeed five games under .500 in a very mediocre division. Prior to a offensive outburst against the Rangers this week, they had virtually no clutch hitting to speak of. Now the injuries are mounting for both the hitters and pitchers. Even if they were to somehow vault past Chicago and Minnesota and get back to the postseason,

they'd probably get chewed up and spat out by their first-round opponent.

The Tribe's front office has to weigh both sides of the exact same argument. The future of C.C. Sabathia hangs in the balance.

Before we analyze this any further, let's make one assumption: C.C. is not coming back to the Indians next year. Stranger things have certainly happened, but judging by the money likely to float in C.C.'s direction next winter, and judging by the Tribe's history of not spending *beau coups* bucks on long term deals for free agents who can see 30 on the horizon, it's probably safe to assume the 2008 season is C.C.'s last with the Indians.

With that ground rule set, the only reason to keep C.C. is to make a championship run this year. The only reason to trade him is because you are certain you won't be able to make that championship run.

History would recommend Mark Shapiro deal C.C. to the highest bidder approximately 15 seconds before the trade deadline at the end of July. There is a reason why teams that emerge from the midseason doldrums to win a World Series are usually given the prefix "miracle." It doesn't happen very often.

But baseball's postseason setup makes it harder than ever to punt away a star player in midseason. A three-division setup increases the likelihood that at least one division will be won by a team without championship credentials, a team that would have finished in third or fourth place in the old two-division alignment. The White Sox and Twins look like they're vying for that designation this year.

On top of that, the wild card always dangles out there, most years tempting any team within sniffing distance of .500 to keep plugging along with George Mason-type dreams of shocking the world.

In the end, it's almost too easy for a team like the Indians to rationalize holding onto a pitcher like C.C. until the bitter end. To do otherwise would be giving up, willfully crumpling up and throwing away all the progress made during last year's 103-win run to the seventh game of the ALCS.

Shapiro and his staff are competitive guys, otherwise they wouldn't be in the business of sports. They might project the bone-dry personalities of businessmen

who have jammed their noses into one too many statistical abstracts, but when it comes to willingly saying "We're losers this year. We admit it." it's probably hard to separate the heart from the head.

Unfortunately, baseball is only romantic in books and movies. In real life, it's far colder.

Shapiro's heart probably says, "keep fighting for first place. Never admit defeat." His head probably says, "The Indians organization has virtually no power hitting prospects in the upper tiers of the minor leagues. The Buffalo Bisons have probably given the big league club all they can with regard to ready-made hitting help. This organization desperately needs an infusion of hitting talent that can be ready to produce at the big league level this year or next. A couple of young bullpen arms probably wouldn't hurt, either."

It's easy to see which part of Shapiro's anatomy is probably making the more convincing argument to him. But then he has to listen to his head and perform the difficult task of parting ways with a player he's seen raised from a pup as an Indian. The good news is it shouldn't take too long for Shapiro's Princeton-sharpened business instincts to kick in and make him realize that the right move is the move that will make the Indians a more well-rounded organization.

If you've lost confidence in Shapiro's ability to do everything else, you can remain confident that he can pluck good players out of other organizations' farm systems.

Since becoming GM in 2001, Shapiro has gleaned a list including Grady Sizemore, Cliff Lee, Brandon Phillips, Travis Hafner, Asdrubal Cabrera and Shin-Soo Choo from other teams' minor league systems. All are producing, or have recently produced, at the major league level.

There is every reason to believe that Shapiro would take the same time and care in gathering a return package for C.C. The trade would have to rival the Bartolo Colon trade as a defining move in Shapiro's tenure, and it's doubtful that fact is lost on the Tribe's GM.

Once Shapiro commits to trading C.C., history says he'll do a good job. But in order to do his job, he has to overcome the temptation to damn the torpedoes and make a kamikaze run at the World Series from third place in the American

League's weakest division.

Like the infamous Japanese suicide divebombers from World War II, that approach will lead to a crash and burn, but the only damage the Indians will inflict will be on themselves and their future.